The Working-Class Avant-Garde

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THE WORKING-CLASS AVANT-GARDE

'Barbaric Peoples of the Earth': The Avant-Garde and the Revolt Against Civilisation

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Between Vorticism, the post-WW2 Independent Group and the "Cybernetic Serendipity" exhibit of 1968, elements of a working-class internationalism emerge that define both the circumstances of a revolutionary art and its methodology, founded upon a confrontation with the aesthetico-political ideology of work as alienated surplus-production. In positioning art-work as "general commodity" (Bataille) against the commodification of the "artwork" as artefact of an impoverished aesthetic labour, the avant-garde subverts the tragic view of history presented by Peter Bürger in the supposed failure of the avant-garde to resist appropriation to the "culture industry." In contrast, the radical tendencies represented by such artists as Henri Gaudier-Brzeska, Eduardo Paolozzi and Gustav Metzger and persisting in the work of Laura Oldfield Ford, for example, can be regarded as a *discourse of irrecuperability*, born of the "impoverishment" of aesthetico-political totalisation as it succumbs to the excessive labour required to sustain the illusion of itself. And just as this *failure* of totalisation is always to some extent an *aestheticisation*, so too it ultimately constitutes the *work* of the avant-garde.

> The long, dark night of the end of history has to be grasped as an enormous
> opportunity. The very oppressive pervasiveness of capitalist realism means
> that even glimmers of alternative political and economic possibilities can
> have a disproportionately great effect. The tiniest event can tear a hole in the
> grey curtain of reaction which has marked the horizons of possibility under
> capitalist realism. From a situation in which nothing can happen, suddenly
> anything is possible again. (Mark Fisher)

Any art that co-operates with the prevailing ideological structure of power can be subsumed under an 'aesthetics' (Vichnar and Armand, 2017). On this principle, the association of the avant-garde throughout its history with a generalised *anti-aesthetic* bears within it broadly political connotations of economic and class antagonism, traceable to its origins in the militant revolutionary discourses of the nineteenth century across the political spectrum. Yet the notion of a specifically proletarian or working-class avant-garde is rife with paradox – stemming firstly from the fact that, historically, it has been the avowed function of the avant-garde to affect revolutionary *class consciousness* in the first place, and secondly from the necessity to contest precisely those ideological forces seeking to legislate the meaning of *work* and its role in political ontology.

Though having evolved in direct symbiosis with market capitalism, the avant-garde – in its militant, anti-institutional phase – emerges from an adversarial stance towards the 'abstraction' and 'impoverishment' of labour in the production of cultural surplus-value. In refusing the industrial work ethic as alienated and dehumanising – and *l'art-pour-l'art-isme* as its mystification – this emergence (from Blanqui and Bakunin to the Situationists and Arte Povera) manifests as a form of radical counter-work, one which sought to circumvent what Nick Land has called 'the rage of jealous time' and 'matter's positive effacement by utilitarian society' (Land, 1992: 65). In doing so it salvages notions of *usedness* and *uselessness* (as determined by the capitalist work ethic), and *entropy* (as later delineated in cybernetics), for a critical affirmation of the art (or anti-art) of everyday life. Land draws on Georges Bataille's concept of general economy and 'expenditure without reserve' (Bataille,

1991: 21ff) to posit such a counter-work in a virulently antagonistic relation to the logic of surplus production. 'Expenditure without reserve' opens within cultural labour the space of an ecstatic chthonic function, through the purging of normative social desire. This radical potential can be understood as the means of avant-garde art to affect contradictions in the instrumentality of Power (capital), in such a way that Power itself (in its mechanism of desiring-production) is caused to dissipate in a histrionic effort to re-normalise and re-commodify.

Redolent of a negentropic movement, exceeding the ends assigned to it by its socially 'productive' function (Armand, 1998: 184ff), the avant-garde's convulsive re-potentiating of everyday life stands as remote from capitalism's commodification of existence as it does from Gautier's notorious pronouncement that 'il n'y a de vraiment beau que ce qui ne peut server à rien; tout ce qui est utile est laid, car c'est l'expression de quelque besoin, et ceux de l'homme sont ignoble et doûtant, comme sa *pauvre* et *infirme* nature' (Gautier, 1880: 22).[1] While Marx argued that the first condition of art is that it is not commerce, nor is art a reason of State: the socially-transformative programme of the avant-garde had thus to be situated in an antagonistic relationship to *servility in general*, and not in the trivial opposition of Aestheticism and utility, or a *technē politikē*. Breton and Trotsky make this the main polemical thrust of their anti-Stalinist manifesto, 'Towards a Free Revolutionary Art,' written in Mexico City in 1938. In it they argue that 'the imagination must escape from all constraint and must, under no pretext, allow itself to be placed under bonds.' They also note, 'True art, which is not content to play variations on readymade models but rather insists on expressing the inner needs of mankind in its time – true art is unable not to be revolutionary; not to aspire to a complete and radical reconstruction of society' (Breton, Trotsky, 1938).

In what can be read as a call for renewal of the avant-garde's revolutionary project – after WW2, the 'failure' of 1968, and the 'triumph' of neoliberalism during

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[1] 'True beauty resides only in that which can serve no purpose: all that is useful is ugly, for it is the expression of some need, and those of man are ignoble and disgusting, like his *impoverished* and *infirm* nature.' [Translation mine – emphasis added.]

the period since – Mark Fisher, in his 2009 collection of essays, *Capitalist Realism*, argues that, 'If neoliberalism triumphed by incorporating the desires of the post 68 working class, a new left could begin by building on the desires which neoliberalism has generated but which it has been unable to satisfy' (Fisher, 2009: 79), just as the historical avant-garde (culminating in Surrealism) had emerged from the foreclosure of those mass emancipatory desires aroused in the democratic revolutions of 1848, and which the triumph of the bourgeoisie was incapable of satisfying. 'What is needed,' Fisher insists, 'is a new struggle over work and who controls it' – to which we might add, *a new struggle over the concept of the 'working class'* and the ideology of *work* that defines *it* (Fisher, 2009: 79). For in the proposition of an aesthetic economy of counter-work there is also a proposition for a counter-politics of social relations and the corporate ontology that has continued to underwrite them.

Work as Critical Self-Consciousness

With the appearance of Vorticism in 1914, the formation of the post-WW2 Independent Group, and the public confrontation between cybernetics and auto-destructive art in the form of the Destruction in Art Symposium of 1967 and the Cybernetic Serendipity exhibit at the ICA in 1968, lineaments of a working-class avant-gardism come into view that define a major polemical axis in modernist and contemporary 'British' art. Constellated around figures like Henri Gaudier-Brzeska, Eduardo Paolozzi and Gustav Metzger, this axis represents more than a series of historical contingencies. At its core lies a radical reformulation of the concepts of 'work' and 'class' drawn directly from the circumstances of a revolutionary art, its practice and its methodology. Elements of this development may be seen as describing a synthesis (bastardisation) of Cubo-Futurism, Dada, Surrealism and the Situationist tendency, in disputation with that return to critical purism that culminates in Peter Bürger's revisionist dissertation, *Theory of the Avant-Garde* (1984) – a text designed as much to declare an end of the avant-garde as to 'theorise' it (Armand, 2013: 282–4). Whatever may be said concerning the ambivalence of Bürger's text in those polemics around the so-called postmodern turn in art during the 1970s (see Foster, 1983), what commands our attention in the line of aesthetic inquiry running from Gaudier

to Paolozzi and Metzger is how this ambivalence is ultimately rooted in a conception of 'work' that continues to mystify critical theories of art history. And just as the reach of Bürger's argument has been *de facto* extended via the counter-revisionism of Rosalind Kraus, Hal Foster, Benjamin Buchloh and Yve-Alain Bois (see their *Art Since 1900*, 2004), so it, too, requires renewed critique.

Halfway through *Theory of the Avant-Garde*, Bürger advances what will be a recurring thesis, that – in its historical formulation – the avant-garde had always viewed the dissociation of art 'from the praxis of life' as art's dominant characteristic in bourgeois society (Bürger, 1984: 49). Bürger argues that 'One of the reasons this dissociation was possible is that Aestheticism had made the element that defines art as an institution the essential *content* of works' – a coincidence that was above all necessary, in Bürger's estimation, 'to make it logically possible for the avant-garde to call art into question' (Bürger, 1984: 49). Two factors need to be immediately addressed here. The first is the somewhat circular argument that emerges around this self-reflexivity of 'content,' wherein an emergent critical self-consciousness of art is simultaneously bound to self-supersession and obsolescence, since the 'element that defines art' can in this relation be one only of anachrony to an art (or *technē* in general) that *calls itself into question*. The second is the confusion of Aestheticism, as a *determining logic* of the meaning of art in 'bourgeois' society, with the *abstractive logic* of the commodity in general, which should be identified as the real determining force here. Aestheticism is in effect nothing but a mystification of (sovereign) power, while the question of the institutionality of art (and of aesthetics in general) is directly bound to the question of power itself, whose signifying force – in industrial society – is communicated via the medium of commodification (its ideological social 'content,' in effect, substituting as a *technē* of experience, of 'consumption'). It is, in short, the relationship of metaphysics to technology.

These factors intersect in what has become a quite conventional dialectical reading of the avant-garde, in which a certain false opposition is established between Aestheticism's rejection of 'means-ends rationality' and the historical avant-garde's 'attempt to organise a new life praxis from a basis in art' (Bürger, 1984:

49). Yet far from the one negating the conditions of the other, we can see that both are complementary aspects of the same critical impulse and informed by the same abstractive logic. Yet it is only in its most Stalinist manifestations that anything which Bürger might be able to call 'the historical avant-garde movement' here – that is, in its most reactionary appropriation – can be described as attempting 'to do away with the distance between art and life' and to characterise this as still having 'all the pathos of historical progressiveness on its side' (Bürger, 1984: 50) (as if the organisation of 'a new life praxis' and the critique of 'bourgeois society' amounted to nothing but a crude revisionism, through which the dichotomy 'art and life' remains nevertheless preserved and fixed in its meaning). It is not for nothing that this tendency is precisely what Adorno and Horkheimer identify with the operations of a culture industry (Adorno, Horkheimer, 1979: 120–16) – in which, as Bürger says, the institutionalisation of the avant-garde 'has brought about the *false* elimination of the distance between art and life' (Bürger, 1984: 50 – emphasis added).

Unstated in this equation is the question of work. Just as Bürger confuses the organisation of a new 'life praxis' with 'historical progress,' so too he fixes the conception of *work* within precisely that framework of means-ends rationality against which both Aestheticism and the avant-garde define themselves. Consequently, in addressing the avowed anti-art of what he terms 'Dada manifestations,' for example, the most he is able to do is argue that it 'does not have the character of work' – whereas the contrary needs to be grasped in order to understand how the work paradigm (along with the relation between the *ideology of work* and the category of the *work of art*) is itself deconstructed by the nascent cyberneticism of the avant-garde. In this regard, also, it is necessary to examine the movement, built into Bürger's schematic, from the 'dignifying' of art-work as anti-labour, to its 'impoverishment' as institutional labour. The otherwise unacknowledged relationship between the 'dissociation of art and life' – as the context of the 'Aestheticist work of art' – and the impoverishment of labour under the social provisions of industrial capitalism, underpins a further misconception about the *constitutive* alienation of capitalist subjectivity (articulated through the abstraction of labour) (Marx, 1973: 693), of

which the 'autonomy' of the avant-garde (vis-à-vis the 'alienation' of art-work) is in effect the critical consciousness.[2]

It is here that the significance of Bataille's re-reading of Marx and Hegel must come to bear upon the idea of the avant-garde, as a 'mode of production' of dissipative structures, in which 'production' is itself understood as a *means of expenditure*.

For Bataille, dissipation and expenditure are not the (negative) consequences of a withering or impoverishment of (aesthetic) labour, but its *raison d'être*. And not only its 'reason' but in fact its condition (Bataille, 1985: 116). As Derrida has noted, if 'work' for Bataille is the discourse of reason itself (as Bürger tacitly assumes), it is no less the case that in its generalisation as the *ideology of labour* – enlarged to 'include within itself, and anticipate all the forms of its beyond, all the forms and resources of its exterior… in order to keep these forms and resources close to itself *by simply taking hold of their enunciation*' (Derrida, 1978: 252) – it necessarily evokes a certain anti-work which, while appearing to be already comprehended by it, nevertheless threatens to exhaust (impoverish) the discourse of work itself. It does this, moreover, not by *opposing* an idea of alienated labour, but by inscribing, in the same language as this alienation, that which 'exceeds the opposition of concepts governed by its logic' (Derrida, 1978: 252).

It is in this that Bataille situates the real deconstructive potential of this avant-garde (entirely opaque to Bürger's rationale), which does not resolve itself by a simple dialectical gesture of negation, since its movement is one of an *excess* that is both 'necessary and impossible,' whose effects – as Derrida says – 'fold discourse into strange shapes' (Derrida, 1978: 253) that, verging upon the *formless*, defy recuperation either for an instrumentalist system of value-production or its aesthetic contemplation. The logic of work as dissipation (entropy), and consequently the reconceptualising of modes of production as modes of expenditure, requires a

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[2] Arnold Hauser offers an important distinction between the autonomy of art and the economic (in) dependence of the artist, noting that 'it was only romanticism's bad conscience that attached such extraordinary value' to the semblance of this division-of-labour, informed by an 'inhibited attitude toward everything *material and practical*, not the fact that he plies his art for a trade' (Hauser, 1985: 337).

re-examination of the framing of the aesthetic problem as it stands in the work of
Bürger and his critics, if only to emphasise what is most radical in this movement.

Alienation and the Avant-Garde

Bürger's complaint about the exhaustion of the historical avant-garde in its
institutional iteration stems in no small measure from a perception of the neo-avant-
garde's incapacity to produce a *shock value* that is historically necessary rather than
merely faddish (Bürger, 1984: 50). It suggests that art-work needs to be distinguished
from an auratic, ritual phase – in Walter Benjamin's terms – as much as from a
commodity phase, whose relation to the 'new' is one of a mechanical and otherwise
arbitrary reflex. In either case, the distinction rests on an appreciation of the capacity
of the *artwork* – and only indirectly the *aesthetic labour* of the artist – to produce not
only an effect, but a relation to 'historical necessity.'

Such 'reified monuments' (Jameson, 1983: 11) of aestheticised labour distort a
socio-economic relation into a teleology of the order of an historical materialism.
In thus denying the abstract arbitrariness of the artwork as *surplus-value*, Bürger
remains blind to the standard of auratic kitsch to which avant-garde labour is thereby
to be held – as a category of production apparently transcending the constitutive
alienation of work in general (that is to say, as a *class*). Likewise the standard of
historical necessity does no more than mystify that *ideological social content* which
is the supposed measure of art's capacity to shock. Yet what of an art *work* that fails
to reify in this way? That fails, so to speak, to correspond – like Nietzsche's laughter
– either to some dour fatalistic teleology or to the entropic effluvium of a culture
industry driven by rampant inflation, producing neither aesthetic value of 'shock' nor
its commodification (as if these weren't already the same thing)?

In the age of Taylorist scientific management, on course for what Harvey
Wheeler in 1968 would call the Cybernetic Revolution (Wheeler, 1968: 14), the easy
dichotomy between aesthetic non-work and means-ends rationalism is complexified
in numerous and subtle ways. Simple binary antagonisms, of the quasi-Hegelian
kind favoured by Bürger, had already begun to give way to increasingly logistical
structures as the paradigm of a revolutionary movement. Concepts like that of

distributed power, advanced by the utilitarianist Jeremy Bentham, devolved by turn into a general thinking about autonomous systems, like Darwinian evolution, the Freudian unconscious and quantum physics, in which indeterminacy vied with causality as the motive principle. While thermodynamics and mechanical computing likewise provided the underpinning logics of industrial modernity – regardless of all the avowals of historical necessity, manifest destiny, or the perfectibility of Man that sought to extract ideological validity on modernity's behalf – they also brought into view forces equally capable of disrupting the existing socio-economic (as well as aesthetic) categories and of negating the very idea of progress itself. And by consequence, any linear schematisation of an avant-garde.

In this conjunction of complexity and abstraction, we see that 'the pathos of historical progressiveness' that supposedly haunts the recursions of the avant-garde is that of Bürger's schematisation itself.

It is not enough to acclaim a certain machine aesthetics or proletarianisation of modernist art as the terrain for marking out a conception of aesthetic labour within a larger revolutionary discourse – as if the movement of the avant-garde were simply a mirror held up to the 'innovations' of the industrial sector (in the false belief, among others, that there are, indeed, independent sectors, or that the institution of art itself – and society *itself* – is not *integral* to the operations of modernity as a whole). The question is rather how the avant-garde articulates (produces) this critical logic in the *failure* of 'historically necessary' production, or non-production. Not as the conservation of a revolutionary style, genre or *sense of moment* (the 'shock of the new'), but as a general movement of a *destabilisation of frameworks*.

It is a widely repeated truism that Britain – 'birthplace' of the Industrial Revolution – lacked a comparably radical aesthetic movement in response to it, as if the socio-political fact of advanced industrialisation had obviated the need for an avant-garde – just as, though home to Marx's researches on Capital, it somehow obviated the need for a 'worker revolution.' In the face of such complacent self-evidence, it is necessary to point out that the absence of an avant-garde in Britain is a myth and yet this myth has gone some way in precluding the institutionalisation of otherwise isolated aesthetic tendencies construed as little more than footnotes

to art history (see Nuttall, 1970, for example). Such is, to a greater or less extent, the case with Gaudier, Paolozzi and Metzger who – along with David Bomberg, Jacob Epstein, James Fitton and the Alpha Group, and Richard Hamilton, among others – have conventionally been cast in the role of local adjuncts to the more consequential (and thus more vigorously commodified) tendencies of Futurism, Pop Art and Conceptualism.

More than a conspicuous marginalism links these artists. Metzger had met Paolozzi, along with another member of the Independent Group, Nigel Henderson, in 1944, and later enrolled in Bomberg's painting and composition class at the London Borough Polytechnic in 1946. Bomberg had, with Gaudier, been a sometime fellow-traveller of Vorticism. Importantly, all three developed radical conceptions of art practice as collaborative and trans-medial, ranging from Gaudier's formal extrapolations of salvaged materials, to Paolozzi's mechano-morphisms, to Metzger's auto-destructive acid-and-nylon demonstrations, et cetera – each in tandem with the publication of manifestos and/or lecture performances. In Metzger's case, art practice merged directly into social practice through his involvement with the Committee for Nuclear Disarmament, the Direct Action Committee Against Nuclear War and the Committee of 100 – thereby generalising Kurt Schwitter's advocacy of the 'unity of art and non-art' (Wilson, 2008: 181). Metzger's mid-1960s collaboration with poet Bob Cobbing, for the DIAS (Destruction in Art) Symposium at Better Books on Charring Cross Road – like the exchanges between Gaudier and Ezra Pound that fuelled *Blast*, and the Independent Group's ICA lectures and the work around the 1956 'This is Tomorrow' exhibition at the Whitechapel Gallery – is likewise not only indicative of a socially-grounded practice, but one that repudiates the facile equivalence of aesthetic autonomy with individualism.

That such practice is grounded in the re-use of ephemera and the production of categorically ambivalent artefacts, or non-artefacts (performances, interventions, auto-destructions), amplifies an intransigence towards *art work* as *productive of commodification*. This intransigence towards 'surplus production,' in which art (inadvertently or otherwise) announces its own obsolescence, was spelled out in a series of manifestos, culminating in Metzger's several statements on auto-destructive

art. In the first of these, published in November 1959, Metzger writes: 'Auto-destructive art is primarily a form of public art for industrial societies… When the disintegrative process is complete, the work is to be removed from the site and scrapped' (Wilson, 2008: 182). As economy-without-reserve, Metzger's auto-destructive *art work* echoes Gaudier's concept of the *vortex* as 'INTENSITY OF LIFE BURSTING THE PLANE': a negation, by way of the 'transformation of technology into public art,' of the fetish economy of cultural 'ruins' (Wilson, 2008: 184).

The Vortex of Production

Reflecting on Gaudier's 'great achievement' during his four frenzied years in London, Ezra Pound noted: 'It was done against the whole social system in the sense that it was done against poverty and the lack of materials' (Kenner, 1971: 250). The vehemence of establishment denunciations of Gaudier's experiments at the time (as with Bomberg's and Paolozzi's) wasn't an 'aesthetic' stance, but one of cultural power intent on breaking what it couldn't seduce or expropriate.[3] Yet this struggle was also an impetus – as Gaudier wrote in a letter from 1910: 'the more I wander about amidst filth and sweat the better I understand art and love it: the desire for it becomes my crying need.' Like Paolozzi's collage assemblages of consumer admass or 'Bunk' (satirico-critical counterparts to a sculptural practice involving welded scrap metal), Gaudier's reliance on 'oddments of stone left over from other people's hackings' (Kenner, 1971: 250) presents a rebuke to what Ken Russell, in his 1972 film *Savage Messiah*, parodies as 'art democracy': the secular worship of commodity fetishes. In doing so, it orientates what Hito Steyerl (in a reversioning of Arte Povera and Jerzy Grotowsky's 'poor theatre') calls the 'poor image' – the work of materially degraded art – as *anti-work*.

Steyerl's 'poor image' developed out of an extended reflection on Chris Marker and Third Cinema, and is described as 'a copy in motion' – not simply the 'motion' of digital images, or their circulation through the economy of technical reproduction, but the *motion* of a certain historicity. 'The poor image,' Steyerl writes, 'is a rag or a rip… *a lumpen proletarian in the class society of appearances*' (Steyerl, 2012: 32). It is

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[3] The war was its ideal instrument of enforced 'disillusionment' in this respect.

defined by 'low' resolutions, where 'low' needn't correspond to dpi. Most importantly, the poor image 'is no longer about the real thing – the originary original. Instead, it is about its own real conditions of existence.' As Grotowsky wrote in 1965, on the relationship of competing modes of spectacularism:

> Theatre must admit its limits. If it cannot be richer than film, then let it be poorer. If it cannot be as lavish as television, then let it be ascetic. If it cannot create an attraction on a technical level, then let it give up all artificial technique. All that is left is a 'holy' actor in a poor theatre. (Grotowsky, 1968: 32–33)

Despite appearances, this isn't a mere strategy of 'reaction.' What matters in defining the 'poor image' isn't a degradation of *content*, but a materiality of degradation itself, out of which arises the possibility of radical co-option. 'By losing its visual substance,' Steyerl proposes, the 'poor image' creates around it a new *aura* – 'no longer based on the permanence of the 'original,' but on the transience of the copy' (Steyerl, 2012: 42 – emphasis added). And we can go further, by insisting that this 'copy' isn't a mimēsis in any straightforward sense, but the material 'itself' in its ongoing co-option – whether Gaudier's pilfered gravestones, Paolozzi's magazine cut-outs, Metzger's *Cardboards*, or Steyerl's AVIs and JPEGs.

This transient aura is, of course, the counterpart of the *aura of the commodity* – and it is this that confers upon the 'poor image' a critical and not merely artefactual status. It is the aura that shimmers on the event horizon of lightspeed obsolescence: the implosion of *value itself* into garbage. The 'poor image' evokes negentropy. In it, the alchemical illusionism of the commodity is 'deformed' – via a cybernetics of impoverished labour – into the *stuff* of an active political constructivism. With it, too, a certain conception of 'art' as *cultural antimatter*. But this seemingly recuperative movement can't simply be a matter of feeding commodification's shit back to it in the *magical* form of an aesthetic gold standard called 'the institutional avant-garde,' whose artefacts – like Pierro Manzoni's *Merda d'Artista* (1961) – ironically advert to the 'puerile utopia' (Baudelaire, 1961: 614)[4] of the deregulated cultural marketplace.

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[4] Referring here specifically to the cult of art-for-art's-sake.

Rather, it is a question, to paraphrase Courbet, of radical 'democracy in art' (Nochlin, 1989: 3). That is to say, of a certain 'equivalence' of exchange, in which everything is equally abstracted before the law of value-production *as irrecuperable entropy*.

There is a belligerent egalitarianism that we encounter in Russell's *Savage Messiah*, viscerally at odds with the museumised cultural paternalism and art-for-the-masses which serves as the target of the film's relentless parody. In a highly polemical scene centred around an Easter Island monolith, Russell depicts the crushing institutional ambivalence of the Royal Academy (masquerading as the Louvre) in the form of a monumental ethnological exhibit of 'primitive art.' The scene concludes with Gaudier's physical ejection by museum guards after volubly eulogising the Easter Island head as living art embalmed in a colonial mortuary. It is paralleled later in the film by two other scenes. The first shows Gaudier exultantly jackhammering a version of 'Red Stone Dancer' (1913) into some roadworks, to the cheers of construction workers, evocative of Epstein's 'Rock Drill' of the same year and redolent of Metzger's Southbank acid-dissolve performances of the mid-60s. The second shows Gaudier hurling his own 'primitive' sculpture through the front window of a London art dealer's gallery – the return, so to speak, of the 'poor image' in the form of what Gaudier called the 'PALEOLITHIC VORTEX' (Pound, 1970: 20).

Russell's window-smashing scene is reminiscent of the filmmaker's other major treatment of cultural iconoclasm fed-back through the spectacle of disillusion-ment – *Tommy* (1975) – in which The Who's Roger Daltrey 'breaks the mirror' of blinding false enlightenment, only to find himself martyrised by 'the masses,' who have been indelibly conditioned by the commodity's promise of instant gratification. But if Gaudier's work likewise 'broke the mirror' of a prevailing conception of sculptural art ('an agglomeration of Rodin-Maillol and useless academism') (Pound, 1970: 32), the individual pieces themselves have – beyond the tributes of Pound, Ford Maddox Ford and a few others – tended to be discussed precisely for their *minority*, as mere indicators of a future possibility foreclosed by Gaudier's 'premature' death at Neuville St Vaast in 1915 at the age of twenty three – 'part,' as Pound judiciously put it, 'of the *war waste*' (Pound, 1970: 17):

> There died a myriad,
>
> And of the best, among them,
>
> For an old bitch gone in the teeth,
>
> For a botched civilization. (Pound, 1975: 101)

This thematic carries over into a formal critique of the work itself. Indeed, the mark of Gaudier's 'greatest innovation,' so Marjorie Perloff tells us, is the 'presentation of movement that is potential rather than actual' (Perloff, 1996: 52). A movement that seems to anticipate, in its directness of attack, a kineticism as yet unachieved – one unbounded by sculptural conventions not only of form but of material, and of a certain *material inertia* that will come to preoccupy that line of exploration from Calder and Maholy-Nagy to Richard Serra and Bruce Nauman. Yet already in Gaudier, it is a movement vested in the materiality of the 'whole work' as a complex of situations – in which we must include the means and circumstances of its construction as well as its subsequent trajectory in the thought of 20th-century art: from Gaudier's forging of his own tools and eschewal of modelling, to the cannibalism of quasi-industrial waste into aesthetico-critical 'vortices.' As Gaudier wrote in a 1912 letter to his partner Sophie Brzeska: 'Movement is the translation of life, and if art depicts life, movement should come into art, since we are only aware of life because it moves' (qtd. in Ede, 1931).

De-Fetishising Art-Work

Gaudier's dynamism steps away from that of the Futurists precisely in its refusal to relinquish the contemporary lifeworld for a mimetic techno-utopianism, while equally repudiating the retreat into Humanism that was to characterise Bomberg's sometimes reactionary stance following his experiences during WWI. In Gaudier, technicity is never separate from life (even as encountered in the trenches at Neuville-Saint-Vaast), nor is it *exemplified* in the monumentality of industrialised, militarised social organisation or the march of progress and mass mechanised warfare. If Gaudier's work is to be regarded as 'minor' and/or 'potential' – or, so to speak, *poor* – this in itself isn't incidental but rather the substance of a praxis whose *movement* describes a series of vectors:

1. from economic circumstances to an economy of circumstance;

2. from economy of circumstance to critical method (virtue of necessity);

3. from critical method to the materiality of critique (a gravestone, cut brass, a rifle butt);

4. culminating in the deconstruction of the art/life dichotomy as *work* (the Vortex).

In many respects, Gaudier's anti-Aestheticism anticipates Dada's open assault on the fetishising of what Clement Greenberg will later call *medium.* For Gaudier, as with Schwitters (whose *Merz* constructions are nothing if not a restatement of the paleolithic vortex), there is only *material.* It is for this reason, too, that Gaudier's 'sculpture' can't be reduced to the mimetic/phenomenal dichotomy presented in Gotthold Lessing's *Lacoön*, with which Rosalind Krauss begins her reconsideration of avant-garde sculpture from Boccioni to Nauman (a book which notably omits any mention of Gaudier, Epstein, Schwitters, Paolozzi or Metzger). 'Sculpture is an art,' Lessing writes, 'concerned with the deployment of bodies in space... This defining spatial characteristic must be separated from the essence of those artforms, like poetry, whose medium is time.' However, he adds, 'all bodies exist not only in space but also in time. They continue, and at any moment of their continuance may assume a different appearance and stand in a different relation' (Krauss, 1977: 3–4). Yet in Gaudier, as in the work of Schwitters, Paolozzi and Metzger, such spatiotemporal coordinates are never *separate* from a broadly social movement (i.e. in collective tension) – in particular the circulation of commodities in which a certain *ambivalence* predominates, in the exchange of 'value' and 'non-value,' where 'History,' 'abstraction' and 'alienation' intersect.

Here, in its ongoing critique of aesthetic morality ('the good and the beautiful'), Courbet's 'proletarian' radical democracy collides with the ultimate dross: the commodity itself. If for Steyerl 'poor images are the contemporary Wretched of the Screen' (Steyerl, 2012: 32), for Courbet the 'poor image' is the image of the socially 'unpresentable':

Poor images are poor because they are not assigned any value within the class society of images – their status as illicit or degraded grants them exemption from its criteria. (Steyerl, 2012: 38)

That the one can be made to collapse into the other should alert us to the significance of Gaudier's project, in which what is at stake is rather the *unpresentable as such*. This doesn't mean a *reification* of social relations into a working material (something that is the accomplishment of industrialisation, in fact), but of an articulation of that which escapes (or is suppressed by) the ideology of mimēsis. Insofar as the relationship between the 'poor image' and the 'unpresentable' mirrors a return of the commodity's magical evanescence to the base materiality of some *thing* (i.e. garbage), it serves to demystify those political seductions of 'emancipation' proffered by regimes of so-called 'representation.' Such were the prevailing conditions under which Saint-Simon evoked the idea of a revolutionary avant-garde to 'spread new ideas' and exercise a 'positive power over society' (qtd. in Egbert, 1967: 343), in contest with those property codes dictating which 'ideas' in art were to be communicated. Moreover, with Napoléon III's inauguration of the Salon des Réfuses in 1863, this nascent avant-garde had to contend with its own (instantaneous) institutionalisation – that infinitesimal temporality in which the *work* of the avant-garde returns to being alienated cultural labour.[5]

The vertiginous transmutation of social dross into class consciousness into social democracy thus becomes the commodified appeal of upward mobility by way of *free* commerce. Likewise, the inauguration of a space of aesthetic 'refusal' provided a surrogate for political radicalism, seeking to diffuse the force of the avant-garde in an all-encompassing (homeostatic) pluralism while proffering the illusion of its autonomy only to the extent of its expropriation and commodification. What emerges from the subsequent *disillusionment* of the avant-garde – from Dada to the Nouveaux Réalistes (who Metzger first polemicised against as surrendering 'the world in its totality as work of art' for the sake of commercialisation [Wilson, 2008: 189]) – is a socially-critical art that increasingly mines the commodity's underside, its dirty secret, its 'unpresented': that armature of dross on which the aura of its allure is

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[5] Of which there are strange echoes in the dispute between Marx and Bakunin between 1868 and 1872, in the context of which Bakunin convened a Social Democratic Alliance as a revolutionary avant-garde *within the First International*, resulting in a split that divided the revolutionary movement for many years.

sustained. It's in this respect that the intensities of Gaudier's otherwise 'attenuated' project amount to something like a Minimanual of Urban Guerrilla Art, whose legacy persists – via the détournements and dérives of the Lettrists, Situationists and Fluxus – in such 'samizdat counter-histories' as Laura Oldfield Ford's *Savage Messiah* London zine series from 2005–2009.

Entropy is the Mirror of Abstraction

Borrowing (like Russell) the title of Jim Ede's 1931 biography of Gaudier, Ford's *Savage Messiah* is a self-consciously lo-fi assemblage of 'collaged and photocopied pages' – redolent of Paolozzi's April 1952 'Bunk' epidiascope performance at the ICA (assembled from American magazine cut-outs, postcards, diagrams, and assorted admass) – recording the artist's drift through neoliberalism's border zones in post-Blairite London: 'lanes of traffic, toxic troughs… glyphs in a spiral stairway, a submerged arcade… a loophole, a hidden anomaly' (Ford, 2015). As with Paolozzi, 'objects from the environment become the collage-skins of the beings in that environment' (Stonard, 1959: 26). Ford's subject is both 'a city in the process of being buried' beneath the accumulated mass of industrialised image-manipulation and a poetics of salvage of London's 'negative equity ghettos' (a re-weirding of gentrification processes productive of *futured ruins*, evoking the metamorphic urban sculpture of China Miéville's *Un Lun Dun*).

Savage Messiah, in Ford's words, is a 'mapping of ruptures like the London riots, the breaks in the flattened time of a "continuous present"' (Ford, 2017). Like Gaudier's found, appropriated and stolen bits of cultural 'hackings' and Metzger's 'auto-destructive' erasures, Ford's materials are the 'punks, squatters, ravers, football hooligans and militants,' as Mark Fisher writes in a preface to the later book edition, 'left behind by a history which has ruthlessly photoshopped them out of its finance-friendly SimCity' (Fisher, 2011). For Fisher, *Savage Messiah* is permeated by a Derridean 'hauntology': 'the idea of being haunted by lost futures.' In this sense it self-consciously situates itself within that *anachronistic* fissure defining the avant-garde, between the recuperation of a radical impulse and the future-imaginary reduced to expired commodities. In doing so it recalls the ambivalence of the 'poor

image,' whose circulation, Steyerl reminds us, 'feeds into both capitalist media assembly lines and alternative audiovisual communities':

> The poor image – ambivalent as its status may be – thus takes its place in the genealogy of carbon-copied pamphlets, cine-train agitprop films, underground video magazines and other nonconformist materials… (Steyerl, 2012: 43–44)

Moreover, as Steyerl goes on to argue, the poor image '*reactualises* many of the historical ideas associated with these circuits…' (Steyerl, 2012: 44 – emphasis added). They serve, in a manner of speaking, as the constellational logic of the 'vernacular spolia of reality' (Leiris, 1949: 411–17) they embody. In doing so, they conjoin the ideas of Gaudier (vortex), Eisenstein (montage) and Benjamin (dialectical image), but also William Burroughs who, as Fisher notes, 'deploys collage' in much the same way as Ford, 'as a weapon in time-war' (Fisher, 2011). In the June 1914 issue of *Blast*, Gaudier wrote:

> Sculptural energy is the mountain.
> Sculptural feeling is the appreciation of masses in relation.
> Sculptural ability is the defining of these masses by planes…
> PLASTIC SOUL IS INTENSITY OF LIFE BURSTING THE PLANE. (Pound, 1970: 21)

For Gaudier, the deconstruction of the 'Law of Genre' (Derrida, 1992: 223ff) defined by so-called historical necessity is indeed a form of time-war against the abolition of a future that is forever presenting itself in the institutionalisation and normalisation of art *as the permanent tension between praxis and reification*.[6] And if 'the whole history of sculpture' thus feeds, as Perloff asserts, into a 'complete revaluation of form as a means of expression' (Perloff, 1996: 54), this isn't for the purpose of aesthetic novelty, but as an affirmation of the *possible* through a deconstruction of the *permitted*. Gaudier's 'working-class avant-gardism' isn't a *primitivism*: his

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[6] The introjection of this movement, by which the temporality of commodification is brought into view, subsequently marks that point at which avant-garde art-work displaces the a-temporal logic of the 'artwork.'

'PALEOLITHIC VORTEX' is the antithesis of regression; moreso the antithesis of a seeking after exotic forms of authenticity. It is rather a 'bursting' of the plane of a supervening present – the collapsed present-time of the commodity – into the future-anterior of the 'new, primordial' (Pound, 1970: 31). In other words, a work of *dis-alienation.*

Like Paolozzi and Ford's differing examinations of rampant commodification – as the major socially-transformative force of the post-War era – Gaudier's and Metzger's methods transform the working environment (London) from a series of private and institutional demarcations of *property* into an eruptive vortex of possibilities resistant to the very idea of ownership. And if 'sculpture and architecture are one and the same' (Pound, 1970: 30), as Gaudier argued, then the critique of art equally extends to those systems of regulation and control that fuse urbanism with the cultural heritage industry, as quiescent real-estate décor – a critical line that likewise extends through the psychogeographies of Ralph Rumney, Stewart Home, Marc Atkins and Iain Sinclair; the site-specific political performance art of Stuart Brisley; as well as Wolf Vostell's 'Dé-coll/age Architecture' (1961) and other works included in Vostell and Dick Higgins' 1969 volume *Fantastic Architecture*; and in the deconstructive practice of the Anarchitecture Group (Gordon Matta-Clark, Laurie Anderson, Tina Girouard, et al., 1973).

The sculptural-architectural vortex is nothing if not the transverse movement of psychogeographic *détournement* itself, its radical collage-effect wrought upon the organisational structures of the aesthetic/social complex and their instrumentalist logic. This is the predominant function assigned by Guy Debord to the Situationist *dérive*, as a praxis of urbanological deconstruction. The *dérive*, as defined by Debord, is 'a technique of transient passage through varied ambiances' entailing 'playful-constructive behaviour' distinguishing it from notions associated with the Baudelairean flâneur. It seeks to subvert 'the domination of psychogeographical variations' and to exploit a 'calculation of their possibilities' (Debord, 1981: 50) in counterpoint to the forces of urban planning – just as Gaudier and others worked in a constructive counterpoint to the forces of aesthetic normalisation vis-à-vis the 'objectivity' of sculpture.

'I think about walking in the city,' says Ford, 'as a way of unlocking memory, of encountering time slips, dreams and desires.' The temporal physiognomy of Ford's

urban *détournements* mirrors the collage-effect of Gaudier's spatial reconfigurations of material and environment in the evolution of works such as 'Bird Swallowing a Fish,' 'Fish,' and 'Torpedo Fish (Toy)' (all produced in 1914). Like Ford's *Savage Messiah*, Gaudier's project can similarly be read as nothing if not *anti-utopian*. His 'walks, his prowls, his constant chipping at stone' (Pound, 1970: 40), as Pound recounts, synthesise a relation of abstract elements to a whole social praxis – recalling Ivan Chteglov's 'Formulary for a New Urbanism' (1953): 'Dreams spring from reality and are realised in it' (Chteglov, 1953: 2).

> All cities are geological; you cannot take three steps without encountering ghosts bearing all the prestige of their legends. We move within a *closed* landscape whose landmarks constantly draw us toward the past. Certain *shifting* angles, certain *receding* perspectives, allow us to glimpse original conceptions of space, but this vision remains fragmentary. […] It has become essential to bring about a complete spiritual transformation by bringing to light forgotten desires and by creating entirely new ones. And by carrying out an *intensive propaganda* in favour of these desires. (Chteglov, 1953: 2–3)

Chteglov's unitary urbanism revives the delirium of the Paris Commune, suggesting that the revolutionary artist should take up their tools the way one takes up arms against the institutional forces of entropy. Similarly, Gaudier's and Ford's architectonics of sub-cultural *refuse* transforms the work of salvage – like Metzger's auto-destructive/auto-creative 'manifestations' or Paolozzi's 'Bunk' and found-film works (e.g. *History of Nothing*, 1962) – into a refusal of the *un*presentable against the totality of what, within a system of mimetic domination that Kenneth Clark (in a syntax ridiculed by Russell), could still, in the wake of two world wars, grandiosely call Civilisation.

Avant-Gardism and the Cybernetic Predicament

It is this project of wilful 'barbarism,' of a 'revolt against civilisation,' that radicalises the concept of *art-work* in the line of attack developed from Gaudier to Paolozzi, Metzger, Ford, and which points also to a renewal of Courbet's notion of an avant-

garde beyond the spiral of formal innovation and aesthetic novelty into which – in the recursive 'détournements' of postmodernism – it had threatened to descend, and to which Bürger subsequently sees it as inevitably succumbing, post-WW2, in the institutionalism of what he terms the 'neo-avant-garde.' Indeed, the direction in which Gaudier's work points is that of an 'end of culture' itself – whether understood as class, genre, stereotype or division of labour – and a remaking of 'art' from its ruins. To this extent, commodification isn't a negation but a primordial force (of signifying social separation) that *makes possible* this movement. It is never a question – in the subsequent tendencies of Paolozzi and Metzger – of retreating from abstraction, as Bomberg had done (in a rejection of Marinetti's bombastic techno-futurist militarism), but of grasping its broadest ramifications *as a categorical equivalence of exchange between all constituent elements*[7] – aesthetic, social, political, technological, ontological. It was only on the level of abstraction, in fact, that the avant-garde could critique (or in Situationist terms, *détourne*) the commodity form and the ideological system that has sought to maintain a monopoly over it *as the constitutive form of everyday life*. Precisely because it is only on the level of abstraction that the categorical reason vested in the commodity is contradicted by it.

It is for this reason that Bürger misconstrues the relation of (anti-) *work* to the concept of *functionlessness*. The avant-garde, he argues, counters functionlessness 'not by an art that would have consequences within the existing society, but rather by the principles of sublation of art in the praxis of life' (Bürger, 1984: 51). In other words, by drawing from the equivalence of the *impoverishment of aesthetic labour* an impetus that directly aligns with that of a broadly social-revolutionary tendency, in which the concept of the social nevertheless remains in a fixed constellation. In Bürger's terms, this means displacing *alienation*, as the 'content' of art-work, with the *sublation* of art-work itself (defined in solely 'negative' terms, i.e. functionlessness). The avant-garde thus corresponds to a specific transformation of theory into praxis, of which neo-avant-garde art would be the transient 'false consciousness.'

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[7] Of which Humanism, also, is one.

Yet it is meaningless under such conditions to continue to insist (as Bürger does) upon the rhetorical distinction between 'art and the praxis of life' (Bürger, 1984: 51). Just as it is meaningless to speak of 'autonomous' art-work as the production of/by 'individualities,' since the production of autonomy (abstraction) is itself the product of a general logic that is both an 'aesthetic' and a 'technē politikē' (since Bürger's 'individuality' is simply a mystification, as we have already seen, of an alienation that is itself *constitutive* of individual subjectivity). It is the *system of abstraction* that produces the *work of autonomy*, and does so – as cybernetics makes abundantly plain – in an *ambivalent* relation to the Humanism that continues to haunt every art/life dichotomy (as the self-sufficiency of alienated thought and the arbitrary commerce of its significations).[8] The seemingly historical character of these antagonisms already belies the technical character of historicism itself, as what Eisenstein called the 'montage of attractions' (Eisenstein, 1998: 35ff) and what Derrida has called 'the *polysemy* of technē' (Derrida, 1987: 21 – emphasis added).

Though computers are almost universally synonymous with logic and functionality, and have increasingly become the very paradigm of Reason itself, displacing that of 'Man,' this has been accomplished under the paradoxical sign of a technological mysticism that only appears to be the inverse of a Humanist 'aesthetic.' Which is to say, as the aestheticisation of Reason. In the figure of the computer, the entire history of technical artefacts is aggregated into a unified system of rationalised control and communication: in the period around WW2, what throughout previous history had been regarded simply as *prostheses* were abruptly transformed through systematisation into something like an *autonomous agency* in which the two apparently opposed Messianisms of civilisation and progress intersect. Thus while in appearance a centuries-old Humanist standpoint was displaced with remarkably little resistance by a technocentric one, in truth they are indistinguishable. It is no surprise, then, that in the half-century since the foundation of cybernetics as a discipline, electronic digital computers and a rapidly evolving AI have not only

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[8] 'Alienated thought is always sufficient unto itself' (Vaneigem, 1994: 13).

'infiltrated' to the most trivial levels of everyday reality, they effectively constitute the very *means of production* of reality itself.

How did this happen?[9]

Such facets of cybernetics contribute significantly to the view that, rather than representing a break with the aesthetics and positivist science of modernity, it constitutes an extension of it, through the *putting to work* of the previously *unpresentable* and *irrational* in the form of a generalised, technical *system*. In this, cybernetics bears certain resemblances to the 'positivism' of psychoanalysis, semiotics and the cubo-futurist-constructivist avant-garde. It is no accident that cognition, communication and creativity preoccupied cybernetics from the outset, in the attempt to simulate a human hypothesis, but more-so as analogues to the fundamentally

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[9] It had long been suspected, contrary to certain organicist and theological notions, that 'life' as previously understood wasn't a category apart from 'technology' – and that what had been called 'mind' devolved not upon vague metaphysical concepts but upon a definable mechanics of self-organisation and self-modification in physical systems. Such an autopoiēsis provided the framework for a 'general intelligence,' whose lineaments might be detected in one form or another universally – whether in the behaviour of other species of 'animal,' or in the biosphere at large, or in the characteristics of subatomic particles – but above all in a continuum with so-called *artificial* intelligence. This was elegantly demonstrated in Alan Turing's restaging of a certain mimetic allegory – the elder Pliny's famous 'grapes and drapes' test of Zeuxis and Parrhasius. What Pliny presented as a contest between art (technē) and nature is reduced in Turing's Imitation Game to the act of judgement itself: in this case between 'man and machine' (or, considering its – and Turing's – gendered history, *trans* and machine). What this act of judgement reveals, however, is a fundamental *ambivalence*, vested as it is in the entirely implicated figure of the *artist*, the *scientist*, and the *interrogator*. A judgement, in other words, situated at the intersection of an aesthetic, scientific and political *knowledge* more than able to 'deceive' itself – not through some technical insufficiency, but because the very distinction it is supposed to test is a product of its own logical operations. In its capacity to see itself reflected in all things, judgement *as such* (its fundamental lability) becomes the predicate of a generalised *cybernetics*. As in Pliny's allegory, the question is no longer one of content (the *what* in which 'nature,' or the 'artist,' is deceived), but of a co-dependency of *contradiction, paradox, indeterminacy*. We might speak, rather, of a kind of *mimetic algorithm*: not a mimēsis of any *thing*, or *concept* (the imitation of 'the human' by 'the machine,' for example), but of *mimēsis itself*, in the conditional (or rather probabilistic) form of an *as if*. And this would necessarily include proceeding *as if* the world were susceptible to a *rationality* premised upon acts of judgement, decision, critique and *ipso facto* that this underlying rationality of the world qualifies such acts of judgement, decision, critique as inherently *rational*. Such is the tautological 'nature' of the cybernetic hypothesis issuing from Turing's 'game,' as a kind of simulacral or *trans-* Newtonianism. In this way such excluded features of Newtonian mechanics as chaos and complexity are able not only to be *modelled* but to be statistically and topologically *determined* in such a way as to permit their representation both within and by series of cybernetic operations.

cybernetic problem of 'general intelligence' (an expression which translates equally well to 'everyday life'). Such preoccupations served not only to strategically 'humanise' cybernetics – which in any case had a long pre-history of anthropomorphic curiosities, like Kempelen's chess-playing 'Turk' – but, in its more sinister aspirations, to engineer various beguiling systems of what José Delgado termed 'psychocivilization': the extension of power-through-information, to power-through-behavioural-control, to the eventual *production* of collective and individual consciousness (Delgado, 1969). A species of automatised Panopticism built into the fabric of 'everyday life.'

In 1969 Delgado published *Physical Control of the Mind: Toward a Psychocivilized Society*, which extrapolated from isolated research on remote electro-stimulation of the brain to an entire authoritarian social machinery. Where Delgado envisaged the need for physical mutilation, the emerging industry in Public Relations envisaged semantic reprogramming through the pervasive feedback system of mass media and the stimulation of *irrational consumer impulses* which themselves could be commodified. Between the advancement of a technocratic security state and commodity capitalism – what Wheeler contemporaneously referred to as the 'universal revolution' of cybernetics (Wheeler, 1968: 14) – the social application of such apparently dehumanising technologies required an alibi. It sought this, as it continues to seek it, in the domain of 'culture,' and such may be said to be the substance of the 1968 'Cybernetic Serendipity' exhibition at London's ICA.[10]

As a landmark moment in the integration of the contemporary arts and sciences, 'Cybernetic Serendipity' displayed an attitude towards innovation which combined

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[10] Running from 1 August until 20 October 1968, 'Cybernetic Serendipity' opened just over a month after student and worker insurrections in Paris had brought French industry and government to the verge of collapse, averted at the last instant by snap parliamentary elections. Similar 'disturbances' occurred in Mexico, Tokyo, the United States and, under seemingly inverted political circumstances, in Czechoslovakia (where the very first 'Computer Art' exhibition occurred earlier that same year, in Brno, curated by the 21-year-old Jiří Valoch). The common element was an authoritarianism as *anachronistic* as the popular 'revolutionary' impulses appealed to in resisting it. In Paris, acolytes of Situationism called not for a revolution in 'everyday life': creative emancipation in place of the alienation of industrial labour. Yet if *this* revolution was said to have failed, it did so only as the advance guard of a more subtle 'universal revolution': the cybernetic displacement of conventional authoritarianism by an ever more pervasive *soft power*, and the recuperation by a renewed Corporate-State Apparatus of the idea of creative emancipation via a new market in lifestyle choices.

that of major industrial fairs (it attracted some 40,000 visitors before transferring to the Corcoran Gallery in Washington and the San Francisco Exploratorium) with the subversive avant-gardism of such precursors as the 'Man, Machine and Motion' group exhibition at the Hatton Gallery in 1955 and 'This is Tomorrow' at the Whitechapel Gallery a year later (both vehicles of the Independent Group around Paolozzi and Hamilton). As curator Jasia Reichardt explained, the exhibition intended to showcase 'artists' involvement with science, and… scientists' involvement with the arts' as well as 'the links between the random systems employed by artists, composers and poets, and those involved with the making and the use of cybernetic devices.' Moreover, it sought to do so in a 'positive social and political climate,' under the auspices of Harold Wilson's aggressively 'white heat of technology' Labour government (Mason, 2018), playing to the 'dream of technical control and of instant information conveyed at unthought-of velocities' which pervaded 1960s culture (Shanken, 2003).

'Cybernetic Serendipity,' in other words, sought not only to be timely, but to be both populist and experimental, to operate – in a manner of speaking – at the intersection of art, cybernetics and life. To accomplish this within the institutional setting of the ICA required that the exhibition not only exemplify contemporary cybernetic cultural research, but also 'subvert' the austere, menacing and even apocalyptic image of computers and atom-age technology handed down from 1950s science fiction – an image reprised in the figure of the psychopathic Heuristic Algorithmic mainframe in Stanley Kubrick's *2001: A Space Odyssey* of the same year. The inclusion of artists like Metzger, Bruce Lacey, Nam June Paik and Jean Tinguely – whose various works exhibited strong cyber-critical as well as cyber-positive impulses (through parody, satire and auto-destruction) – appears in this respect a calculated effort to co-opt avant-garde strategies to the service of dis-alienating the public from the abstract technologies of the Corporate-State Apparatus.

Stereotype as Operative Logic

In contrast to what has often been perceived as the dehuminising means-ends rationalism of social cyberneticisation, the construction of satirical-critical 'machines' – from Paolozzi's mechano-morphic sculptures to Metzger and Tinguely's auto-productive/destructive installations, to the anthropo-robotics of Paik and Lacey – not

only posed questions about what machines *are* and what they are *for*, but about the ideological character of machine aesthetics and machine culture generally – and about how machines may evolve beyond the limits of conventional predictive modelling in the future. Above all – and against the supposed 'neutrality' of cybernetics as techno-scientific discourse – the satirical-critical character of auto-destructive art exposes its inherently *political* dimensions (perceived most visibly in the increased cyberneticisation of the 'individual' and society at large throughout the post-WW2 period).

With the revolution in personal computers (and an accessible means of production of 'computer art') still a decade away, 'Cybernetic Serendipity' posed the 'problem' of cybernetics not as a social and political one,[11] but as an aesthetic problem contained within the history of experimental art. The menacing intrusion of inexplicable new technologies into everyday life could thus be normalised as *spectacle*, restoring to the collective imagination the illusion of 'power' over that which was designed to regulate and control human behaviour. Lacey's contribution to 'Cybernetic Serendipity' is a case in point: a minimally anthropomorphic robot named R.O.S.A.B.O.S.O.M, designed to convey a Duchampian sense of futility and disarray in the technofetishisation of desire (Eros). Lacey's R.O.S.A. was designed to operate as a pair with another robot, M.A.T.E., which – using ultrasonic and infrared sensors – was programmed to automatically detect R.O.S.A.'s presence and follow her. Reuben Hoggett describes the ritual thus:

> As he gets closer to ROSA his infrared beam is activated, and ROSA has a corresponding detector. As he gets still closer, ROSA emits a scream from a tape-recorder stored within her body. MATE has a voice operated switch activated by the scream, and changes direction to avoid contact with her. If, however, the avoidance action doesn't quite work and they contact, Bruce

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[11] In any case, not a 'scientific' problem: in public discourse the word 'science' is ostensibly meaningless, other than in terms of immediate application in everyday experience. The public-at-large has neither the competence nor the inclination to concern themselves with so-called scientific problems, which must first be represented to them by other means, such as Industrial Fairs, science fiction, and the mass market in gadgets and labour-saving devices.

installed contact switches on ROSA, and when activated (by MATE), she
blows confetti everywhere. Bruce goes on to explain that after the courtship,
the confetti is symbolic of ROSA and MATE being married. (Hoggett, 2009)

Counter-intuitively, an artificial intelligence is one that learns by breaking down,
rather than simply through the positive aggregation of data. In their 1972 study
of capitalism and schizophrenia, *Anti-Oedipus*, Gilles Deleuze and Félixe Guattari
identified the operation of 'breakthroughs and breakdowns' with the fundamental
drives of what, in an allusion to Duchamp's mechanical bride ('La mariée mise à
nu par ses célibataires, même,' 1915–1923) (McLuhan, 1951), they termed 'desiring
machines.' For Lacey, such cybernetic allegories remain first and foremost allegories
of a heteronormative 'human' predicament: 'Given a brain,' Lacey writes, 'man has
the possibility of developing into a sublime, happy, creative, and unique creature,
but he is prevented from realising his potential by the severe limitations imposed
on him by the environment he has created for himself…' (Lacey, 1968: 38). To survive
in the future, 'he must rebuild his cities, rewrite his laws, and re-educate himself…
He must do all of these things to suit his emotional, sexual and psychological needs'
(Lacey, 1968: 38).

Lacey's desiring machines, like Tinguely's 'Metamécaniques' and Metzger's
auto-destructive/auto-creative sculptures, resembled automatised junk: a critical
anti-aesthetic of emergent cyberculture. Tinguely's 'cyclo-matic' and 'metamitic'
painting machines and Metzger's 'acid action paintings' were likewise designed
not as an aestheticisation of randomness or of quasi-cybernetic processes, but
as autopoiētic assemblages of generative perturbation – of *breakthroughs and
breakdowns*. In contrast to the conventional aesthetics of 'machine art' (like Roy
E. Allen's 'Patternmaker'), Tinguely's 'metamitics' and Metzger's 'acid paintings'
produced *patterns* that were exactly neither 'regular and repeatable' (Allen, 1968: 40)
nor objectively stable, but which produced, as Perloff says, a complete revaluation of
form as a means of expression. In this they exploded the myth of a 'primitivist' *art
informel* (the so-called expressive fallacy) as a *negation* of abstract rationalism. In his
1964 article 'On Random Activity in Material/Transforming Works of Art,' Metzger

stated that 'at a certain point, the work takes over, is an activity beyond the detailed control of the artist, reaches a power, grace, momentum, transcendence… which the artist could not achieve except through random activity' (Metzger, 1964). In doing so, these works likewise exposed the ideological fallacy behind 'functionalist' cyber-aesthetics as well as the constructed 'Humanism' of informal or expressive art, which now appeared interconnected[12] (as Willem de Kooning famously insisted, 'style is a fraud' [de Kooning, 1949]).

Here, too, we see that Bürger's assertion about the avant-garde representing the 'radical negation of the category of individual creation' is contradicted by the abstract ambivalence of Metzger's, Lacey's and Tinguely's work to the very category of individuality (the position of an 'autonomous agency' that can potentially be occupied by *anything whatsoever*: the agency of a 'class consciousness,' for example, or of 'revolutionary knowledge'). From this seemingly radical position (one which derived, in fact, from the convergence of Marx, Freud, Saussure and others), the avant-garde could be seen to challenge the dogmatic and essentialist tendencies disguised within the institutionalisation of art – as not merely ideological embellishments of power, but as indicative of a foundational logic. Yet it is precisely for this reason that it is wrong to speak, as Bürger does, of a 'failure' of the avant-garde 'to sublate art' into a life-praxis on the principle that its artefacts (its 'manifestations') are subsequently recuperable for a general algorithmics of commodification. 'The revival of art as an institution,' Bürger insists, 'and the revival of the category of 'work' suggest that, today, the avant-garde is already historical' (Bürger, 1984: 57). Such an observation is in any case rendered trivial by the fact that the commodity itself is the formal expression, *par excellence*, of abstract ambivalence, whose tactical availability to the critique (or production) of 'value' (even as *non-value*) – as the cybernetic reconstitution of aesthetic labour exemplifies – remains open-ended.

The problem posed by the work of Metzger, Paolozzi, Gaudier et al., is one in which the apparent antagonisms of techno-poiēsis are not discretely dissolved but rather generalised within the logic of work itself (as irrecuperable entropy). Like

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[12] A pseudo-dichotomy which by 1968 was productive of nothing but cliché in any case.

Nietzsche's laughter, this *excessive* movement – general, inflationary, satirical – threatens to destroy its sense (of productive subordination), to dislocate it from a recuperative logic *in general*, causing the very totalising movement that defines it to appear as what Bataille calls a 'small comic recapitulation' (Bataille, 1943: 60). This concerns also the ability of cybernetic systems, as the mechano-morphic analogue of Gaudier's PALEOLITHIC VORTEX, not only to produce 'active stereotypes' or nascent archetypes, but to represent what History teaches us to call the 'unpresentable' – that indeterminate dynamic with which, in the last instance, humanity vests its innermost drives: as if, robbed of its unique claim upon Reason, it had sought tactical advantage in the *irrational*. Far from exhausting the idea of an *autonomous* avant-garde, this movement exposes the dependency of all institutional structures upon an accelerated, convulsive movement of expropriation and recuperation that only bears the *semblance* of systematicity, but is in fact purely reactive to a paranoid, schizophrenic degree.

In this, Gaudier, Paolozzi and Metzger anticipate the totalising capacity of the cyberneticised Corporate-State Apparatus – signalled by the advent of the Organisation Man (Whyte, 1956) – to produce an abstract reality in which individual and collective subjectivities are constituted as data aggregation which is fed back into the social economy in the ambivalent ritual guise of *either* 'desiring' commodity-consumption *or* 'revolutionary knowledge' – where the premium commodity is social being itself, in all its stereotyped idiosyncrasies. In this ideal synthesis of 'art' (technē) and 'life,' the aestheticisation of politics as Benjamin foresaw it is indistinguishable from a mystification of History as 'technology' – where technology doesn't in fact name an autonomous condition of possibility but rather a reinscription of the Humanist paradigm of 'civilisation' by other means. If the avant-garde's 'transgression' of the systematicity of this paradigm is not, as Bataille argues, an 'access to the immediate and indeterminate *identity* of a non-meaning,' this is because its operations themselves derive from that *alienation* at the origin of the very conception of the system, of work, of productivity, and consequently of recuperation, institutionalisation, totalisation.

It is at the point at which the reinscription of this paradigm *fails* that the function of the avant-garde comes into view not simply as critique or subversion

but as an *excess of production*: not in the form of a surplus-value, but of a *compulsive dissipation* that invests the principle of value itself from its inception and tends to exponential increase. Consequently, the work of the avant-garde can be regarded as a *discourse of the irrecuperable*, born of the 'impoverishment' of totality as it succumbs to the entropic labour required to sustain the illusion of itself. This irrecuperability is the nondeductable element of art-work itself, regardless of the subsequent institutional trajectories of the so-called *artwork*, within the historical confines of an avant-gard*ism*. In this, the failure of totalisation – as it slides towards the 'loss of sense' at its horizon – is always to some extent an 'aesthetics' of the sublime, in which the old ontological unity of History and method, envisaged by Hegel, is reduced to that parodic cybernetic conundrum that presents itself in Bataille in the form of the question, 'Who will ever know what it is to know nothing?'[13]

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Competing Interests

The author has no competing interests to declare.

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