

Anarchist library
Anti-Copyright



Art Schools Burning & Other Songs of Love and War

Gene Ray

Gene Ray

Art Schools Burning & Other Songs of Love and War

Retrieved on November 28, 2011 from www.leftcurve.org

en.anarchistlibraries.net

fitting form in which to hear and answer the unsilenced call for
“another try.”

Contents

I. In Search of the Avant-Gardes	6
II. Art Schools and the Embattled Academy	15
III. Processing the Legacies of Defeat	21
IV. The Case of Critical Art Ensemble	26
V. One More Time: the Dialectic of Art and Life	40
VI. Going Out to the Rhizomes	46

teachers and students can still reclaim and re-function their campuses by opening up links and lines of flight to the rhizomes. They can also carry out their own curricular “reforms.” Whatever their subject, studio art and art history courses can include serious exposure to the real functions of bourgeois art and its institutions, as well as to the histories of revolutionary avant-garde struggles against them. And these can be made urgently relevant by demonstrating their secret links to contemporary struggles over globalization. Contrary to what is often assumed, capitalism can be named and called to account, even in the United States. Given tools and sites for critical self-enlightenment, students can at least make more sovereign choices about the best ways to “invest” in their future. Some of them, desiring to empower their high-octane creativity with a practical adventure, will desert to the rhizomes.

Cells of artists willing to work in coalitions of activists: this is good. But artists distributing their capacities more widely, by joining activist cells already on the ground: this is even better. The gift that only artists can give is to transversally disperse their desires and capacities — which the consolidated and specialized identity of “artist” wants to contain and professionalize — and to playfully recombine them with new elements, in new ensembles and models of militant practice. The rhizomes are there, in which to spread oneself out among several groups at once, as a Guattari-style free radical and “agent of enunciation.” In theory, this wouldn’t preclude, as part of a pragmatic survival strategy, artists working simultaneously as artists, in or out of artist cells, and even maintaining positions in the academy or institutions. But in practice one would need to remain vigilant and realistic about the processes of recuperation, and to remember that no one can do all things well, and especially not at the same time. This would be Guattari *with Debord*: a form-process — unforced, qualitative, and impossible to decapitate — that keeps generalizing the will to autonomy, by continuous translations into inventive *and militant* collective practices. It is a

early avant-gardes to the institutions of bourgeois art and high culture were merely first attempts to take the measure of the real enemy.⁴⁰ As time went on, and the image of that enemy was resolved and refined through contact with anarchist and Marxist theory, the avant-gardes became consciously anti-capitalist.

From this we should conclude that it's unnecessary to wage war on bourgeois art as such, which was in any case quite sufficiently exposed and liquidated by dada. At this point, it's much more efficient and effective to simply desert and bypass the necrophiliac institutions of bourgeois art, aiming one's liberated capacity directly at the vulnerable nerve centers and pressure points of the capitalist world system: the regime of property ownership, corporate power, the state, the military, the nation and its borders. (I'm prepared to call the deterritorialized sum of all these points and centers, a la Hardt and Negri, "Empire"; and, yes, it is against them, precisely, that the global rhizomes — "Multitude" — are pressing.)

In what form can artists enter and support this global anti-capitalist "thing," this multitudinous desertion, this (il)legal above-underground of networks and layered coalitions of autonomous cells, collectives and affinity groups? I think CAE nearly has it right: a fast cultural cell of three to ten people, maximally flexible through a membership that diversifies the skill and knowledge base, and capable and willing to improvise interventions and ruptures in any available medium. This is formidable, but it can still be improved. CAE gives us a model for an artist group. In some texts, CAE seems to want to point beyond this, but mostly, and in practice, it has been an artist group that works, mostly, within the academy or art institutions. That's understandable, but limiting.

What is needed is a generalized *détournement* of the art schools. In the absence of another student revolt, the subordination of the academy to market discipline will continue in the short term. But

⁴⁰ See Peter Bürger, *Theory of the Avant-Garde*, trans. Michael Shaw (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1984).

Like enfants perdus, we live our uncompleted adventures. — Debord, *Howls for Sade*

It is certainly true that if the problem of the group's functioning is not posed to begin with, it will be too late afterward. — Deleuze, "Three Group-Related Problems"²

One day long ago — back in 1960s, or was it the 1950s? — the radical avant-gardes became a formal object of institutionalized art history.¹ Sometime in the wake of dada's belated post-1945 "reception," the histories of militant art groups from the early twentieth century were absorbed by the academy, and the precedents were established by which every groupuscule working in the shadows and border zones of culture — if it ever once emerges into visibility, if it fails to utterly cover its tracks — is fated to eventually have its history written. Before that, the cultural establishment had simply ignored them. These histories existed only as living memory, in the heads and papers of surviving protagonists, or as fugitive trace and rumor in the cities where these groups had been active. If an artist or student wanted to find out more about Club Dada and the Malik-Verlag, she or he had to be ready to go to East Berlin and track down Heartfield and Herzfelde, or look up Grosz and Huelsenbeck in New York. Interested in the surrealists in their militant phase? Better see Breton in Paris, and scour the bookstalls and flea markets for back issues of *La Révolution surréaliste* and *Clarté*. This is the way members of new post-1945 groups like COBRA or the Letterist International would have had to gather and appropriate the radical fragments of their heritage. It required a lot of desire and persistence to get very far, but it was a strong form of transmission that had all the urgency of a real chase.

¹ Many thanks to Iain Boal, Rozalinda Borcila, Steven Corcoran, Thomas Pepper, Gregory Sholette and Joni Spigler; their critical responses to earlier versions of this essay have improved it enormously.

Today we're glutted with archives. The histories multiply: colonized as an academic commodity, each group spawns an industry. For the moment, some of Guy Debord's films are still difficult to see and accessible only through pirated copies. But the estate is in the process of re-releasing the complete cinematic works, and Debord's letters have been published — so far, four volumes of them, with another two projected. It's all there, or will be shortly, and more and more close to hand. But so far the result betrays the promise. In the academy itself, students seem to be learning less and less about these groups that killed the paradigm that still reigns today in the art schools and galleries. But the reason is not that the indictments and death sentences brought by the avant-gardes against bourgeois art and the society that sponsors it have been convincingly answered or escaped. Nor has the archive machine demystified these groups, in any enlightening way, so much as facilitated the management of their threat through the banishment of a different forgetting. As degraded as the term "avant-garde" is today, anyone tempted to hack the archives — to recover the force-field of these histories through a rescuing critique — should be prepared to do some work. Unlike many people, I'm sure such work is worth it.

I. In Search of the Avant-Gardes

The first thing one would need to recover and grasp is just how deeply avant-garde artists were involved in radical politics. No historical image of them that suppresses or dismisses this political dimension will be true or can have anything urgent to tell us today. At stake here, immediately, are issues of definition and the power to classify. Which groups are avant-garde? How do you tell? That the methodology here can only be circular is not the problem. It is rather that defining them in one way has certain very political effects, while doing it in another way either blocks those effects

necessary to manage them and keep them busy, but without being heavy-handed or pissing them off too much. Out of this systemic need emerged the institutions of bourgeois art. In more detail: as a social stratum of cultural production, artists bring together a dangerous set of capacities. (They're actually human capacities that for most people are structurally blocked.) Artists have learned manual skills that make them sensitive and capable fabricators. They've developed and command generalized creativity that could easily be applied outside the studio. They have also developed conceptual skills, which means the ability to think critically is never far away. And as a result of spending so much time in the virtual world of the imagination, they represent a worrisome reserve of utopian hope. The risks abound. How to deal with them?

The market is the answer. The gallery-commodity system, with art schools, museums and the rest of its apparatuses, functions as a big machine for capturing all that capacity — all those competencies, all that potentially radical creativity, criticality, and utopian desire. It then steers and channels this capacity into the safe, policed forms of the opus-commodity. Thereby, of course, it is neutralized and prevented from developing into pressure for systemic transformation or even direct support for an existing revolutionary force. The ideology that supports this castration-hysterectomy machine is crude, but has been fairly dependable: flatter the artist's ego, tell them they're geniuses, special, unique, authentic, etcetera, blah, blah.

Thinking about it this way, in terms of how bourgeois art functions to block a sector of latent antagonism to capitalism from fully and consciously emerging, clarifies what the avant-garde project actually was: an organized attempt by artists to recover their powers, by liberating them from the dead-end of the bourgeois paradigm and its commodity form, in order to redirect them *offensively and proactively* against the systemic enemy in the sphere of everyday life. In short, to make boom-boom. It also clarifies something further: the hostility — so impressive to Peter Bürger — of the

be accomplished in the absence of the radical, systemic transformation of society as whole (or “totality”), the necessary trajectory of a revolutionary group of artists is to merge with a revolutionary political movement. On the other side, a revolutionary political movement that excludes play, free creativity, spontaneity, and the other “true” values and experiences of art, will never be able to launch a better society. For this reason, the trajectory of a revolutionary political movement should be to welcome groups of radical artists and open itself to what the artists can bring to it. In practice, we know, the issue of creative autonomy remained the object of negotiations that were at best difficult and at worst terminal; but at this point of blockage pressure builds for a qualitative leap or rupture yet to come. Guiding the movement, again, is the ongoing self-critique that rescues “revolutionary theory” from reified “revolutionary ideology.” As statement of the necessary relation between life and a revolutionary artistic practice and as signpost to the way beyond a dead paradigm, I doubt these formulas can be improved on.

VI. Going Out to the Rhizomes

I’ll end with a summary redaction that tries to convey the excitement that the “old” avant-garde project still inspires in me. At the same time, I’ll try to incorporate and tweak the fine organizational model of CAE. From the Marxist critiques of cultural autonomy — take your pick: Marcuse, Benjamin, Adorno, or Althusser will do here — we know that culture is not really autonomous, or at best is only relatively so. Concealed behind the cover of autonomy are culture’s social functions, which are affirmative, compensatory and stabilizing. But bourgeois art also has an important and under-remarked *defensive* function.

We could put it like this: From the point of view of domination, artists are pesky, troublesome people. They tend to be creative, independent and stubborn, and some of them can even think. So it’s

or produces opposing ones. The real question is: to which political effects is the analyst committed? I won’t fail, in the course of this essay, to register my own commitments. And they are duly reflected in how I delimit the category. For me the exemplary artistic avant-gardes are: the groups of the international dada network, and above all Berlin dada, in the four years from 1917 through 1920; the various groupings of the surrealists, from the BarrÈs trial in 1921 to the publication of the second and final issue of *ClÈ* in 1939; and the Situationist International, in the twenty years spanning its letterist proto-formation of 1952 to its self-dissolution in 1972. There are many others, of course, but these groups are the source of the definition implicit in all that follows. Anyone is invited to dispute my choices. But let’s not imagine empiricism can settle what’s at stake here. This is critical theory, not art history.

From their beginnings in the nineteenth century, the artistic avant-gardes oriented themselves in relation to the political avant-gardes of their own time. For most of the twentieth century, this has meant: finding or developing new ways to put art at the service of revolution. Typically, artist groups challenged themselves to work in the revolutionary movements of their day, with or alongside established Marxist-oriented vanguard parties or anarcho-syndicalist networks. Sometimes such collaborations worked well for both parties, sometimes it led to splits and realignments. But remaining in play through such shifts, irreducibly bound up with how avant-garde artists understood themselves, were their radical political commitments. These were intensities that, in the beautiful phrase of Lyotard, took “the form of a resolution.”

How can we approach these commitments? To begin with, I’ll put it this way, and take the responsibility. A society that condemns most (or any) of its members to poverty and powerlessness is a barbarous and criminal society: this proposition would have appeared painfully, or laughably, obvious to all of the avant-guard artists and groups I care about or would want to recognize. But more than that, their commitments were the kind that compelled

continuous translation into action. If a society, such as ours, is barbarous and criminal, then we need to get rid of it and bring in something better. Everything begins there, and artists of this kind soon apprised themselves of the forces in combat.

So it won't be enough to note, as if in passing, avant-garde scorn for bourgeois manners and conventions. Artists of the historical avant-gardes were two things, at the same time that they were artists: they were anti-capitalists, and they were activists — or, in their own twentieth-century idiom, “militants.”² They may

² “Militant” is a tricky term, problematically entangled as it is with the military genealogy of vanguardism and with Lenin's militarized clandestine party form. Militancy is poison, in so far as it does no more than mirror the military power it is sworn to fight. However, there is a non-Leninist militancy that is both redeemable and necessary today: it denotes, to begin with, a level of commitment that goes beyond occasional activism or participation in demonstrations. And while it does not advocate violence in every situation, it does not reject all forms of violent struggle in advance (as do, for example, those full-throated pacifists who chastise the black blocs for breaking the windows of transnational corporations). Militancy is inseparably bound up with the problem of oppositional violence in the face of state and systemic violence. There are no abstract solutions to this problem: there are only situational decisions that need to take into account both tactical and strategic calculations of effectiveness and the incalculables of a rigorous practical ethics. Militants today cannot, as those of the past have done, simply dismiss ethics as an aspect of bourgeois ideology. But they are right to reject all ideologies of pacifism that deny or discount the realities of state and systemic violence or the right to self-defense in the face of them. In other words, militancy must not devolve into a form of militaristic ideology. And to say, as I do in the third part of this paper, that the issue of revolution has not gone away is to affirm that questions of self-defense are now, like everything else, globalized. That these problems are urgent today is underscored by the increasingly panicked insistence with which official discourse — shared by all states and echoed obediently by corporate media — crudely equates every kind of militancy with “terrorism.” In view of this, I am a sympathetic reader of both Ward Churchill's critique of pacifism and Alain Badiou's attempt to rescue the militant as an agent of revolutionary subjectivity and commitment. See Ward Churchill and Mike Ryan, *Pacifism as Pathology: Reflections on the Role of Armed Struggle in North America* (Winnipeg, Manitoba: Arbeiter Ring, 1998) and Alain Badiou, *Ethics: An Essay on the Understanding of Evil*, trans. Peter Hallward (London: Verso, 2001).

orthodoxies or adopt them as a style have in effect refused critical dialogue and reduced themselves to passive followers. It was on the basis of their own attempt to process the revolutionary tradition, and to fully appropriate what they learned from the Socialisme ou Barbarie group's debates on organization, that the situationists insisted on active and creative participation from their own members. They didn't want groupies, and when, after 1968, they were no longer attracting anything but groupies, they concluded that they were becoming an “ism” and pulled the plug. Before then, they insisted that it was possible and necessary to speak of situationists, but not of “situationism,” which became a kind of anti-shibboleth by which outsiders and those who hadn't done their homework revealed themselves. The fact that they speak here, in their critique of the avant-garde tradition, of dadaism and surrealism indicates that they think these groups also succumbed to ideology, in this sense. The objection bites, but, like the too rigid chiasmic formulas the critique is packed into, is not quite just. A more historical and differentiating view would see the problem of ideology as one that began to haunt these groups in their late phases, just as it did for the situationists.

They in any case drew the conclusions. To realize its full potential as a revolutionary practice, art would need to both *abolish and realize* the bourgeois paradigm. It would need, in a simultaneous double-movement, to liquidate itself as a separate and separating sphere of activity and, linking up to a systemic critique of the social given, apply itself directly to the experimental decolonization of everyday life and the destruction of domination. To the positive moment of this dialectic belong the situationist innovations: the *dérive*, psychogeography and unitary urbanism, *détournement* and the construction of situations, eventually direct participation in insurrectionary and revolutionary “events.”

To the extent that art realizes both of these moments, it will supersede itself, qua art, and disappear into the conflicts of politicized life, becoming in the process a real weapon of hope. As this can't

for the International Dada Fair: “The dada movement leads to the dissolution and supersession [*Aufhebung*] of the art trade.”³⁸

But, and this is the situationist charge against dada, these artists failed to realize the positive, constructive moment of the dialectic. They failed to see clearly the need to go beyond negation and invent new forms and practices for “revolutionizing everyday life.” Ultimately, they failed to site themselves beyond the stabilizing and recuperative conventions of passive spectatorship that structure gallery and theater. (In fact, this harsh verdict is unjust, since the members of Berlin dada did make strong collective moves in this direction). The surrealists, for their part, went directly to the positive “realization” of art, by developing new techniques for living the revolt. Here Debord is thinking not so much of the fierce provocations and public interventions as of the ways Breton, Péret, Éluard, Aragon and the others turned the city of Paris into a site for their games and for the free flow of their desire, anticipating the *dérive* and situationist critical urbanism. But at the same time — the blade now swings from the other side — the surrealists still wanted to hang on to their identities and prestige as (bourgeois) artists and poets. (This characterization, reflecting Breton and the elder surrealists as the situationists would have known them in Paris in the 1950s and 60s, is also somewhat distorted and would not apply so easily to the group in its more militant pre-war phases.)³⁹

It’s also significant that the operative terms in the situationist formula are “dadaism” and “surrealism.” For them, this “ism” always marks the presence of an ideology. It means something created from living ideas and relationships has hardened into the *rigor mortis* of an orthodoxy no longer open to question through a dynamic dialectic with history. And those who “subscribe” to such

³⁹ For a more developed version of the situationist interpretation, see Jules-Francois Dupuis [Raoul Vaneigem], *A Cavalier History of Surrealism*, trans. Donald Nicholson-Smith (Edinburgh: AK Press, 1999). For a periodized academic account, see Helena Lewis, *The Politics of Surrealism* (New York: Paragon House, 1988).

have disagreed sharply on the role of the state and on the projected forms of post-revolutionary society. But they shared a damning critique of capitalism and a radical rejection of partial or reformist solutions that would leave the structures of exploitation and domination in place. For all of them, only a revolution would be enough to bring down a violent order and establish a new one on the foundation of non-exploitative social relations. This might be some stateless federation of autonomous, democratic councils, in the anarchist vision, or, after the Bolshevik model, centralized state socialism. But the revolution they hoped and worked for was one that would liberate and empower shared human capacities for free creation and unforced cooperation. It would generalize the prefiguration of unalienated labor, playful improvisation, and a healed division of labor experienced by all the artists among them. To be sure, the groups and individuals of the artistic avant-gardes gave different interpretive accents to the elements of this project, and as a result developed divergent practices. But they all understood themselves as anti-capitalist cultural radicals working actively to destroy the structural barbarism of an intolerable status quo.

This is how we should understand, for example, the activities of the Berlin dada groups in the months following the so-called November Revolution of 1918. Germany’s defeat in World War I was by this time certain. Faced with open mutiny by sailors in Kiel and Wilhelmshaven and a general strike by workers in Berlin, the

³ Herzfelde had taken over the publishing permit of the defunct *Neue Jugend*, and he, Grosz, and Heartfield began publishing a journal under this name in July 1916. Jung soon joined the editorial board, and the new collective also took on *Freie Strasse*. *Neue Jugend* was banned by the German censor for its February/March 1917 issue, after which the collective changed its name to Malik-Verlag. In addition to publishing journals, including three issues of *Der Dada*, the organ of Club Dada, edited by Hausmann, Malik published a book series called *Kleine Revolutionaire Bibliothek*. Among its titles was Lukács’ *History and Class Consciousness*, published for the first time in German by Malik in 1923. The history of the collective was rescued in a 1962 exhibition; see the catalog *Der Malik-Verlag, 1916–1947* (Berlin: Deutsche Akademie der Künste, 1962).

Kaiser fled the country and Ludendorff and the generals made their deal with the Social Democrats: you'll get your parliamentary republic, but no revolution. Club Dada had been launched in April, in a special issue of Franz Jung's anarchist journal *Die Freie Strasse* (The Free Street). In the year before, Grosz, Herzfelde, and Heartfield had established Malik-Verlag, the publishing apparatus for their antiwar journals and portfolios of Grosz's corrosively satirical drawings.³ The counter-revolutionary character of Ebert's new Social-Democratic regime was revealed even before the Weimar Republic was officially constituted in February 1919. As strikes and demonstrations by workers, soldiers, and sailors continued to grow in Berlin in the early days of January, the Social-Democratic War Minister Noske unleashed the proto-fascist Freikorps against the Spartakusbund and other groups on the revolutionary Left. A massive demonstration on 5 January grew into a spontaneous armed rising that quickly surpassed the level of Spartakist preparations and opened a week of street fighting. On 15 January 1919, Spartakus leaders Luxemburg and Liebknecht were captured, interrogated at a Freikorps division headquarters at the Eden Hotel, and brutally murdered. Three days later, Herzfelde could already report to Kessler that the group around Malik-Verlag supported the Spartakists, and that he, Grosz, Heartfield, and Jung had joined the new, yet-to-be bolshevized German Communist Party (KPD).

Exactly one month after the murder of Liebknecht and Luxemburg, and just nine days after the founding of the Republic, the Malik group brought out the first issue of their new journal, *Jedermann sein eigener Fussball* (Everyone His Own Football). A photomontage on the cover had the faces of Ebert, Noske, Ludendorff and other figures in or behind the new government spread out across a fan. "Who's the Fairest of Them All??" mocks the caption. The journal was immediately banned, and Herzfelde was arrested and held for 13 days. During that time he saw for himself the boot and rifle-butt of Social-Democratic justice. Released after Kessler's intervention, he and the Malik group defiantly published a new journal, *Die Pleite*

bluntly anti-capitalist placards and posters; one, bearing a photomontage of Grosz, read: "Dada is the Deliberate Decomposition of the Bourgeois Conception of the World/ Dada Stands on the Side of the Revolutionary Proletariat." To the painted surface of Dix's *45% Able Bodies* (War Cripples), the dadaists attached Grosz and Heartfield's photomontage ("Who's the Fairest of Them All?") from the cover of the banned *Jedermann sein eigener Fussball*. And suspended from the ceiling was Heartfield and Rudolf Schlichter's notorious *Prussian Archangel* — a pig in an officer's uniform, to which was pinned a sign: "Hanged by the Revolution." All this was installed, three months after striking workers foiled the Kapp putsch, in Otto Burchard's space on the Łtzow-Ufer in Tiergarten, just across the Landwehr canal from Noske's War Ministry and a short walk from the Lichtenstein bridge, from which Luxemburg's murderers dumped her body.

No merely aesthetic mirroring of life, then, this was conscious, critical reflection, packed into galleries with the open aim of making the whole gallery system explode. Dada "abolished" art by directly attacking it, as a system of pretensions and claims to authority, and by forcibly pushing beyond its institutionally enforced limits, within which separation can be mis-recognized as autonomy, privilege justified as talent, and passive isolation confused with contemplation. Thus they could claim, as they did on the poster

the addition of cut-out photographs and other collage elements were the *Apollo Belvedere* and the *Venus de Milo*, and paintings by Rubens, Picasso, and Rousseau. For a sharp reading of Grosz and Heartfield's corrected Picasso, see Charles W. Haxthausen, "Bloody Serious: Two Texts by Carl Einstein," in *ibid.*, pp. 111–8.

³⁸ "Die Bewegung Dada führt zur Aufhebung des Kunsthandels." The critical consciousness of the most politicized tendency of Berlin Dada can be measured in Grosz and Herzfelde's *Die Kunst ist in Gefahr. Ein Orientierungsversuch* [Art Is in Danger: Toward an Orientation] (Berlin: Malik-Verlag, 1925). See also the introduction Herzfelde wrote for the 1920 Dada Fair, "Zur Einführung in die Erste internationale Dada-Messe," is reprinted in *DADA total: Manifeste, Aktionen, Texte, Bilder*, eds. Karl Riha and Jörgen Schäfer (Stuttgart: Reclam, 1994), pp. 146–8; and is in English, trans. Brigid Doherty, in *October* 105 (Summer 2003): 100–4.

art cube, in order to test and expose the unacknowledged conventions and standards at work there. In reply, the Cologne dadaists brought art to the urinal, so to speak, by making visitors enter their exhibition through a public pissoir. There, Max Ernst had installed “a wooden sculpture with an axe attached, inviting the public to destroy it.”³⁵

But these loaded jokes and pranks paled before the fully-conscious and consciously political demolitions of Berlin Club Dada’s “First International Dada Fair,” which opened at the end of June in the same year. Among the minefield of anti-art collages and sculptural assemblages installed in two “galleries” were a series of “corrected masterpieces” — altered reproductions of classical sculpture and Renaissance, Baroque, and even Cubist paintings. Three months after Duchamp’s sly debunking of the *Mona Lisa* was published in Picabia’s 391, the Berlin dadaists used photocollage and collectivized production to attack those foundations of the bourgeois paradigm, the cult of beauty and the fetishization of the masterpiece.³⁶ Grosz went even further, literalizing the violence by slashing a reproduction of Botticelli’s *Primavera*.³⁷ But these *détournements* were shown side-by-side with a barrage of

³⁵ Bruce Altshuler, *The Avant-Garde in Exhibition: New Art in the 20th Century* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1998), p. 108. On the First International Dada Fair see also McCloskey, op. cit., pp. 69–75, and Willet, op. cit., pp. 53–4.

³⁶ According to Duchamp, he drew a moustache, goatee, and the graffito-caption “L.H.O.O.Q.” on a reproduction of the *Mona Lisa* in Paris in October 1919. He showed it to Picabia, who improvised a version, sans goatee, and published it in his journal in March 1920. Pierre Cabanne, *Dialogues with Marcel Duchamp*, trans. Ron Padgett (New York: Da Capo, 1979), pp. 62–3. Since Picabia had three works in the International Dada Fair, we can assume the journal was known in Berlin.

³⁷ Altshuler, op. cit., p. 109. Brigid Doherty describes Grosz’s piece, titled *Mißachtung eines Meisterwerkes von Botticelli (Primavera)* [Disrespect for a Masterpiece by Botticelli], as “an ãX’ taped across the glass of a framed reproduction.” Doherty, “The Work of Art and the Problem of Politics in Berlin Dada,” in *October* 105, Dada Special Issue, ed Leah Dickerman, (Summer 2003): 87. Well, if he didn’t slash the reproduction, he should have. Among the masterpieces “corrected” through

(Bankruptcy). Its second issue, published in late March, contained Herzfelde’s account of his arrest, under the ironic title “Schutzhaft” (Protective Custody), and accompanied by Grosz’s drawings of his friend. In the graphic work he produced for Malik journals and publications over the course of this tumultuous year, Grosz depicted both the crimes of the state and its capitalist backers and the revolutionary justice waiting to be realized. On the cover of issue three of *Der blutige Ernst* (Deadly Earnest, or Bloody Serious), a satirical weekly Grosz edited with the critic Carl Einstein, Grosz makes the generals stand before a Spartakist tribunal, a portrait of the murdered Liebknecht on the wall behind the proletarian judges.⁴ On the cover of the sixth issue of *Die Pleite*, out in January 1920, Grosz carried out the sentence in a biting image of a capitalist and a general hanging from two gallows.⁵

Shortly after, the most radically programmatic and humorous of all dada manifestoes appeared. It demanded “the international revolutionary union of all creative and intellectual persons in the whole world on the basis of radical communism,” “progressive unemployment by means of comprehensive mechanization” of production, and “the immediate expropriation of property and communist provision for all.” It went on to call for, among other things, “a great dadaist propaganda campaign with 150 circuses.” As a self-destructing parody of the manifesto form shaped around a hard core of rage and radical affinity, the text explodes the distinction between play and political seriousness. It was signed, with a characteristic combination of bluff and bluster, by Huelsenbeck, Haus-

⁴ *Der blutige Ernst* was published by Trianon Verlag, but the editors and contributors overlapped with the Malik circle.

⁵ It’s high time all these Malik-Verlag journals were liberated from the specialists and made accessible through on-line facsimiles and translations. The drawings discussed were among those collected and published by Malik in 1921, under the title *Das Gesicht der herrschenden Klasse* [The Face of the Ruling Class]; republished by Makol Verlag, Frankfurt/Main, 1972.

mann, and Jefim Golyscheff, here incarnated as the “German section” of “the Dadaist Revolutionary Central Council.”⁶

It was well understood by artists and militants that unfolding events in Germany were closely linked to the Bolshevik Revolution in Russia, then defending itself against the counter-revolutionary White armies and invasion by a coalition of capitalist nations. It was generally taken for granted that the fate of both the Russian Revolution and of international revolutionary anti-capitalism depended to a large degree on the success of revolution in Germany. There, from late spring through the summer of 1920, Jung was busy helping to establish a dissident communist splinter party. In mid-March, a clique of rightwing military officers and bankers attempted to seize power. Although the Weimar government was forced to flee Berlin to Stuttgart, the putsch collapsed in the face of a general strike by workers in Berlin and other cities and by the mobilization of the so-called Ruhr Red Army. The German Communist Workers’ Party (KAPD) was founded in April by those within the KPD who opposed the party leadership’s approval of a call for the Ruhr Red Army to disarm following the failed Kapp putsch. The KPD Central Committee had concluded by this time that conditions in Germany still lacked an “objective basis” for the dictatorship of the proletariat. To strengthen its position in the near term, it decided on a tactical reconciliation with the Social Democrats and for participation in electoral politics with the aim of becoming a parliamentary opposition. From Moscow, Lenin endorsed this analysis in his pamphlet “*Left-Wing*” *Communism: An Infantile Disorder*. To carry out this shift in tactics, the KPD leadership now imposed a severe top-down party discipline on its membership.

The KAPD condemned these reformist-parliamentary and centralizing tendencies; assimilating elements of council communism

⁶ The manifesto was published in Richard Huelsenbeck, *En avant dada: Eine Geschichte des Dadaismus* (Hannover: Steegemann Verlag, 1920). Huelsenbeck’s 1920 *Dada Almanac* (“Commissioned by the Central Office of the German Dada Movement”) has been translated and published, ed. Malcom Green (London: Atlas,

we restrict ourselves to the opus-based bourgeois paradigm of art. What Adorno unwittingly meant was: art cannot commit and re-function itself without undoing its status *as bourgeois art*. But what can this mean today, when many of us couldn’t care less about this paradigm and its pseudo-autonomies and so choose not to invest two cents, let alone anything important, in the market’s pathetic attempts to keep it flapping and churning?

The answer to Adorno was already collectively worked out by artists who never read him: Debord, Gil Wolman, Michèle Bernstein, Asger Jorn, Constant, Raoul Vaneigem, J.V. Martin, and the other situationists. “Dadaism sought to *abolish art without realizing it*; and surrealism sought to *realize art without abolishing it*.”³⁴ Behind this cursory formulation is a formal dialectic. To transform art into a revolutionary weapon, it would first be necessary to “abolish” — that is, negate, decompose, dissolve, liquidate — the bourgeois paradigm of art. This negative movement would disentangle the truth of art — its promise of happiness and utopian force — from the untruth of the commodity form. Set free, this truth would then be carried on in a positive and creative movement that goes beyond — transcends or “realizes” — the bourgeois paradigm in the construction of new practices. Hegel’s term *Aufhebung*, or “supersession,” is meant to capture both of these movements or dialectical moments.

So the argument is that dada, and especially Berlin dada, successfully realized the negative moment, by decomposing and liquidating bourgeois art. Dada transformed art into a weapon for exposing the obscenity of art’s function as affirmative decoration for a murderous order. Visitors to the “Early Dada Spring” exhibition, mounted by the Cologne dada group in April 1920, were made to trace a variation on a Duchampian demolition. In submitting *Fountain* to the first exhibition of the Society of Independent Artists in New York in 1917, Duchamp threatened to bring a urinal into the

³⁴ Debord, op. cit., §191, p. 136.

— tactical media cannot renounce or avoid issues of strategy or the problems of developing forms of collective agency capable of realizing transformation at the systemic level.³² Here, CAE’s pronouncements to the effect that the very idea of public space was always already “dead on arrival” are not helpful. We still don’t know what further mutations the idea of revolution would have to go through in order to get us beyond capitalism as a world system. But so far, the implosion model of transformation that brought down the Soviet empire and numerous governments since then has not been able to do without, as its necessary climax and final act, the return of the repressed of real bodies filling the streets. I reserve some skepticism for any proposed collective passage beyond “pancapitalism,” as CAE likes to call it, that prefers to avoid such episodes.

V. One More Time: the Dialectic of Art and Life

But I haven’t spoken at all about the relation between art and “everyday life” — that great theoretical obsession of the old avant-gardes. Briefly, then, very briefly. Adorno, in his 1962 polemic against Sartre and Brecht, argued that art cannot instrumentalize itself on the basis of political commitments without undermining the autonomy on which it depends and without, finally, undoing itself as art.³³ As he would later put it in the *Aesthetic Theory*, art cannot escape its double-character, as both “promise of happiness” and “social fact.” This would seem to be a valid critique, but only if

³² The return of strategic thinking after September 11 and the declaration of the perpetual preemptive so-called war on terror is legible in much of the writing in the reader of the 2003 Next 5 Minutes “International Festival of Tactical Media.” There, CAE acknowledges the need for strategic theory and practice, but argues that the N5M festivals, centered on workshops and skill-sharing, are not the proper forum for such strategizing. See *Next 5 Minutes 4 Reader*, at www.next5minutes.org.

³³ Theodor W. Adorno, “Commitment,” in *Notes to Literature*, vol. II, trans. Shierry Weber Nicholsen (New York: Columbia University Press, 1992).

and anarcho-syndicalism, the new splinter party called for the immediate resumption of armed revolutionary struggle. While Jung and most of the Berlin membership of the KPD went over to the new KAPD, the other members of the Malik group, which was having its own problems with party discipline, did not. The new party sent Jung and another member, Jan Appel, to take its case to the executive of the new Third International in Moscow. Deciding that an overland entry into Russia was impossible, they made contact with the crew of a steam trawler in Cuxhafen, who took them aboard as stowaways. When the vessel was at sea, Jung and the comrades took it over, locking the captain and officers in a forecabin, and steamed to Murmansk. Arriving in Moscow, they were received coldly at the Comintern, which only in November temporarily granted the KAPD conditional rights as a “sympathizing member.” Their short audience with Lenin was even colder; the Bolshevik leader paternally read them passages from *Left-Wing Communism*. Back in Germany, Jung was thrown in jail for piracy. As soon as he got out in March of 1921, he joined Béla Kun and Max Hoelz for another armed rising.⁷

Whatever the differences and disputes between them — and these were many and intense: I don’t want to deny the complex rivalries and conflicts at work in the group form — the members of the artistic avant-gardes shared, and knew how to recognize and acknowledge, a radical refusal to be reconciled with the dominant

1992); the manifesto is on pp. 73–5. An English translation of *En avant dada* is in *The Dada Painters and Poets*, ed. Robert Motherwell (New York: Wittenborn & Schultz, 1951), pp. 21–47.

⁷ For context and bibliographies, see Barbara McCloskey’s excellent *George Grosz and the Communist Party: Art and Radicalism in Crisis, 1918 to 1936* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1997); and John Willet, *Art and Politics in the Weimar Period: The New Sobriety, 1917–1933* (New York: Da Capo Press, 1996). See also *Berlin in Lights: The Diaries of Count Harry Kessler (1918–1937)*, trans. Charles Kessler (New York: Grove, 1999). On Jung, see his still untranslated autobiography *Der Weg nach unten* [The Way Under] (Neuwied/ Rhein: Luchterhand, 1961). On the KAPD, see the histories and documents archived at www.kurasje.org.

social given. The commitments that animated this refusal were clearly more than a simple allegiance. What does that mean? Here is Lyotard again, in his most beautiful text, an honest and moving homage to Pierre Souyri, with whom he spent 12 years in the militant revolutionary group Socialisme ou Barbarie. Lyotard published this text in 1982, the year after his comrade's death. What was Souyri's investment in Marxism like? It was, Lyotard writes, "the form of a sensibility, the schema of imagination, the rhetoric of affections, the analytic and dialectic of concepts, the law of the will."⁸ So we need to think a refusal as emphatic and far-reaching as that.

And there is nothing, looking back today, that leads us to doubt that for all these artist-militants the shared adventure of this refusal was the central, animating experience of their artistic and political lives, which indeed appear to have been lived as they claimed, not as separate spheres that never connect, but as a single synthetic field of creative experimentation and open possibility at the core of what it meant to them to be human. I'm speaking here, so there is no confusion, of militants at their peaks, however long those peaks were sustained, and whatever the individuals concerned may have become afterward, as a result of whatever wound, lapse, crash, or swerve of desire. (I don't give a damn what Grosz was or became in New York after 1933, it's for who he was in Berlin, from 1916 to 1924, that I love him. Ditto, for all these men and women.) Commitments shared this deeply, formed in the nerves of the vulnerable body and held there, as a secret strength, for the body's performance in risk; a desiring refusal that could only be lived as active

⁸ Jean-Francois Lyotard, "A Memorial for Marxism: For Pierre Souyri," trans. Cecile Lindsay, in *Peregrinations: Law, Form, Event* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1988), p. 65. The essay first appeared as "Pierre Souyri: Le Marxisme qui n'est pas fini," in *Esprit* (January 1982). It matters not at all that Lyotard, by the time he wrote these words, had "drifted" away from the Marxism he and Souyri shared. Lyotard's *différend* with Marxism doesn't prevent him from acknowledging the real ground of commitment.

bunkers and monuments. And when they cannot — or visibly have trouble doing so, as they did in Seattle — they suffer real losses of prestige. These translate in turn, via the unforgiving logic of the spectacle itself, into losses of *real power*. (And Debord's "society of the spectacle" is first of all an insistence on the inseparable imbrication of the image world and the violent material relations of commodity capitalism.) This means that the virtual or digital realm of cyberspace is clearly a valid field of struggle. But it also means that at the end of the day the streets cannot be renounced or vacated. In fact, street demos are unavoidable tests of strength, and no group whose members think they are too good or too radical to give their support to allies engaged in such tests can claim to have overcome elitism.

The challenges remain: how to be effective and win such tests. Here we can take a lesson from old Sun-Tzu. Unconventional forces in combat against a much stronger conventional force are obliged to produce an continuous stream of tactical innovations. In practice, CAE has been doing exactly that. And they continue to question and evolve. To be fair, the texts I've cited and criticized here are mostly pre-Seattle and pre-September 11. Although CAE has not, as far as I'm aware, revisited these issues explicitly, I'm encouraged to see several strands of the group's recent research — those of "recombinant theater" and "contestational robotics" — seem to signal a return to the streets and other remnants of public space, as sites of situational resistance.³¹

Tactical media is certainly one of the most important streams of critical cultural practice to have emerged over the last decade and a half. But for all its disruptive promise and all the considerable advantages it offers to its practitioners — in terms of autonomy, flexibility, and dealing with the realities of boredom and burnout

³¹ See CAE, *Digital Resistance*, especially pp. 83–133. These problems do not figure centrally in the groups's current work at the intersections of "gentech" and biopower. See CAE, *The Molecular Invasion* (Brooklyn, New York: Autonomedia, 2002).

most important are, first, that it is in the streets that we learn to recover our capacity for collective thinking and action and, secondly, that no one can predict what may happen when people reassert their desire to make their own history. It is a species of arrogance — and one typical of the worst avant-garde elitism of the past — to think that one does not need to participate in such efforts, or that one knows better. The large counter-globalization and anti-capitalist demonstrations, from Seattle in 1999 to Genoa in 2001, have shown that the old form of street protest can still be powerful. The even more impressive anti-war demonstrations of February 2003 — the largest linked protests in world history, bringing out some 17 million people in cities across the globe — also showed the limitations of this form, when everyone goes home and returns to work on the next day, and when governments know that and can count on it. (But although it did not prevent the invasion of Iraq, this collective rejection of the war's legitimacy did constrain the US, with respect to how it could conduct the war; it is certain that many more Iraqi civilians would have been killed and maimed by the shock and awe machine had these global demonstrations not taken place.)

Street demonstrations remain a valid tactic wherever and whenever states or corporations have symbolic capital at stake. As CAE well knows, symbolic actions can have material effects. In some situations, some bunkers may not be vulnerable, but symbols always are.³⁰ The dialectic between matter and the idea cuts both ways. The ideology that would reduce symbols and images to some inferior reality status merely reflects that conception of the aesthetico-imaginary as a sphere cut off, as if behind some *cordon sanitaire*, from the real world. States and corporations are obliged to protect the symbols of their power, above all when these are embedded in

³⁰ And the attacks of September 11 and the fate of the World Trade Center complex have obviously undone all glibly-held certainties about invulnerability. Were the twin towers bunker or symbol? They were both. Again, see Retort, *Afflicted Powers*, especially pp. 16–37.

creation, with a chosen idiom and weapons, on a chosen field: these could only be pursued with others, within the forms of an association.

And this collective dimension is the second aspect that one would need to recover. In practice, it meant forming or joining an affinity group, with its special challenges, generousities, and bonds. This is why it's wrong to imagine the avant-gardes as some loose Bohemian network of mavericks, supermen, or lone "forerunners." These freaks lack the openness to pluralities of others — call it solidarity — that constitutes the political in the strong sense. For this, the group form is a necessary condition. And to put it precisely, there are and can be no avant-garde artists outside of their groups; for me, there are, and can only be, avant-garde groups. And just here, in the form and shared experience of the freely chosen affinity group, the artists and "politicals" never cease to meet. Any of them, whatever their differences, would have been capable of meeting anywhere beyond "the given," within the shared horizon of anti-capitalist refusal and utopian hope. There, they would have been able to address one another by the freighted name of "comrade." We for whom, for reasons of trauma and loss, this word has become unpronounceable, without the poor protection of irony or embarrassment, we should not allow ourselves to dirty what was, for militants, a chosen word of hope and love.

II. Art Schools and the Embattled Academy

Given the rich and differentiated histories of the avant-garde adventure, it may seem surprising that artists and students today seem not to be very urgently involved with these histories, that they apparently don't recognize this adventure as their own. In fact there are two kinds of reasons for this: structural pressures to conform and accommodate, and real despair and confusion about a revolutionary tradition marred by defeat. Accommodationism is

no mystery. As everyone knows, membership in a radical or quasi-clandestine group doesn't usually advance a career. The pressure to sell out is such a common and transparent reflection of market discipline, so nearly a capitalist invariable, that it is far more interesting and important to ask how and under what conditions people are inspired to resist it.

Certainly many artists, still hoping to be able to eke out a living by their creative work, have resigned themselves to accommodating the market and therefore know, without ever needing to make a conscious choice about it, that intensely-held radical commitments can only threaten their ability to pay the rent. But it is doubtful whether the proportion of artists in this category today — presumably the vast majority — is much different than it ever was. The current situation is unique in some respects. There must be many more artists today than there ever were in the past, given the increase in the number of art schools. But teachers of art and art history — the professional academics responsible for training and accrediting those who would be artists — are not sheltered from the “structural adjustments” that, for decades now, have been brought to bear on all the institutions of so-called higher learning.

A brief digression will sketch the context. Since the late 1970s, the managers of the dominant capitalist national economies have pursued a model of globalization based on pulverizing all barriers to trade and capital in the global South, and on “outsourcing” and the steady privatization of public services across the US, Europe, and Japan. Through the 1980s and into the 1990s, these neoliberal structural adjustments were carried out under the Thatcherist mantra — TINA: “There is no alternative” — and, after 1994, through the new apparatus and regime of the WTO. Since then, as we know, neoliberal globalization has provoked global resistance, gone into crisis, and had to resort to the dubious enforcement of the permanent war machine. But it is in this context of privatization and slashed public spending that “higher” education has become another target of market discipline. Throughout this

ing the skills of wardriving and the passive sniffing and parsing of data-packet protocol layers. It's probably an excellent thing if some groups are engaged in the kinds of clandestine information blockages that CAE advocates, as well as in organized virtual sit-ins and the whole range of denial-of-service (DoS) attacks — to the extent that such actions do not result in counter-productive collateral damage to servers and untargeted Internet users.²⁸ And should we find ourselves in “the real state of emergency” (Benjamin), who could afford to renounce more decisive forms of intrusion and attack against the ethereal forces of repression, assuming some group had the competence and strategic sense to deploy them effectively? The problem comes only when jamming and hacking are conceptualized as *substitutes* for the politics of the streets, in which one commits one's body, either in direct action with one's cell or affinity group, or in the larger movements of mass actions.²⁹

In this, CAE reflects the conclusion, widely-held today, that street protests have become a futile and predictable ritual. Rubbish. There are numerous reasons why it is always worthwhile, on appropriately political occasions, to abandon a position of passivity and paralyzed isolation by joining others in the streets. Among the

²⁸ Critics (including Steve Kurtz and a number of hackers) of the “Floodnet” program developed by Electronic Disturbance Theater and other forms of “hacktivism” have argued that certain DoS attacks can be counter-productive for a variety of reasons. See Lovink, *Dark Fiber*, pp. 268–70 and 274; CAE, *Digital Resistance*, pp. 13–28; and Metac0m, “Hacking Globalization,” *The Hacktivist 3*, www.thehacktivist.com.

²⁹ Here I follow common usage of the term “hacking,” meaning those practices of cyberspatial intrusion and intervention so familiar in both corporate media hype and the cyberpunk imaginary. In a stimulating reworking of Marx, Deleuze-Guattari, and Debord, McKenzie Wark has attempted to generalize the “hacker ethic” — that is, a broader commitment to the free appropriation of all forms of immaterial property as an open commons and to the collective redeployment of these forms in anarchic gift economies — into a new model of revolutionary theory. We will need to come to terms with his bold and promising reconceptualizations, and the sooner the better. McKenzie Wark, *A Hacker Manifesto* (Cambridge, Massachusetts: Harvard University Press, 2004).

make.²⁶) This is all the more important given the realities of the ongoing culture wars, in which our words and signals can and do make a difference for students on the point of choosing a radical adventure.

And what are we to make of CAE's call to desert the streets for cyberspace, if in fact that is what it was.²⁷ To be sure, there is merit in the tactics of avoiding direct attacks on the fortified bunkers of power and of refusing to become entrenched — thus pinned down and all too visible to power's targeting systems — in bunkers of one's own making. Mobility is ever a virtue. And by all means, take contestation to cyberspace. Beyond the usual tools and networks for organizing and counter-publicity (Indymedia, Peoples Global Action, etc.), it is certainly worth experimenting with edgier means of data collection and surveillance, for example learn-

²⁶ As the lucid and incisive analyses of the Retort collective make clear, al-Qaeda embodies the worst tradition of vanguardism. See Retort (Iain Boal, T.J. Clark, Joseph Matthews, and Michael Watts), *Afflicted Powers: Capital and Spectacle in a New Age of War*, (London: Verso, 2005). And the attacks of September 11 and the fate of the World Trade Center complex have obviously undone glibly-held certainties about invulnerability. Were the twin towers a bunker or a symbol? They were both.

²⁷ I want to be as fair as possible here. When I raised this issue during a brief conversation with Steve Kurtz in Berlin in September of 2005, he claimed that CAE had been misunderstood and pointed out that the chapter "Electronic Civil Disobedience," in the 1996 book in question, is followed immediately by "Resisting the Bunker" — not at all a retreat from the streets. The problem is that CAE's references to protest culture tend to be tonally dismissive rather than sympathetic — even though, it is true, CAE itself has worked in coalition with ACT-UP and other activist groups. And while the "Resisting the Bunker" chapter does include the claim that bunkers "must be kept under siege," the whole discussion of what is there called "nomadic action" begins from the premise that "bunker disruption should not be the center of resistant activity." (*Electronic Civil Disobedience*, p. 38.) So while there is a certain tension between these chapters, the second doesn't successfully qualify the impression left by the first, that street protest is a failed model, even if such a balancing qualification was the intent. Given the confusion, it would be helpful if CAE addressed the problem directly and clarified its position.

phase of globalization, public funding of universities has been cut back, year after year, resulting in the rise of a new bureaucratic class-sector within the academy.

The fundraising apparatchiks have long been familiar on US campuses, from those elves in charge of corporate and alumni "development," to the layer of deans schooled in hard lessons of "the bottom line," to that anti-scholarly emblem of market-capture, the university president-as-CEO. The transformations in the character, functions, and self-understanding of the academy that follow inexorably from these alterations have been steadily coming to light. Once claiming to be a preserve for free thought and unfettered critique and exchange, the university now resigns itself to vocational training and officially directed research. What research would that be? Of two kinds: what the corporate sector thinks will promise profit — think: biotechnology and pharmaceuticals — and what the war machine requires to improve the performance of weapons systems. As an indication of what that means today, consider the example of the University of Hawai'i, where I recently spent some time teaching. Whereas reductions in state funding have just forced students at UH to swallow tuition increases of 140% over the next six years, Department of Defense support for military research at the same institution has increased 500% in last five years, not even counting plans for the establishment of a new Navy-directed classified research center there.⁹

To terrify the professors into marching in lockstep, the tenure system has been brought under attack. The relative job security offered by this remnant of the early liberal era admittedly encourages careerism, among other abuses. But it nevertheless was instituted to give a modicum of concrete reality to the high-liberal rhetoric of free thought. And in theory, if not in practice, a functional princi-

⁹ On the battle over militarization at the University of Hawai'i at Manoa and on the occupied islands of Hawai'i, see the website of the Save UH/Stop UARC Coalition: www.stopuarc.info ; and that of the group DMZ-Hawai'i/Aloha ʻĀina: www.dmzhawaii.org .

ple behind faculty peer review is solidarity. But for several decades now, the profs have been softened up by the instructive example of a growing academic underclass made up of graduate student “teaching assistants” and exploited “adjunct” lecturers deprived of health care and pension benefits and blocked from entering the tenure system.

And that system itself is now criticized openly in the pages of the *Wall Street Journal* and in the Internet blogs of repugnant right-wing hacks like David Horowitz. The latter flies from campus to campus, mobilizing a national network of right-wing students to draw up blacklists of faculty troublemakers and organizing character assassinations of Ward Churchill and other dissident academics judged to be vulnerable under the new rules of the “war on terror.” (Churchill, a prolific scholar of indigenous rights struggles, has been the target of a viciously personal smear campaign by rightwing pundits, who were enraged by a text in which he argued bluntly that the September 11 attacks were only to be expected, given the devastating effects of US foreign policy on millions of people worldwide; so far, Churchill’s persecutors — who include Bill O’Reilly of Fox Television and a bevy of Republican politicians — have not succeeded in their goal of seeing him dismissed from his tenured position at the University of Colorado.)¹⁰

It doesn’t take a rocket scientist, pardon the pun, to figure out what’s coming. Is there any organized force capable of stopping it? Not at the moment. Faculty strikes are so rare as to be effectively nonexistent. And, with a few exceptions, the campuses are quiet. Not old enough to remember anything different, freshmen

¹⁰ The text at the center of the Churchill controversy, “Some People Push Back: On the Justice of Roosting Chickens,” was written on September 12, 2001 and published on-line. Since then, Churchill developed it into a book, *On the Justice of Roosting Chickens: Reflections on the Consequences of US Imperialist Arrogance and Criminality* (Edinburgh: AK Press, 2003). The original text, as well as an extensive on-line archive on the controversy is maintained on the anarchist antiwar site www.kerplebedeb.com.

the late 1950s and early 1960s, the situationists would condemn the mistake of accepting party-based representational politics. Blasting the “condensed spectacle” of Stalinism and the more fashionable cult of Mao, they would critique every form of will-to-leadership and incipient bureaucracy. This, while insisting on the validity of a “revolutionary theory” that maintains its continuous, critical dialectic with revolutionary practice. Even before 1968, then, this artistic avant-garde had become fully conscious of blunder number two: “Revolutionary theory is now the sworn enemy of all revolutionary ideology — *and it knows it.*”²⁵ Comrades, let’s be generous with each other: we’re not the enemy.

Moreover, when purveyors of the new common sense badmouth the old avant-gardes in this global and dismissive way, it signals — to students who may not yet know all of these histories, for example — that the project is worthless and has neither anything important to tell us nor resources with which to inspire us, which emphatically is not the case. Sure, rhetorical slams are great fun and make for good reading. The surrealists were virtuosi of the insult, and even now one would have to be a sourpuss, to be able to read their diatribes without laughing. Debord, too, is exemplary for famously overindulging himself in abusive slamming of comrade-rivals. But in this, he’s a bad example. In comparison, CAE is very restrained and doesn’t get personal. My point is that it should be part of the tact of political commitment, that one respects those who share one’s commitments, regardless of whether one endorses or disputes this or that particular position, in this or that debate or conflict. Screw bourgeois civility, but one can reserve one’s abuse and dismissive scorn for enemies, of which there are many. (Yes, even after all the deconstructive equivocations have been registered, there are still friends and enemies; and, apropos Osama bin Laden and al-Qaeda, the enemy of an enemy does not a friend

²⁵ Debord, op. cit., β124, p. 90.

not so much reproduce this tone as hedgingly reflect it, even as the group tries to defend the idea of the avant-garde from it. It is entirely appropriate and necessary to look back and recognize where people went wrong. That's part of the work of critique and, when we share commitments with these people, self-critique. But it's unjust and fallacious to retrospectively project the fruits of hard experience to a point before those experiences were lived. We can't blame people for not understanding what they couldn't have understood, for the reason that they didn't yet have this history to process — or because they didn't yet have time and leisure, being actively engaged in urgent struggles, to carry out that processing. It's especially unjust when these people put themselves in serious risk or were even killed trying to destroy a system of domination. This is not to let party leaders and high-level decision-makers off the hook. Not at all. But for the artists who became militants in the revolutionary project — because for them to be alive was unthinkable and unlivable as anything other than an active follow-through on a set of commitments — we need to have more understanding.

When the members of the Malik group joined the KPD during or immediately after the party's founding congress in the last days of December 1918, they could not have known that the Bolsheviks would soon become the carriers of counter-revolution in Russia. The surrealists could not claim the same innocence eight years later, when the group around Breton joined the French Communist Party (PCF). But their brief and unhappy flirtation with "revolutionary ideology" was a sincere mistake — not at all motivated by the cynical realism of bureaucratic power, but rather an attempt to follow the truth and urgent necessity of revolution. From the debates with Naville to the collaboration with Trotsky, the surrealist core group searched for the collective passage of a generalizable freedom. To recover the dignity of that search, one would only need to cite the name of Benjamin PÉret, who went to Spain as a volunteer in early August of 1936 and fought on the Aragon front, first for the POUM, then with Durruti. Scrutinizing these histories in

now entering universities assume the academy has always been what it has only recently become; the loss of a critical education is not registered as such. The result is unsurprising. The humanities and social sciences departments that have been and still are the last institutional safe houses of radical, critical, and nonconformist thought are being starved into submission: dollars don't come from the dean until we all understand each other.

So in this context, art and art history teachers, like most of their colleagues in other disciplines, tend to be in the habit of teaching the accommodation and resignation they themselves have had to internalize, and of downplaying or excluding the motivations and collective practices of artists of the recent past who made other, more resolute, choices. Short of a revolution in the academies, then, we shouldn't expect art schools to be open or honest with students about either the histories of the avant-gardes or the exhaustion and death of the bourgeois paradigm of art. By and large, students study art because, compared to their other options, it offers them an opportunity to learn a playful and relatively unalienated form of work. The alienation soon comes, like a splitting skull on the morning after, however, when they must confront the realities of a globalized art market and the war of all against all that structures it. What they are seldom told, but will sooner than later find out for themselves, is that damn few of them — a minuscule fraction — will be able to survive on their art, and those who do will only manage it by surrendering to the market police all their hopes for a life of real, integrated autonomy. The market says: one may question the bourgeois paradigm, only not in any way that is *effective* or has *results*; one may play with the symbols of radical politics, but one must not act on them; anyone can say the emperor has no clothes or even scream it within the closed walls of a gallery, but no one may *cut off his head*. Art schools are to transmit these rules, but not *consciously*.

And so, to insure that students are not exposed en masse to possibly inspiring and life-diverting doses of the anti-capitalist ad-

venture, and be tempted thereby to become autonomous and ungovernable, various strategies for neutralizing and assimilating the histories of the artistic avant-gardes have tended to install themselves as standard procedure. In so far as art history is concerned, one can first of all liquidate the life, aims and risks of avant-garde groups by suppressing the collective dimension and focusing on (the same few) select individuals. Once one has atomized collective histories into isolated narratives of individual productive output, one reduces these to a sequence of points plotted on a grand linear chronology of merely formal or technical innovations. One can then either ignore a militant commitment and its causes and consequences, or methodologically reduce these to a marginal and discardable political supplement to a “real” artistic oeuvre.

Or one can dilute, obscure, and trivialize such commitments by expanding the category “avant-garde” to admit every would-be *enfant terrible* ever deemed by the market to be on the “modernist” or “post-modernist” cutting edge — abstract expressionists to Pop to the latest top-selling installation fad or gallery interventionism, no matter how accommodating or cynical, how resigned or indeed reactionary. In studios and “crit sessions,” teachers have a thousand other ways, subtle and unsubtle — and including the whole repertoire of winks, nods, and scornful silences — to signal disapproval and try to render ridiculous the radical practices and projects of past anti-capitalist adventurers, finally in order to say that all is well in the art world, or else to call for a return to the good old standards of the good old days.

Of course, it would be dishonest to pretend that teachers who do the opposite — who actively try to inspire interest in the avant-gardes and what they stood for — are not also using their position as a political platform. But there are two important differences. First, because such radical pitches run counter to the institutional unconscious, they can only be effectively advocated through a discourse that is open and transparent. Advocates for the avant-gardes cannot pretend, in the way teachers who reinforce the status

issues published in *Internationale situationniste* reflect and endorse the older group’s “critique of bureaucracy” and work on “autonomy” and “generalized self-management.” And these were already a recovery and reinvigoration, by the group of ex-Trotskyists who in 1949 left the Fourth International to found Socialisme ou Barbarie, of older anarchist and council communist traditions. So even this brief snapshot of the French postwar context should be enough to show the injustice of a globalizing dismissal.

Nor can the problem be displaced to the idea of revolution, which remains true as long as structural barbarism is the factual given. In the situationist idiom, the urgent task of “revolutionary theory” is to rescue the truth of this idea from the untruth of “revolutionary ideology,” and to carry that truth into new forms of revolutionary practice. The important organizational innovations developed and advocated by CAE itself, in their fast cultural cell, are improvements — or mutations, if you like — of models previously generated from within the political and artistic avant-gardes. We would only need to add, to the record left by the situationists, the famous rhizome text from Gilles Deleuze and Félix Guattari’s *A Thousand Plateaus* and Deleuze’s wonderful 1972 homage to Guattari, “Three Group-Related Problems,”²⁴ and we have the main elements of the contemporary model and, within and as a variation of it, CAE’s excellent “line of flight.”

But above all it is the dismissive tone with which the historical avant-gardes are condemned and maligned that is unjust and counter-productive — confused and confusing. Again, CAE does

cal essays: “Workers’ Councils, Cornelius Castoriadis, and the Situationist International” (November 1996); “Cornelius Castoriadis, 1922–1997” (July 1998); and “Strangers in the Night” (June 1999). All of them, as well as an extensive archive of other situationist texts in translation, are accessible at www.notbored.org.

²⁴ Gilles Deleuze, “Three Group-Related Problems,” in *Desert Islands and Other Texts, 1953–1974*, trans. Michael Taormina (New York: Semiotext(e), 2004). The text was written as a preface to Guattari’s 1972 *Psychoanalysis and Transversality*.

shared the premise that the role of a revolutionary group cannot be to “lead” the working class from above or the outside. The disputes were over how this kind of elitism, as the germ of a bureaucratic class, could be avoided in practice, and how direct democracy and non-hierarchical principles could be realized in the organizational forms of a militant group.

Debord and the situationists followed these debates closely, and Debord even became active in *Socialisme ou Barbarie* from 1959 to 1961.²³ The many collective texts on organizational problems and

tariat et organisation (suite et fin),” No. 28 (July-August 1959). In English see Castoriadis, “Proletariat and Organization, I,” trans. Maurice Brinton, in *Political and Social Writings, Vol. II, 1955–1960*, (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota, 1988); and Lefort, “What Is Bureaucracy?” trans. Jean Cohen, *Telos* #22 (1970). For context see, Castoriadis, “The Only Way to Find Out If You Can Swim Is to Get into Water: An Introductory Interview,” [1974], in ed. David Ames Curtis, *The Castoriadis Reader* (Oxford: Blackwell, 1997); and Marcel van der Linden, “Socialisme ou Barbarie: A French Revolutionary Group (1949–65),” *Left History* 5.1 (1997).

²³ Debord probably joined *Socialisme ou Barbarie* some time in the Fall of 1959, although an earlier contact with the group is mentioned in a 1958 letter to André Frankin (8 August). He submitted a formal resignation to the group on 5 May 1961. In the interval, he collaborated with *Socialisme ou Barbarie* member P. Canjuers [Daniel Blanchard] to write a text establishing the common ground between the two groups, for internal circulation among the two memberships: “Preliminaries Toward Defining a Unitary Revolutionary Program,” dated 20 July 1960, in English in *Situationist International Anthology*, ed. and trans. Ken Knabb (Berkeley: Bureau of Public Secrets, 1981). References to and critical comments about *Socialisme ou Barbarie* can be found in many of the 12 issues of the *Internationale situationniste*, beginning with No. 2 (December 1958). Arthème Fayard has republished an indispensable complete run of the journal in a single volume in 1997. English translations of many situationist texts and some complete issues of their journal are now archived on-line at www.cddc.vt.edu/sionline. Debord’s resignation letter and other relevant letters to Frankin, Blanchard, Attila Kotanyi, J.-L. Jollivet, and Edouard Taube are in Debord, *Correspondance*, Vol. 2, September 1960-December 1964 (Paris: Arthème Fayard, 2001). Bill Brown (a.k.a. Bill Not Bored, a.k.a. Johnny Boredom) has been among the few outside France to grasp the importance of the intersection of these two groups. His journal *NOT BORED!* has published English translations of the relevant correspondence, as well as important texts and commentaries by Castoriadis, Blanchard, Pierre Vidal-Naquet, and others. He has also analyzed the relations between the groups in three criti-

quo can, that they do not have political investments. But declaring these investments openly gives students the opportunity to deal with them as what they are. Second, radical pitches that reject market rules do not enjoy institutional approval and protection. On the contrary, they call down disciplinary measures, when those can safely be applied through apparently apolitical administrative procedures. But bringing such risks and institutional logics into the conversation is in itself an enlightening exercise.

Regrettably, not every art school can count gadflies among its faculty. (Though, as we know, it sometimes happens.) But what is really elided and kept from the students when art schools do no more than fulfill their social functions? No more or less than what, for at least a half-century now, anyone who bothered to could have noticed or learned: the market, and the market alone, can keep the corpse of bourgeois art dancing, through cyclical returns to “painting,” or by perennial resuscitations of whichever medium or new medium of opus-based, made-for-exhibition fodder for the gallery-commodity-magazine-museum system. No doubt, bourgeois art will continue to exist and be dominant, as long as capitalism is the dominant world system. But what is dead here remains a corpse, and it still stinks.

III. Processing the Legacies of Defeat

On to the second kind of reason: real despair and confusion. On first look, the histories of the revolutionary movements that oriented and inspired the old artistic avant-gardes may appear to be little more than a grim meta-story of crushing defeat. The bourgeois revolutions indisputably succeeded in breaking the power of feudalism and installing social relations conducive to competitive capitalism. But the results of the revolutionary movement organized around the subject of history Marx named the proletariat present a more ambiguous legacy, to put it mildly. While prole-

tarian revolutions have been vehicles of modernization and have made real accomplishments in areas such as access to literacy and health care, they have seldom been able to defend their gains from the forces of reaction and counter-revolution. Nor has this been merely a consequence of unfavorable “historical conjunctures.” All too often, revolutionary parties, once in power, have replaced capitalist relations with new structures of bureaucratic exploitation and domination. More often than not, the colossal sacrifices of the proletariat have been betrayed by those who claimed to represent it. This disastrous and traumatic history of defeat must be confronted honestly.

A very cursory review, then. The Bolshevik Revolution of 1917, in which so much radical hope was invested for so long, was within a few years hijacked by counter-revolution: the repression of the Kronstadt councils and all forms of emergent direct democracy in the name of “defending the revolution”; the establishment of the one-party police state, with its bureaucratic class; coerced labor and centralized, hierarchical management; Stalinism and the corruption of the Third International in the name of “socialism in one state”; the repression of the artistic avant-gardes and the enforced institutionalization of “official” socialist realism; purges, Gulags, entropy, and finally implosion. The German Revolution of 1918–23, more classically proletarian than the Russian example: liquidated by the Social-Democratic state and its paramilitary proxies or co-opted by Social Democratic reformism; within a decade, the Nazis, levered into power by international capital, were rounding up the remnants of the revolutionary and radical left. The anarcho-sindicalist Spanish Revolution of 1936, fighting back a right-wing coup and establishing democratic councils and the self-management of factories and public services in Barcelona and elsewhere, was an inspiring but short-lived experiment; its hopeful flash was stomped out between the fascist war machine, Stalinist betrayal, and capitalist hostility.

about.”²¹ On this point, CAE’s rejection of avant-garde ideology is unassailable: there is no place, today, for this kind of arrogant and paternal elitism, or for the kind of hierarchical organizations it spawns. This is blunder number two, and it leads to the hoarding, rather than sharing, of information; to obfuscation and dissimulation, rather than openness and transparency; and to the deliberate blockage of autonomy and mutual self-empowerment.

Having said this, the ways in which such criticisms are registered are usually so global and indiscriminate as to be unhistorical. It’s not the case that all avant-garde groups uncritically accepted the elitist origins of a metaphor that had gone into common usage by 1917, nor did they all organize themselves rigidly along the centralized, top-down lines set down by Lenin in 1902, as the model for clandestine revolutionary groups. It wouldn’t be wrong to see a mimesis of this model in certain aspects of some avant-garde groups, for example in the way Breton provoked splits and exclusions within the surrealists. But that would no longer be true, in any simplistic way, for the situationists, whose splits and exclusions are legendary.

The Leninist model was criticized almost as soon as *What Is To Be Done?* began to circulate — by anarcho-councilists like Anton Pannekoek, as well as, among the Marxists, Rosa Luxemburg; and the Bolsheviks were excoriated, beginning soon after 1917, by Alexander Berkman, Emma Goldman, and Voline, among many others. But as far as I can tell, the issues of representation and elitism pointed to by CAE and others did not become fully conscious within the artistic avant-gardes before the 1958 debates on organizational forms between Cornelius Castoriadis and Claude Lefort within the group *Socialisme ou Barbarie*.²² Both sides in that debate

²¹ *Ibid.*, p. 22.

²² The debate was carried on in the pages of the group’s journal, *Socialisme ou Barbarie*. See Paul Cardan [Cornelius Castoriadis], “Prolétariat et organisation,” No. 26 (November-December 1958); [Claude Montal] Claude Lefort, “Organisation et parti,” No. 27 (April-May 1959); and Cardan [Castoriadis], “ProlÉ-

In place of another repetition of failure, CAE theorizes a decentralized resistance of autonomous confrontational cells that would take the battle to Cyberspace, where the structures of power are actually vulnerable. CAE, at least in this text, would leave behind for good the old streets, barricades, and Winter Palace scenarios. “CAE has said it before, and we will say it again: as far as power is concerned, the streets are dead capital!”¹⁸

Such formulations, by no means rare in CAE texts, have generally been read as a call to vacate the streets.¹⁹ I will take up this problem shortly. Before that, I need to address some of the confusions packed into the “po-mo” common sense that looms behind CAE’s strategic and tactical revisions. CAE is not guilty of all the moves I will criticize. As I’ve already pointed out, the group tries to save and reinvigorate some notion of the avant-garde, rather than dance on its grave. But in doing so, it has had to acknowledge widely held prejudices against the avant-gardes that many others express with far less restraint.

What the vanguards are usually charged with is their alleged elitism. Back in the day when Saint-Simon and Laverdant introduced this military metaphor into cultural and political discourse, revolutionary groups saw themselves as scouting parties — *enfants perdus* (“lost children”), in French slang — in search of “northwest passages” to the promised land. The main army — read: the masses — would then follow and force the opening. Implicit here is the idea that advanced artists (and Lenins and Maos) see things ordinary people cannot, and therefore have a right to lead — or at least to special autonomy. So: “Avant-gardism is grounded in the dangerous notion that there exists an elite class possessing enlightened consciousness.”²⁰ Or: “That dreaded question of ‘who speaks for whom?’ looms large whenever the idea of avant-gardism is shuffled

¹⁸ Ibid., p. 11.

¹⁹ See, for example, Lovink, *Dark Fiber*, pp. 34 and 311.

²⁰ CAE, *Electronic Civil Disobedience*, p. 28.

The record of the post-1945 struggles of national liberation is similarly dubious. China, Cuba, Congo, Algeria, Vietnam: as oppressed people broke their colonial chains and tried to carry through a revolution, they often found themselves citizens of a neo-Stalinist police state or else re-colonized in the grinding debtor’s prisons of the capitalist world system. East Berlin, 1953; Poland and Hungary, 1956; Prague, 1968: wherever people rose up from within the East Bloc, they were swiftly and brutally repressed. The global insurrections of 1968, above all the Parisian May: betrayed by Communist parties and unions, run out of steam, or broken up by the state — in any case, defeated, with few substantive systemic reforms to speak of being gained anywhere. The desperate turn to armed struggle in the wake, the attempt to “bring the war home” to the metropolises? Urban guerillas, Red Brigades, Panthers, and Weathermen: all isolated without popular support, infiltrated, and systematically crushed, by the expanded repressive powers of liberal states.

Finally, the collapse and disappearance of the Soviet Union: is this not the judgment of history, as many were quick to proclaim, a final and unanswerable “practical critique” of Marxist-Leninist revolution? Were they not right, the cold warriors and neo-conservative ideologues who crowed the victory of capitalism and trumpeted in the “end of history”? Who, in the face of all this, could want to carry on with a dismally failed project? Who, now, could fail to be embarrassed by the words “revolution” and “comrade”? And who would want to expose themselves to ridicule by talking garbage about the “death” of bourgeois art, when it’s so clear that the only corpse to be seen is that of the very idea of revolution.

Such triumphalism has turned out to be premature, of course. From the fact that revolution has not yet succeeded in banishing oppression, it doesn’t follow that anyone is justified in declaring it dead. Revolution is an urgency that will never die, so long as oppression persists as a product of systemic relations. As already noted, capitalism in its post-cold war form — neoliberal globaliza-

tion — has run up against its contradictions, which have exploded spectacularly. In the eyes of much of humanity, and within a mere handful of years, capitalism is again ceasing to be the golden stairway to the mansion on the hill and has begun to appear as the thing it is: a system that is out to ruin us all, and will do so if we fail to stop it. In the bleak, ever more familiar desolations of sprawling shantytowns, guarded sweatshops, and glowing toxic dumps, more and more people are beginning to recognize the real future capitalism has in store for us. The glossy shell of globalized reification, then, is fracturing before our eyes. History has quite evidently returned — as if it ever left — and in the decentralized and differentiated rhizomes of global anti-capitalism we can recognize survivals and mutations of the old revolutionary project. In short, the struggle continues. Carrying on with it remains the only way out of a world system as barbarous and intolerable as ever.

So despair and confusion won't do. Such responses do, however, have an understandable source. They are responses of people who have heard, and perhaps seen, the ghosts of defeated revolutions, tens of millions of them, and have been spooked. As well they should be, and as well we all should be. The terrible human costs of defeated revolutions must be faced. Whoever refuses to acknowledge and mourn these ghosts ceases to be credible. In this context, to mourn means to be committed to the critical processing of these histories, to a working-through of inherited theory and practice that not only questions the tenets of tactics and strategy, but also opens the problems of ethics and all that exceeds the crude calculation of forces. To repeat: to say this, to insist on the necessity of remembering those who are in some sense victims of missed, aborted, hijacked, or otherwise defeated revolutions, is not to concede anything at all to capitalism, which remains the prior and ongoing disaster. Reflected in every single one of our pseudo-prosperities under capitalism is the globalized and ever-present misery of a humanity that, so far, has failed to make its qualitative leap. The project of revolution — in a more contemporary and

an international network of media activists and experimenters at the “Next 5 Minutes” (N5M) festivals, the group will go on to align its cellular model with the notion of “tactical media”:

Tactical Media is situational, ephemeral and self-terminating. It encourages the use of any media that will engage a particular socio-political context in order to create molecular interventions and semiotic shocks that will contribute to the negation of the rising intensity of authoritarian culture.¹⁴

There is a certain slippage between the levels of tactics and strategy that make CAE's texts sometimes difficult to confront.¹⁵ But emphasis is on “molecular” interventions because, CAE tells us, “revolution is not a viable option.”¹⁶ Surveying the history of defeat, they conclude that radical revisions of strategy are necessary:

After two centuries of revolution and near-revolution, one historical lesson continually appears — authoritarian structure cannot be smashed; it can only be resisted. Every time we have opened our eyes after wandering the shining path of a glorious revolution, we find that the bureaucracy is still standing. We find Coca-Cola gone and Pepsi-Cola in its place — looks different, tastes the same.¹⁷

¹⁴ This self-representation is from the group's website: www.critical-art.net. On CAE's cell form, see also Critical Art Ensemble, “Observations on Collective Cultural Action,” in *Digital Resistance: Explorations in Tactical Media*, (Brooklyn, New York: Autonomedia, 2001), pp. 65–80. For CAE's own account of the group's relation to tactical media and the N5M festivals, see *ibid.*, pp. 3–11. For another insider account, see Geert Lovink, *Dark Fiber: Tracking Critical Internet Culture* (Cambridge, Massachusetts: MIT Press, 2002), pp. 254–74.

¹⁵ There are signs that this slippage is a deliberate strategy of writing. See CAE, *Digital Resistance*, pp. 27–8.

¹⁶ CAE, *Electronic Civil Disobedience*, p. 24.

¹⁷ *Ibid.*

pudiation or dismissal of CAE, are a friendly contribution to the critical reception due to a collective so named.

As every avant-garde group of the past has done, CAE tries to rethink the avant-garde legacies and re-function the models. But the group seems strangely unable to acknowledge its status as heir without a certain embarrassment. The fidelity CAE keeps with its tradition is not so much one tempered by critical immersion, as one that is obliged to recognize, always ironically, the magnetic pull of a new common sense:

CAE fears that some of our readers might be getting a bit squeamish about the use of the term “avant-garde” in the above essay. After all, an avalanche of literature from very fine postmodern critics has for the past two decades consistently told us that the avant-garde is dead and has been placed in a suitable resting plot in the Modernist cemetery alongside its siblings, originality and the author. In the case of the avant-garde, however, perhaps a magic elixir exists that can reanimate this corpse.¹³

In the same 1994 text, the group offers important innovations of organizational form, arguing compellingly for fast and flexible cultural cells of four to ten people, with diverse skill bases and floating or rotating hierarchies. These direct action avant-garde groupuscules — at one point CAE calls them “anarchist cells” — are to pursue an improvisational and inversional practice that cultivates ephemerality, amateur versatility, and a degree of invisibility. Contributing to the stream of practices developed by and shared among

¹³ Critical Art Ensemble, *Electronic Civil Disobedience and Other Unpopular Ideas* (Brooklyn, New York: Autonomedia, 1996), p. 26. This and all the other cited CAE books are available for free download from the group’s website: www.critical-art.net. Ahead of the curve in this as in so much else, CAE and its publisher, Autonomedia, issue these texts under “anti-copyright.”

sober idiom: the active, consciously radical processes of systemic intervention and transformation — cannot wait for this collective work of mourning to be *completed*: mourning, we know, is interminable. But denial is no option.

Anyone active in the anti-capitalist rhizomes will recognize that there are, still, today, groups of militants running around, often in old-style Maoist or Marxist-Leninist formations, who are very much in denial. As far as I have seen, these are a minority in the global movement now emerging. But the refusal to question and learn, the persistence of old party-forms and demands for “discipline,” the need for leaders and dogmas: all these remain problems that are still all too often on view. This movement will grow and become robust and effective only to the degree that it succeeds in shedding such habits and illusions. It can only do so by subjecting itself, continuously, to the rigors of self-critique — not as a substitute for militant struggle, but as a form of its consciousness.

By now, the (old/new) Left has had plenty of time to draw some conclusions about itself. Arguably, the two most disastrous mistakes, not to be repeated, are (1) the suppression of ethics in revolutionary practice; and (2) undemocratic, centralized, hierarchical organizational forms that lead necessarily to bureaucratic domination. A third, entangled with the first two, is resistance to dealing with the persistent problems of race and gender privilege, behind which are the knots of subjectivity and the forms of its production. A fourth, probably, is the strategic obsession with the seizure of power and the appropriation of the state apparatus. (The important and finally unavoidable question of whether sovereignty can be durably dispersed into decentralized autonomies is beyond the scope of this essay and will in any case only be decided by the hard test of practice. But to date, collective attempts to do so have been killed in the crib.) Needless to say, this list is only partial. The

¹¹ Guy Debord, *Society of the Spectacle*, trans. Donald Nicholson-Smith (New York: Zone, 1995), §122, p. 89.

lessons of the first three blunders can be read in abstract form in a Situationist *détournement* of Hegel-Marx-Lukács: “The revolutionary organization must learn that it can no longer *combat alienation by means of alienated forms of struggle*.”¹¹

IV. The Case of Critical Art Ensemble

A different confusion, one actually entangled with a great deal of clarity, is sometimes seen among committed artists who can be recognized as the heirs of the twentieth-century avant-gardes. This one is born, not so much of despair, as of excesses and wrong-turns of self-critique. Those indulging in this confusion take the death of the revolutionary project as their starting point — thereby accepting capital’s wish projections as reality. To show what they think they’ve learned, they badmouth not any particular historical revolution or vanguard leadership, or even any particular model of revolution, but the very idea of it, *in toto*. For them, Marx died with all the other master-narratives, and capitalism, which presumably doesn’t need one, would merely be what we’re left with. There are many variations on the theme, but typically power and desire are made into inseparable invariables, at work always and everywhere. “The Struggle” against domination has therefore splintered into micro-struggles extending on so many different planes that there is no need, and in any case no way, to link them all up on a macro-systemic level. So one cultivates “radical” subjectivity through practices that methodologically refuse the big picture (“bad” totality). With audible relief, one relinquishes, as naiveté or will-to-power, the ambition to destroy the *structures* of exploitation.

Having been a student in the mid-1990s, I can vividly recall how attractive and obvious these ideas seemed. For me and for the artists I knew and worked with then, they appeared more radical and empowering than anything else on offer. It would take

some more years of critical work and experience to emerge on the other side of them. Some never did. Since much of what follows below also applies to the student I was then, it should also be read as self-criticism. The fact is, this reductionist soup is a vulgarization of Foucault-Deleuze-Guattari-Lyotard-Derrida-Baudrillard that represses, precisely, the *commitments* of these critical theorists. About the real histories and practical contexts in which they struggled, in some cases militantly, one remains sublimely uninformed. Taken out of context and run together into a concoction sloppily called “post-modernism,” these distinct bodies of theory and practice are cooked down to some purported basis of post-political ironic relativism. It follows that, obviously, the old avant-gardes are laughable relics, utterly and irredeemably passé and uncool. Predictably, this kind of thing is often transmitted, in the form of (an) attitude, to students who haven’t yet learned or read enough to make minimally critical choices about it and who, as result, will never immerse themselves in avant-garde histories. (Why bother?) Again, I’m not suggesting that students and artists should slavishly be repeating these histories. The point is that in order to receive and repurpose them, it is necessary to first go through the trouble of learning them.

Critical Art Ensemble (CAE) does not go all the way down that path, but they reflect it, as a kind of postmodern common sense. CAE is a respected and influential group, for the good reason that its committed anti-capitalist artistic and theoretical production is sharp, inventive and courageous. Given its long — since 1986 — and richly prolific trajectory, it seems certain that CAE will in time be lifted into the canon of major avant-garde exemplars. (And, given the ongoing legal harassment of the group by the US state, it goes without saying, and not at all in the margins: Solidarity with CAE! Hands off Steve Kurtz!¹²) The following reflections, far from a re-

¹² See www.caedefensefund.org .