

In some ways, this exhibition begins in 1974, the year Terry Atkinson left Art & Language, the conceptual art group he co-founded in 1966. This individuation, the shift from “we” to “I,” is the origin of the artist “Terry Atkinson,” known also on occasion as Terry Actor, Terry Mirrors, Terry Dog, and Terry Enola Gay. Atkinson’s longstanding commitment to group practice and the dispersion of authorship was ultimately broken by a shift within A&L that he perceived as one from the “social space of a group to that of a caucus.” For Atkinson, 1974 also marks a period in which Conceptualism calcified, “marshal[ing] the resources of an official history... and foreclosing the provisions of theory which it had done so much to plenish.”

Atkinson’s decampment is worth emphasizing as artists, especially those whose names are synonymous with canonical positions in art, don’t often bag their own authority and ardently change course. Easier is the kind of artistic maintenance and consistency we come to expect of the successful. “Artists are marketed as a kind of culturally militant version of a sacred figure, the entrepreneur.” Atkinson writes, “They are ‘radical’ and ‘challenging’, an immutable centre of self-confirming truth, and their market, logo, and brand, are promoted much in the same way as any other consumer item.” By ’74, Conceptualism to Atkinson was a cloak that the teething artist could try on. He was eager to break with it, while “retaining the supply lines from critical theory.”

The exhibition is comprised of multiple material, formal, and textual elements. Sometimes these elements appear autonomously, assuming the familiar form of a didactic, painting, drawing, or even minimal sculpture, and in other instances these elements are combined on one surface, or appended to each other as paratexts. Atkinson is a prolific writer, and his work is rarely, if ever, free of its own auto-exegesis or unloving self-criticism. Atkinson’s project could be described, without a syllable of disrespect, as a series of unresolved strategic

“moves,” delineating, in his parlance, a method of “betting and trying.”

By 1975 Atkinson was making drawings and paintings of soldiers and battlefields from the First World War. These works were based on audio and video interviews Atkinson conducted with veterans of the 1916 Battle of the Somme and materials archived in the Imperial War Museum in London. They were not however exercises in historical documentation. “What I was trying to comment upon was the general point about the transmission and construction of history and the specific point about the transmission and construction of the history-reporting artist. Included in the construction of the latter was the reflexive function of the history of the formal resources and means of representation of, for example, history painting: and going reflexively further and further in, a history painting of a modernist painting about the problems of painting and linked, the finding of some sort of formal resources to harangue the rapidly ossifying historical transmission and construction of Conceptualism.”

Becoming “The War Artist” was not an attempt by Atkinson to make himself feel more comfortable as an artist; it was an attempt to toe a comparison between a cultural front and a warring front. “Avant-garde”, after all, is a term whose strange and ironic history is largely militaristic. William Gass writes, “From the main body of an army in medieval times, two smaller units were detached: one protected the rear during retreats, or from surprise attack, and sent stragglers back and deserters; the other comprised a line of scouts who went ahead to seek out, test, and estimate the enemy. By the 16th century, when the term was first applied to a literary movement, the avant-garde had become seditious, because its enemy turned out to be the very army it was supposed to serve.” As a “history-reporting artist” Atkinson was pre-occupied with the history of himself as an artistic subject, and how his subjecthood had been ideologically arrived at. Atkinson speculates that when depicting history, the question of how to represent is perhaps not as

pressing as the question of how to “represent the representer.” The representers in Atkinson’s drawings often give their testimony in prominent titles. At times, these titles grow into long texts, even diagrams, with the desired effect to lower expressivity and put some pressure on the conventional and subservient relation between picture and title. While you could see this as a vague postmodern address of “how pictures mean; through what technical and cognitive skills...” Atkinson’s titles/texts are much more unwieldy, humorous, and defiantly open-ended. In a painting on paper from 1979, he uses the title to comment on the “history-reporting self” as an instrument of political and social conditions:

Narrative Dispute: the New Zealand Hat – three minutes after this moment the hat fell off the branch! (No, that isn’t true!)

Well, O.K., three to four minutes then (No, that’s not true either)...

A narrative anecdotal index of ‘being’ a British artist (1980).

Auckland infantrymen watching ‘working class’ (1917) —> ‘bourgeois’ (1958) infantrymen of the Bedfordshire Regiment march by.

Early summer evening, Somme area, Summer 1917

Conte and gouache on paper / 49 1/2 x 75 / 1979

Another way to launch an account of these drawings and paintings would be by pointing to a basic, yet enigmatic aspect: that is, their formal orientation to us as viewers. One might instinctively sense that in each, the way through the material is not straightforward. The viewer must accept they are looking at cover versions of Socialist Realism. For Atkinson, Socialist Realism was a way to about face Conceptualism, its exultant confidence, and roots in Western Modernism. “Social Realism was Western art’s most conspicuous ideological opposite...I was seeking, as far as I could tell, that this work should mark itself out as a self-conscious attempt to break out from what I considered by 1974 as the narrowing preoccupations of Conceptualism... I was looking for a set of both formal and, I use the word guardedly, expressive resources which Western Modernism claimed to be its opposite; claimed to see as ideological detritus...So in making the WW1 pictures it seemed to me that I was, perhaps, using a perfectly respectable avant-garde strategy; the

use of ideological and formal material which established Western Modernism considered to be rubbish, and I suppose, equally resonantly, dangerous political rubbish.”

This is perhaps most apparent in the exhibition in *Desert: an aide-memoire before memory* (2013–2014), a series of eighteen drawings which conflate a hot issue—our recent Gulf Wars—with a very cold and distant one, Rommel, the WW2 German tank tactician, and his Afrika Korps. Here, Atkinson’s mind moves naturally into the malformations of the realities he was never a part of. Gruesomeness and debasement are constants, but they never get his entire attention. The horrificness of war is there, but it is unfelt. They are too ready with affect and absurdity after the violence has passed, too weird with their mixture of distance and amateurism for us to not see the artist making them. When Atkinson draws he does not hope himself to be Goya, however deluded the thought. Everything depends in these works on our taking the drawings formal un-seriousness, seriously, or just seriously enough. They are not parodies—the term is too final, but the drawings are handled playfully by an artist for whom so much is at stake—Empire, War, the ideological constructions of history, and the class of the corpses. It seems truly part of Atkinson’s way of proceeding that artistic labor and a representation of the working, warring class come towards some such managed confrontation. As Atkinson sees it, the class of the historical war painting has changed. Awe at the triumph of a painted scene of military technology or victory is long gone, but laughter at the painting’s class concerns, or distaste for its heavy breathing, or boredom with its solemnity, or confusion (even perhaps resentment) at the macabre all remained intact for the “progressive” audience.

The art-historian T.J. Clark, a friend and colleague of Atkinson’s at Leeds University in the late 1970s writes, “Most British painting is a genteel endeavor. Why? The answer derives, I think, from painting’s unique vulnerability to its patrons. Painting, from the 1860s on, was the central modernist art—I follow Mallarmé

Excerpt from Atkinson, Terry. *The Indexing, The World War 1 Moves and The Ruins of Conceptualism*. Dublin, Ireland: The Irish Museum of Modern Art, 1992.

So what kind of dialogue, or perhaps by then it was a monologue, is it that constructs a self which deviates onto a path of faking up a kind of socialist realism of alleged WW1 histories? What kind of mutation is this that springs, relatively fully formed, out of the supply lines of art theory? My hunch now, and it is pretty much the view I had toward the end of the seventies with a few years distance to offer a retrospective viewing, is that it is a kind of self positioned on the ruins and alienating effects of a Conceptualism which I thought by 1974 was already starting to marshal the resources of an official history. A self (the shadow-self of 1974) fearing that the history of conceptualism was already foreclosing the provisions of theory which it had done so much to plenish. The official conceptual artist showed every sign of selling the little bit of energy still left in return for an official post, and because it was a relatively unpaid post it was no less official.

Here I return more specifically to the strategy of the WW1 moves. Heaney’s essay *Nero, Chekhov’s Cognac and a Klocker*, which was written many years after the WW1 moves, does have a specific resonance in respect of them. The story is as follows. In this essay Heaney lays out a view of a number of positions which he claims some poets, both living and dead, represent in respect of their view of the relation between historical events and their idea of self. Wilfred Owen, Sorley MacLean, Chekhov and Zbigniew Herbert are called and carefully accounted by Heaney as variant examples of the problematics of poetic conscience and poetic vision. In relation to WW1 histories Wilfred Owen has an obvious position. Heaney, for example, holds out Owen as an unequivocal case of “the poet as witness”¹¹, representing “poetry’s solidarity with the doomed, the deprived, the victimised, the underprivileged. The witness is any figure in whom the truth-telling urge and the compulsion to identify with the oppressed becomes necessarily integral with the act of writing itself.”¹² Owen went to the war after volunteering, endured it to his death, and between going and dying wrote out the poetry of his dissent from the patriot ideology of which the war was both product and symptom. Heaney states the matter as follows: “These imperatives could be effectively fulfilled only if the poet who was warning or telling his truth was doing so with the authority of experience, with justification of soldiering behind him. Owen therefore suffered the strain of performing what most people perceived as their unquestionable patriotic duty in order to gain the right to question whether it was a duty at all. He connived in what he deplored so that he could deplore what he connived in: he earned the right to his lines by going up the line, and nobody who has read Owen’s poems and letters can underestimate their cost in terms of trauma, courage and heartbreak.”¹³

This longish quotation from Heaney on Owen’s project I make here in order to use it as the opposite of what I was attempting in making the WW1 moves. It

is an obvious thing to point out first, that in choosing such an historical event as WW1 as a kind of narrative subject (standing at the distance it did from 1973-74) that I sought no warrant I should have experienced the event. There was no requirement here of the artist as witnessing the event per se. I was not trying to say anything about my experience of WW1, obviously, since I didn’t have one. What I was trying to comment upon was the general point about the transmission and construction of history and the specific point about the transmission and construction of the history-reporting artist. Included in the construction of the latter was the reflexive function of the history of the formal resources and means of representation of, for example, history painting; and going reflexively further and further in, a history painting of a modernist painting about the problems of painting (partially a Johnsian legacy¹⁴) and linked, the finding of some sort of formal resources to harangue the rapidly ossifying historical transmission and construction of Conceptualism. Plainly, these kinds of specifications no more required my witnessing WW1 than that Mantegna should witness the Crucifixion, David witness the Oath of the Horatii or, for that matter, Manet witness the execution of Maximilian.

A good deal of war art posits the artist, to a greater or lesser extent, as witness. Most war artists worked in this way in WW1 and WW2. But in reporting on the history of WW1 it was the distance from it which was one of the critical reading and reporting factors. The political events the war inaugurated or helped inaugurate, for example, the American Military in Europe for the first time and the Bolshevik Revolution, both of which could by 1975 be seen unequivocally to have been the crucible in which an historical formation had been formed which had dominated the lives of every generation since I could remember - the Cold War. An event at such distance with such a directly observable chain of cause and effect seemed to have a certain appropriateness to the historical position in the West of the formal resources and ideological means of Socialist Realism, since Socialist Realism was Western art’s most conspicuous ideological opposite, or at least one of the most obvious of its ideological opposites.¹⁵ Since, as I have written already, I was seeking, as far as I could tell, that this work should mark itself out as a self-conscious attempt to break out from what I considered by 1974 as the narrowing preoccupations of Conceptualism in general and the overnaming weight of Art & Language in particular then I was looking for a set of both formal and, I use the word guardedly, expressive resources which Western Modernism (of which at that time Conceptualism was seen as a main protagonist) claimed to be its opposite; claimed to see as ideological detritus. A set of formal resources which the West would see as constricting expression, particularly self-expression. In one strong sense the moves in the WW1 works were an attempt to appropriate a set of resources for Western practice from a practice which Western practice saw as heresy. This heresy seemed to offer the volte-face from Conceptualism. So in making the WW1 pictures it seemed to me that I was, perhaps, using a perfectly respectable avant-garde strategy; the use of ideological and formal material which established Western Modernism considered to be rubbish, and I suppose, equally resonantly, dangerous political rubbish. Not only dangerous political rubbish because it was specifically associated with Soviet totalitarianism but

perhaps also because in the West itself the means of representation which most resembled it carried populist and kitsch positions which the Modernist tradition had itself claimed often to be resisting and transcending, certainly anyway until the advent of Pop. The WW1 work was a kind of shopping list art. I was, I think largely through betting and trying, aiming for procedures which I thought simultaneously helped make the kind of distance I was trying to gain from The Indexing, with all its encompassing naming operations, and attempting to build up some kind of practice where the business of practising reciprocally built up the ideological shopping list. Another item from the list from early on was the populist presence of a conventional history of WW1 exemplified perhaps best by the civic visibility of the war monuments spread profusely throughout the towns and villages of the combatant countries. For example, one of the most persistent attempts at betting and trying was a recurrent tabulation of the populist and reactionary formal resources of the masquerade of Soviet Socialist Realism with some of these populist aspects of conventional WW1 histories.

Another item, and not one to be underestimated in the choice of the WW1 event, was the relatively easily accessible reservoir of information and, presumably, misinformation and disinformation (the likes of Wilfred Owen's testimony both was ignited and dampened down in these areas) in, for example, the Imperial War Museum in London - many thousands of photographs and texts. It did seem to make some kind of sense to choose an event where besides the above items the character of its historical transmission was not too difficult to get at.¹⁶ Another item exercising influence on my judging the event WW1 to have some fit with the interest in the history-reporting self reporting on the history-reporting self was the relation between the Imperial War Museum's Commission's strictures upon the artists they appointed and the state of the formal resources and means of representation of Modern art at that time in 1914-18.¹⁷ This seeking after the volte-face panned out then as betting and trying on this kind of listing operation where the functions of betting and trying sometimes added and sometimes removed items from the list. The pattern of this particular kind of feedback was manifest in much of the work right through to 1980.

Having then, by 1976, got some kind of body of work together conforming to the requirements of the listing operations with, as I have just written, the making of the work feeding back to often change the character of the list¹⁸, then I felt I was in position to move on what I thought was another pressing requirement - to go public with this work. The volte-face had been planned and made in the relatively private space of the relations of production (the studio)¹⁹ but in this early period I felt it was essential that the volte-face should be enunciated and announced in public, in the relations of distribution. The obvious place was the public space of a gallery. From 1974 I had realised that a strong strategic part of the volte-face would be some public announcement of the break from Conceptualism, but which break would be paradoxically riven by, because linked to, the achievements of theory, especially those residing in the history of A&L circa 1966-74. So what was attempted to be articulated in the work was a break with the style of Conceptualism whilst retaining the supply lines from theory. Largely through the brokerage of Victor Burgin, who was supportive at that time, Robert Self expressed an interest in showing the WW1 work at his

gallery in Covent Garden. This came to pass in January, 1977. The exhibition I called *History Drawing*.

Once fulfilled this gesture attained some kind of completion of the early moves in the WW1 work. I did not then have another one person show (in fact I showed hardly anything) until April, 1983 at the Whitechapel, which was realigned through the persistence and dedication of Mark Francis. This period between Self and the Whitechapel of over six years was perhaps a little too long but the teaching job I had started at Leeds (largely through the will and support of Tim Clark who was then Professor there) in 1977 turned out to a lot better than I had anticipated since the commitment that the teachers should practice was backed by both the supply of a studio and a will to allow it to be used. This allowed me to take some distance from rushing on to further shows. This luxury of low visibility suited, for the years 78-81 anyway, what I saw as the main requirement then that the practice should develop a radar scanning in tandem more recent 'hotter' conventional political events and more recent 'hotter' art political events such as the then much acclaimed 'new spirit in painting'. This phenomenon and its acclamation strikes me to this day as a failure of nerve in front of the ruins of Conceptualism, and because Conceptualism was a ruin the 'return to painting' had also a stifling, intimidating opportunism about it. The curatorial of this phenomenon, particularly the lauding of its formal resources of expression, were stunning exercises in a lack of ironic self-consciousness. By 1983 when the collection of work which seems to have become known as the Irish Work was started, this compound of conventional historical-political event and nods, winks and general evasive tactics to keep a distance from 'New Expressionism' (which tactics had included feigning, ventriloquizing, mimicking and ersatzing 'expressionist handling') was starting to interest me as a means of riving apart aspects of the old WW1 work to which I had given priority as the means of breaking free from the style of Conceptualism. Though I should say, through the prism of 'New Expressionism', and from the distance of 1983, Conceptualism appeared to be full of heroines and heroes.

To recap a bit on the WW1 works. There were a number of devices generated by the betting and trying hinterland within which the work was made which proved especially tempting in respect of how I could load the work. One was the attempt to construct ideological stencils through playing with the relationship firstly, of title to picture, a conventional relation, and then trying to place some pressure on this relation through expanding titles into texts, sometimes digrammatic texts. The hope being that the display of such exaggerated and extravagant literary motifs might contribute to at least a more critical reading of how we read, for example, pictures. The question of how pictures mean; through what technical and cognitive skills. This move particularly was linked back to some of the games and genres which in my time at A&L I had helped develop. So the volte-face may have been a break in the way I formally resourced the work, but it was not a break in an entire range of interests. I think I knew as well as The Caucus in 1974 some of the strengths that Conceptualism had had in the late sixties and early seventies, and more particularly the strength of concentration in the conversation in A&L. Joseph Kosuth, I am at pains to point out, was a very important participant in this conversation. Behind

this set of image-title-text moves was (to state it in such a general way as to be in danger of saying very little) an interest in language. And this interest locked in productively with an interest in the instruments of historical transmission. This interest in language provided then one prominent symptom showing that the WW1 moves were saturated with theory, and that the relation between my interest in theory and my association with Michael Baldwin and my time in A&L is perhaps so obvious that even Charles Harrison in his most determined history-scripting mood might find it difficult to write out. The take on, faking of, Soviet Socialist Realism was itself saturated with theory, not least because the move lay at the end of the sidestep/volte-face strategies to evade Conceptualism and wriggle out from the overweening naming operations of The Indexing²⁰, whilst, as I have stated above, trying to maintain the supply lines of and from theory. The style of theory within Conceptualism had become a house style problem. The WW1 moves were my first, and it proved to be extended, response to this problem of stylised theory.

Excerpt from Atkinson, Terry. “Materialism, by Jove!,” *Block*, No. 1, 1979.

I hold the pictures to have complex semantic pathways. I also hold the pictures to be ideological items. Having said this, I don’t think I’ve said anything very interesting; these are assertions so general as to amount only to truisms, in precisely the sense that I hold all art works to be ideological items. So how can these assertions be made to count as more interesting truisms? Start,

and there is only space here for a start, by noting the distinction between two ideological systems of picture (art-object) fitting. On the one hand, there is an ideological system, the nature of which is to discount or disguise in some way the fact that pictures *are* ideological items; on the other hand, an ideological system the nature of which is to specify the fact of pictures *as* ideological items. This distinction does not necessarily entail two distinct sets of pictures. The same picture may be moved from one system into the other by virtue of the interpretive functions of various art ‘experts’ (critics, historians, medianiks, other artists, dealers, entrepreneurs etc.). We might characterize these undertakings as struggles for ideological placement. Thus when I write of pictures as ideological items the context is the struggle for ideological placement waged by a whole range of art specialists. The recent debates over Courbet’s work are a good example of this (of which more later). First, a few more general points about the work I have done since 1975.

In the work, the concern is to make the fact of the pictures being ideological items the *content* of the work. There are both reflexive and extensional components, then, making up this content. It is an attempt to observe historical materialism as a methodological principle of art practice. By historical materialist work, I mean work which affirms the primacy of social activity itself on our conception of knowledge. These assertions themselves rest on an acknowledgement, that a defensible art theory/practice must hold art to be an attempt to *gain* knowledge, – i.e. that this theory/practice must be locatable in the practical problem of knowledge: the work must be up for ‘disconfirmability’, not reification. There must be no entrenchment of a proprietary idea. By this I mean that work which attempts to reify a ‘great lineage in art’ is not locatable in an active model of knowledge. It proscribes and fixes art practice on the established epistemological map. The primary convention of such a map is that knowledge is already achieved – the matter of ‘learning’ art is unproblematic in that one can be as good as ‘X’ (great artist), by acquisition of skills, or by the good fortune of having the right intuitions (naturally talented), or by a combination of both. Both these prescriptions for art practice presume a model of knowledge already completed, to which our trainee artists aspire, and which they sometimes achieve (to be as good as Delacroix or Matisse etc.). Such a map ignores the fact of new knowledge being dialectically generated from old, where the concept of knowledge is itself part of the problematic of epistemology. The pattern of transmission can be characterized as old knowledge reified from old knowledge. Many of the modernist moves inside the framework of the avant-garde are characterized by this kind of transmission. Much of the recent so-called ‘socially-concerned’ art (and its attendant texts) are what we might call ‘old knowledge’ stereotypes. And many left-wing dogmas on art fit this model as snugly as does institutionalised modernism (e.g. the writings by Trotsky and Breton).

Excerpt from Atkinson, Terry. *Fragments of a Career: Selected Retrospective Work 1966–1999*. Silkeborg, Denmark: Silkeborg Kunstmuseum, 2000.

In the particular case of the *Trotsky Postcards* it is perhaps especially the history of painting, and its contemporary position which is pressed upon. The written format of the text is that of the conventional letter/postcard - Dear Stalin, Dear Churchill, Dear Locke, etc. I thought here too, there was a resolute ghost of the problems of the history of my own practice inscribed and articulating in the practice of the *Trotsky Postcards* - a phantom of the studio, with the idea, and use, of the studio as part of the phantom. The phantom took form - a voice-text recording transcription moored alongside a painting, both components, par the convention, as evidence of the intentional system which produces an art work. There is plenty of painting in these works, thus, hopefully, the tedious old question about whether they might or might not be art objects is bypassed here. Accepting this as settled then, the idea of using a textual recording of a voice as part of the evidence of the system (which mostly ¹⁷ produces an art, work) was a bit more transparent than it would

have been had it been entwined with the standard modernist questionnaire as to whether it was to count as art or not. The fact that it looked like art, or at least a good deal of it did, provided a certain transparency. Such an idea of using a voice as part of the relations of production of my practice had a long slow-burning precedence in the practice. It, at least, echoed back to 1974, when I constructed a figure called Rimbaud-me (which was nothing more, nor less, than a voice), a device through which I attempted to talk myself out of old habits of loyalty to A&L, when this matter was a pressing one for me. The Rimbaud-me voice was singularly a voice, though it had no texts recording it (in this sense it could be seen, paradoxically, as a typical A&L creature), it was spoken into the aether of the studio. Who can say where causal chains begin and end for a given set of relations of production of an art work *qua* production of ideas?¹⁸ In contrast to the Rimbaud-me voice the Trotsky voice was conceived from its start as being recorded and explicitly on-going-ly imbedded in the relations of production, as a visible(visual) text it was not only a product of the relations of production, it was its self a relation of production. The notion of a voice-driven practice, arched over the notions of both a philosophy-driven and politics-driven practice. The voice-driven practice was a *raison d'être* of A&L practice, but in the case of all the personnel of A&L the interest in voice went back before A&L. When I first met Michael Baldwin in 1966, he already had a sophisticated analysis in place of the role of the voice in practice, the role of Frank Stella's voice and Robert Morris' voice for example. This was one of the early bonding and binding points with David Bainbride, Harold Hurrell and myself with Michael Baldwin. This view of the voice as an instrument for making work, which we shared with him. The match with our concerns, anchored as we three then were in London, and Michael's views, for which, up to then, we had no knowledge of whatsoever, in Coventry, was a revelation for us. Another example, would be the force of Don Judd's critical writing voice, which both parties, we in London, Michael in Coventry, had separately minuted throughout the period, say, 1963-66. Frank Stella's voice was, seemingly, a perpetual production in the reception of his work, as was Carl Andre's in the reception of both Stella's and his own work at that time. And this is to say nothing of the presence

of critics' voices, the role of some of which seemed to move into a more proximate relation to the artists' relations of production (for example the voices of Lucy Lippard, Barbara Rose). In those years the phenomenon of the artists'/critics' voice became a vivid one for the future founders of A&L. Voice became a dominant A&L instrument, perhaps the most characteristic motif of A&L relations of production throughout the 1966-71 period, and an unrecorded instrument at that.¹⁹

Another but related way of characterizing the conception of the *Trotsky Postcards*, was to view Trotsky as an historically reconstructed version of the Trotsky of the October Revolution, with the reconstructed voice at the centre of the reconstruction. There did seem to be an historical appropriateness here. Both Lenin's and Trotsky's voices were significant instruments in driving on the Revolution. Both were noted orators and rhetoricians. Perhaps Trotsky can be imagined, certainly if his literary production is to be considered, as one of the great postcard writers. The text recording of the voice of the *Trotsky Postcards* tended to presuppose a certain brevity of eloquence acquainted with an appropriate brio for writing to meet the exigencies of the historical deadlines of a revolutionary situation. But the voice was always temporally ambivalent. Sometimes writing from within the immediate post-revolutionary situation - the *Postcard to Churchill* from Trotsky's early exile in Prinkipo, or the situation in Mexico prior to WW2" - the setting for the *Postcard to Stalin*, or writing to a temporally distant place - the *Postcard to John Locke* sent back across two centuries to Locke in Somerset, or *Postcard to Ian Paisley* in the Belfast of the 1980's. I imagined Trotsky as a vehement and polemical postcard scribbler with the texts as witnesses to the historically reconstructed Trotsky voice voice-ing. In a practice as intimately connected to the notion of the importance of the role of voice as maker of the practice as my own practice seemed to be, and remains so, then the notion of a set of works so set upon the notion of voice seemed to have a historically reflexive position too, sounding, so to write, back upon the very practice of practicing.

I had noted by then, 1982, that my own practice tends to call up some notion of self-conscious voice whenever I am attempting, for whatever

reasons, to interrogate the status of how I see or, equally, how I think other people see my possession of my work. An interrogation of how I see the public perception of the possessive pronouns around which my address, and other people's address, of my work takes place. There is a somewhat indentured history of the use of such possessive pronouns in the history of my own practice. The 'my' of 'my work' when I use Atkinson, the 'our' of 'our work' when I have been a member of Fine-Artz (1963-66) or A&L (1966-74), or in the more recent joint works with Sue Atkinson. No doubt the use of the pre-1963 'my' left its mark somewhere, but certainly the use of the pronoun 'our' within the contexts of Fine-Artz and A&L acts as guarantor that I regard the notion of an independent and isolated 'I' as being singularly responsible for 'my' work, as a counterproductive myth. The relation between 'my' and 'our' remains an intriguing one in the embrace of this history. In 1986 I tried to set up another voice, this time a kind of 'art grunt', when I began to produce the Grease Works, I will write more of these works below in the essay commenting upon them (see below, 1986-92: *Philosophy in the driving seat again: Goya Series, Grease Works, Ruse Works, Enola Gay Works, Signature Works*).

The construction and use of voice remains interesting for me, especially when it is couched in the setting of how an artist might be claimed to epistemically possess their work (see *Terry Mirrors*, 1996).²⁰ Whilst Rimbaud-me was fashioned as a device to attempt to talk my way out of the A&L 'our', the by then deeply ingrained habits of loyalty, the Trotsky voice was a first, and I guess blatant, attempt to mechanize myself qua artist. In the interests of attempting to downgrade possessive individualism. A range of questions turning upon the question 'how might we claim to possess our-selves?' The best I can still do at the range of 18 years past the *Trotsky Postcards* is to state that I was interested in stating (voice-ing), in the sense of emphasising, myself as intentional system in contrast to moral agent. There is something of a sleight of voice here - since when was an intentional system **necessarily** not a moral agent. I emphasise, it was a matter of emphasising.

In the *Trotsky Postcards* there was an attempt to shift the 'my' of the work immediately prior to

them, the WW1W of 1975-82; a perceived WW1W - me as moral agent (an agent moving practice through the embrace of resources of expression of a proxy 'Social Realism' to some other more 'mechanized' me). Shades again of cyborgs and the world of Olaf Stapledon's 'collective intelligence'. The mechanized me a thrower of the Trotsky voice. A few years later in the Turner Prize jamboree of 1985, in which I was on the short list, the media publicly characterized me as 'political artist'. I was then in the midst of a host of media voices, more or less uncontrollable, more or less mechanized, more or less intentional systems, more or less moral agents. Whatever a 'political artist' might or might not be, the characterization of myself as one, provoked me into asking such questions: How was Howard Hodgkin's or Ian Hamilton-Findlay's work (two other Turner Prize nominees that year) not political? What could be more politically loaded than Hodgkin's claim, or Serota's claim on his behalf, that painting a la Hodgkin is a transcendental category. The ideological claim to transcend ideology is as politically loaded a claim as any claim an historically reconstructed Trotsky voice might make. My response was not so much that my work was not political, but rather the question 'Whose work isn't?' The response to this particular characterization of my work in 1986 was to make the voice of the Grease Works, which I have mentioned above, and which was a kind of feigned art-grunt, which, I guess, is a voice of sorts. This voice came out in the visceral spreads and emissions of the grease.

One of the aims of using the grease was, once again, to interrogate an identity I seemed to have publicly acquired, and which I judged was in danger of overdetermining and misleadingly simplifying other people's view of the problematics which constituted my practice. However, although in the *Grease Works* of 1986, the voice went, nominally at least, back to the status of a near mute, to art grunt, this was all ruse. In deciding to run such a programme, I talked to myself and other people as much as ever, both in making the *Grease Works*, and in talking of them. And although I never bothered to measure my output, I suspect I was writing more than ever.

Certainly, anyway, by the mid-eighties, this set of deliberations around the role and status of voice

in my practice began to change emphasis as the accrual of the information from reading and notes I had made over the past ten years or so - artificial intelligence, cognitive science, philosophy of mind, evolutionary theory, etc. - began to fuse into some kind of concentration, enough to take the practice on, some notion of voice record puzzling the problem of mind, moved into the centre of the practice. The practice, after two or three years of being made from resources explicitly dissenting from Thatcherism, more or less traditionally settled resources of expression, and this is where the media, in one sense rightly, perceived my practice as 'political', moved into a position where philosophical issues, more specifically the puzzles of the philosophy of mind, were driving it once again.

Apart from the pivotal effects of the move to centre practice once again on an explicit concern with matters epistemological/ontological, one other result of this move in 1986, was the concern to try and analyse and display a more complex form of the term 'political'. Not least in the betting and trying moves through into the *Grease Works*. The notion of the voice, or rather notion of voice with the possibility of losing it, of becoming voiceless. Not only literally but also in the sense of developing a meaningless voice - I was looking critically at what I took to be the excesses of pluralist Postmodernism and the theatrical philosophising of 'French Theory'. (Hence three shows of mine 1988-92, were titled *Mute 1*, *Mute 2*, *Mute 3*). But the notion of voice as belonging to a machine engine rather than soulful vessel of a literary philosophy was the notion upon which I became focussed. For example, Dennett's ideas that minds are syntactic engines and that syntactic engines are capable of mimicking semantic engines. The idea seemed vivid, and still does, in respect of some notion of maker of practice, producer of representations. Grease, as I have stated already, I thought of, literally and analogically, as software, and analogically as wetware. A material on which a physical/chemical programme could run. Roving through the interstices of this emergent practice was, via the work of the likes of Minsky, Dennett, Millikan and the Churchlands, a kind of assembling-as-it-went-along conversion kit. This kit, became clearer with the aid of a year's hindsight, converted the image/voice/text residue of the *Trotsky*

Postcards into a more explicit concern with inscription, possibly writing, but in the case of the first moves with grease, into a kind of mark-recording wetware art-making grunt. A kind of braille, but for the allegedly sighted. The analogue of both cyborg and semantic-syntactic engine emerged again in the *Grease Works* from the residue of the *Trotsky Postcards*. This entailed refocussing the idea of setting out art works, an important part of whose relations of production would be their future relations of distribution. There was here a shade of the ongoing, never-ending text (as voice record) in the *Trotsky Postcards* ²¹. In broad terms, the grease would be a sensing-device, sensing whatever the temperature conditions of its future environments might be. That is to say, the wetware of the Grease Work machine would, contra the conventional definition of art work requiring a stable syntax production, generate unstable syntactic incidents. Albeit like an ongoing Pollock painting production. The opposite of watching Pollock paint dry - not only paint that would for the foreseeable future not dry, but, should the temperature rise, might wett-en considerably. Thus some part of the machine, the grease, would continue to produce noticeable material changes in the machine, as it was distributed into its ongoing environment. A background to this work (or is it a foreground?) was, that whilst I continued to pull in fresh sources of reference, I also crossed over into territories I had been familiar with in the sixties and seventies - the old Bainbridge/Hurrell reference territory of Wiener, Pask, Minsky, Ashby, *et al.*

Greasing.

- 1) Grease the axle.
- 2) Grease the Henry Moore Medallion for proper art behavior.
- 3) Grease seriousness.
- 4) Grease the European Treasure House.
- 5) Grease The Wall.
- 6) Grease The Diamond.
- 7) Grease the Brit.
- 8) Grease Rock n' roll.
- 9) Grease consciousness.
- 10) Grease minimalism.
- 11) Grease God (in John Milton's vision heaven was landscaped—perhaps by God himself! It is rumoured God is still a he!)
- 12) Grease language (in John Milton's vision God spoke—from whom did God learn the language?)
- 13) Grease the autonomous surface.
- 14) Grease the materials of art.
- 15) Grease the practice.

Using grease.

- 1) The material of the avant-garde greasers.
- 2) Grease—the new material.
- 3) Grease as a repository of the potentially oppositional. Chortle! (Be serious now! Grease is entering the portals of serious art histories of the social referent.)
- 4) Grease as a disaffirming material—will it ever dry? I don't know, but I can find out. From Castrol for example. Castrol the art object consultants.
- 5) Grease is the perfect material for a successful art career.
- 6) Grease, the perfect material for the civilization of senior common room culture.
- 7) Grease is the perfect material for making copies.

Paragraphs on grease.

- 1) It is asserted by the wise guys of art criticism that representation (or is it figuration?) leads to conservatism of practice. This is true enough. But what are we to make of the figurative state of abstraction? Hoorah for our serious art historians of the social referents of autonomous surface, of conceptual audacity (swoon), of technical daring (double-swoon).
- 2) Grease is the perfect material for contemporary art practice. And how is this, we ask ourselves? Because grease is a perfect resume of the shift towards consumption as its own justification! Really!
- 3) Grease is the perfect material of socialist realism. Because of its working class associations. The local car mechanic. (but how about Formula 1, Silverstone, etc.? Within the next decade we will see the Leningrad Glasnost Grand Prix!) Please don't try to be ironic, rather try and make a noble stereotype out of the material of the car mechanic.
- 4) The attack on complacent dichotomies is complacent. Fake the attack! Grease it! Then make a double-fake! A double-fake! What's a double-fake?

Uses for grease.

- 1) Grease for the career.
- 2) Grease for the opportunity.
- 3) Grease for the going-on.
- 4) Grease for Dion diMucci.
- 5) Grease for the remembrance of the Great war—to keep the history slipping.
- 6) Grease for lessening the leaven of irony.
- 7) Grease for the sake of grease sales organizations.
- 8) Grease for democracy.
- 9) Grease for Tom Paulin's Permafrost breakfast.
- 10) Grease for the Revolution (being serious, but don't let them know you're being serious—the real test will come soon enough—and in an October not in an art practice. Grease to distinguish work from wishful thinking.)

Non-figuration is now a token. It takes its figurative place alongside the rest of figuration. This condition holds across the board regardless of whether work is two dimensional or three dimensional. Inside the putative autonomy of modern art the 2D/3D border can be crossed willy-nilly. It hardly constitutes a border.

A. Grease is: (essentially figurative?)

(1) Let to seep in

(2) Held in place by a painted structure (for example a trough).

Allegory. Narrative describing one subject to under the guise of another.

(3) Is an allegory of the convention, developed since Pollock, of accident in modern practise.

(4) Is an allegory on the one hand of the edge (frame) as both the defining condition of painting, and on the other hand, of the edge (say the trough) as the frame which frames the figurative incident. Grease seeped into the edge and perhaps onto the wall. Geometry, particularly since minimalism, seems to have been transformed into a figurative mode. In the Greaser Slat/Greaser Trough works this is presupposed. The works are an attempt to see what follows from a further articulation of this presupposition. The armature of the Slat/Trough works presupposes a by now largely implicit convention of reading geometry as a figurative mode.

B. More detail is:

(3) The grease catches incidents which fall between levels of representation. It is sometimes designed with (a) figures of figuration (e.g. Warhol's chari) and/or (b) figures of non-figuration, say a trough or veneered shape, or with a more general set of figurative references: for example a now stereotypical form like minimalism.

(4) Grease generates quite a lot of decorative and extraneous incident. It seems for example, to be physically situated across the border of two/three dimensions. An incident in extremis (especially in heat) would be the grease literally falling out of the painting into the world of the gallery, museum, studio, etc. Such a material is used allegorically too in this way. As an allegory of the fact that non-figuration is by now so familiar that the art audiences long ago learned continuity. Their fami-liar

reading of it, became familiar with it, remaindered it out as more figuration. It is remaindered out by a culture that asks only that its art be mute.

(5) Grease was sought out also in this body of work partially because it is hard to mark personally. In grease one person's "personal mark" will in a relatively short time, be pretty much like another's.

At least without a good deal of forensic technology.

(6) The materials of the work, say wood or veneer sandwiched or laminated, etc. tries to locate and reposition the paradox at the alleged boundary of figuration/non-figuration. Since conceptualism at least we have been past a point where the putative self-sufficiency of non-figurative work has been imploded as one of the conspicuous figurations of the modernist project. All the canons transmitted out since the high days of modernism have imploded – figuration, non-figuration, originality, authenticity, etc. No boundary seems either clear or, for that matter, safe.

Zones of accident, conventional since Pollock, are constricted and over determined by the now historical depth of their conventionalism. The dances around figure/ground, figurative/non-figurative are heavily choreographed, The logical contradiction inherent in the idea of a choreography of accident is seemingly ignored. Hard materials plus grease seems a way of talking about this state of affairs.

TERRY ACTOR

The analogy that I adopted when conceiving the *Grease Works* was the hardware/software distinction in computer science. I wanted to make a series of works in which the works would continue to produce themselves (or at least aspects of themselves) after they had left my (the artist's) relations of production. An early group of *Grease Works* was the Warhol Chair works, where the hardware/paint/trough construction is treated as the hardware upon which the software (grease) is implemented and runs. Grease, being the relatively volatile material it is, continued to shift and move according to such factors as variation in temperature, and how vigorously the work might be stored, hung, and shifted from one site to another. Accordingly, I conceived of the use of grease as the deployment of a continual software program.

Since I conceived of the given model of the artistic subject (this model first learned in my case in art school in the late 1950s) as running (implemented) in the body of the artist, then, accordingly, the works I made in the late eighties and early nineties I viewed as an attempt to increasingly focus upon the works as modeling the artistic subject himself/herself. It is clearer now than it was then that the *Grease Works* are a sustained attempt to make a work which is a kind of automaton, and to use grease as a kind of continuous moving agent of alteration long past when the work leaves the artist's studio and is therefore an agent of continuing production. In the later eighties and early nineties other series of works also preoccupied me and sometimes intertwined with the *Grease Works* (e.g. *Enola Gay Works*, *Mayor of Leipzig/Jacques Louis David Works*, *Mute Series*), and all four series had particular works that crossed into one or another of the other series. The boundaries between the various series are porous in this respect, with the software programs (grease) occasionally becoming intra-series works.

The later *Grease Works* (after early 1992) were lapped into a second software program possibility. The grease was the initial software program. The second program was the introduction of projected image technology onto the hardware/software technology. The first works to propose using this second software technology (projected image technology) were five or six late *Grease Works* drawings (*Two Software Greaser Nos. 1 to 6*, 1992–93). Many of the works to follow were designed to use the projected image and/or computer software text and image programs, and at this point, many of the works were left as drawings. The first work to be realized from the drawing stage using a projected image software program was *Work by a Split-Brain Artist* at the IMMA-Glen Dimplex Prize Nominees exhibition at the Irish Museum of Modern Art in Dublin in March 1994. This particular realization was based on a plan-drawing and notes, a characteristic form of my working process in this body of work. I consider these drawings/plans/notes just as significant work as I do installations, paintings, etc. Given a suitable opportunity I would like to realize a number, perhaps even all, of the variations of

these pieces. Although the projected image software program was fixed and repetitive in the Dublin version, on other future versions the program might be capable of changing hour by hour, or day by day, from site to site, etc. Such flexible programs I have yet to pursue. A computer software program continuously changing and developing its content—text, image, audio resource, whatever—is the aim of some of my current work.

The first work to use projected image software with a synchronized audio tape is *Terry Mirrors*. It was first installed at the exhibition *Circumstantial Evidence*, curated by David Green and Peter Seddon at the University of Brighton in November 1966. The slide program was synchronized with an audio tape (a monologue by Terry Mirrors about Terry Mirrors qua installation) that scrolled down a computer screen as text, the screen set into a tableaux upon which ran the projected image program. The text was also printed out in the space of the gallery.

These software entrants (implemented by whatever technology) are an attempt to model an artistic agent (subject). These works may be seen as representations of a representer. They make representations of an artist, or perhaps it should be called an 'artist'? Hence one way of looking at these works is as agents/subjects rather than as objects. If my current preoccupations with genetic algorithms, automata theory, etc. are at all predictive of future work, then they may entail more direct involvement in computer science/artificial intelligence/cognitive science than hitherto. One of the problems for me is that such engagement necessarily entails further study of areas of mathematics that I am just starting to approach. Such study is time consuming, and in my case at least, exhausting.

Along with constant production of drawings since 1992, I am making paintings that incorporate a computer monitor running a software program (usually a text) imbedded into the tableau. This feature has been a characteristic concern of certain works since 1996 and these works act as a kind of bridge, in the sense that it is securely tied into a technology (painting), the ontology of which safely chaperones the work as "art." As noted earlier, I count studies (notes, texts, drawings) as work equal to paintings, installations, etc. The idea that the work, or at least some of it, hangs both in and out of art has interested me for a long time. It seems to be a space where some productive questions might be raised.

Be this as it may qua painting and drawing (perhaps in this context they should be termed 'painting' and 'drawing'), it seems that both slide-projection software and computer software offer some purchase upon the notion of an agent that reflects and comments upon itself, including, obviously, the history of any given genre or technology. These reflexive and iterative functions seem to be solid reasons for furthering my work for—it should be stated clearly here—the purpose of developing the practice rather than as a career. Not the least of the historical aspects that the work may comment upon, is the avant-garde model of the artistic subject (AGMOAS) in all its burgeoning reproducible repetitive versions.

Excerpt from: Atkinson, Terry. “Avant-Garde III,” Unpublished, Artist’s Personal File, Leamington Spa, England, 2011.

APPRAISAL

I recently read a claim that Conceptual Art of the sixties “was one of the decisive movements of the twentieth century.” By which I take it is meant that conceptual art is a decisive movement in twentieth century art practice. In this same article a director of a famous museum of modern art, is quoted as saying that Conceptual Art “radically challenged notions of the art object.” [1] For the present staying with the idea that this claim is meant as some kind of compliment, it does, for me at least, turn out to be a back-handed one, since I think this claim seriously overestimates the long-term impact of sixties Conceptual Art in respect of what Conceptual Art might have achieved. Sixties Conceptual Art may have challenged notions of the art object, but, as things turned out, it did not challenge, radically or otherwise, notions of the avant-garde model of the artistic subject. But I guess hyperbole is a frequently occurring characteristic in the rhetoric of individuals whose institutional jobs require them to favorably represent the works the institutions acquire. It would be a perverse, or a very courageous, individual who mounted a serious social critique of the works he or she either purchases or accepts into the collection of the institution he or she is appointed to direct. Challenging the object in the sixties was relatively easy. Challenging the avant-garde model of the artistic subject (hereafter AGMOAS) has proved much more difficult. Still to this day, we await an adequate articulation of AGMOAS. It seems very unlikely that individuals, say museum directors, will mount a critique of the lauded model and characterizing virtue of twentieth century artists the museums are founded in order to collect. If Conceptual Art had anything going for it, it was those few brief few years in the late sixties when it sufficiently attempted to de-regulate the AGMOAS (not simply to attempt to revise, convert or expand the model) but an attempt to liquidate it. By the mid-seventies a conceptual artist was a pretty standard regulated version of the AGMOAS, thoroughly absorbed into the conventional and increasingly corporative twentieth century narrative of the avant-garde. By the eighties it was easy to see that the AGMOAS, and with it not least the alleged conceptual artist, was a managed public relations exercise, the art world political order of the day. [2] The Relations of Distribution (ROD) of the art world were

by then fully-fledged public relations instruments shaped for managing The Relations of Production (hereafter ROP) of the art world.

There are a number of prominent conditions that constitute the current managerial hegemony of the AGMOAS. The first is the class nature of mass communication itself. This has a long post-World War II history. This history warrants some further commentary below, but to summarize it the following is worth noting. The center of both the ROD and ROP of the art world shifted in the fifties from Paris to New York. It was a shift from a French speaking culture to an English speaking culture, and whilst French capitalists were never imperialist slouches it is a fact that in the twentieth century English became the most emphatic language of corporate capitalism. By the sixties, the managerial structure of contemporary art was an English-speaking managerial hegemony, and it was already showing every sign of morphing into the Corporate Tyranny.

By the early sixties the CIA had invested, since the late forties, millions of dollars in the Western cultural front of the Cold War. It is worth reiterating that not only had the regulatory authorities of the AGMOAS settled and become established but these regulating authorities were now English-speaking; a language change that would ensure the dominance of corporate culture as the dominant center of both the ROP and ROD of art.

More will be recounted further on in these remarks on this change from a French-speaking culture to an English-speaking culture and its implications for the attainment of a corporately dominated culture, but I’d like to first focus on the struggle in the US itself between the representatives of labour collectivism and the representatives of corporate individualism. The aim of the latter it should be remembered is to fashion a collective subject who rejects the notion of a collective subject. In the US, this increasingly depended on who gained greater access to the emergent mass communications in the US in the two decades after World War II. As it turned out, and not surprisingly in a capitalist culture, the class nature of mass communications was decided by which class had the greater financial resources, for financial resources were a gate not only to access, but also ownership, and the character of its consequent development. [3] In response to the Great Depression, Roosevelt’s New Deal shifted the productive potential of the US economy away from private enterprise toward government structured organizations and an increasingly strong labour movement. The federal programmes

became more concentrated and reliant on organized labour as the US was pulled into World War II after Pearl Harbor. By the time of victory in 1945, the organized US labour movement was a powerful industrial force that maintained its strength throughout the forties and into the fifties. During this time corporate institutional ideology, which had brought on the crash of 1929 and the resultant Depression, lost much of the power and impetus it enjoyed in the twenties until the end of World War II. But the corporate fight began immediately after the end of WWII and gathered in strength and in deceptive financial manipulation throughout the late forties and fifties. It was patently clear by 1946 that corporate interest in the US was out to change the political climate of the legacy that Roosevelt’s administrations and the requirements of organizing a wartime economy had placed upon US economic structures since the corporate led disaster of the Crash of 1929. In 1956, for example:

“J. Warren Kinsman, chairman of National Association of Manufacturers PR Advisory Committee and vice-president of DuPont, reminded businessmen that ‘in the everlasting battle for the minds of men’ the tools of PR were the only weapons ‘powerful enough to arouse public opinion sufficiently to check the steady, insidious and current drift towards socialism.’” Well before this in a January 1950 radio broadcast, six months before the opening of the Korean War, Guy Nunn of the United Automobile Worker warned Detroit area workers of this “highly organized and systematic attempt to poison the minds of workers against liberal government.” Again, in January 1956, Kenneth R. Miller of the National Association of Manufacturers proclaimed that:

“One of the gravest threats to management’s right to manage is the vastly increased size and power of organized labor.” This latter sentiment could be taken right out of the mouths of Reagan, Thatcher and Tim Bell thirty years later in the eighties. [4] It was patently clear in 1946 that corporate interest in the US was out to change the political climate of the legacy that Roosevelt’s administrations and the requirements of organizing a wartime economy had placed upon US economic structures since the corporate led disaster of the Crash of 1929.

This was the corporate revisionary campaign to restore worker ideology to the pre-1929 Crash state and resurrect an order of society in which widening income inequality would become accepted as the norm regardless of the standard capitalist recessions. It was to be

the springboard for the entire direction of the US economy which reached its most extreme and ardent corporate form in the noughties until the sub-prime mortgage crash in 2008. By 1960 the widening income inequality pattern was well established. The idea was to remove from the corporate concept of market any restraint that Rooseveltian and wartime political and social institutions had placed upon it. By the seventies this corporate mission was more or less fulfilled. From the fifties through to 2008, accumulation of wealth occurred much more through dispossession than through investment. Throughout the US the wealthy enhanced their position by simply appropriating a greater share of existing wealth at the expense of the rest of society. The US led concept of the AGMOAS was not an inconsiderable cultural player in this appropriation. As it turned out in 2008 even the investment part of the economy fell apart.[5] However it is important to relate that one thing the forties corporate raiders were happy to maintain and extend from the inherited World War II organization of the US economy and state apparatus was the national security state. The CIA was created in 1947, as was the Joint Chiefs of Staff. Both bodies were formed to consolidate and extend the reach of security services and military organizations into the US state. Thus the state formed legacy from World War II was not a more powerful labour representation and greater income equality as it seemed might be the case in 1945, but greater security and military intrusion in the US state apparatus. By the time of the invasion of Iraq in 2003 the military security state apparatus and corporate profit making were fully joined at the gun-slinging hip. This is the most marked example of what Naomi Klein calls disaster capitalism. The character of disaster capitalism can be summarized as something like: inflict a disaster on a culture and country, say Iraq, in order to create as near as possible an unimpeded field for US (or Western) corporate investment and profit. Military expenditure, one of the big contract resources for corporate expansion, was, and remains, a good index of the increase in income inequality. On the Western cultural arts front a significant part of this corporate tyranny was the increased corporate regulation of the AGMOAS [6] Corporate power by the eighties had so vastly increased in confidence and impudence to sufficiently turn into the Corporate Tyranny. This was due in no small measure to the forty year long close liaison between corporate power and CIA power.

A second condition of the highly managed character of the AGMOAS is the expansion of the established managerial class in the art

institutions themselves. An expansion not only required of the old bureaucracies as new art institutions were built and older ones extended, but also, from the entry of a new managerial class into the art milieu in the 1980s. These art consultants operated not only intra-art world but in an advisory role with the status of ‘experts’ as the term consultancy suggests, between the art world and civic government and corporate formations, not least in the realm of what has come to be called ‘public art’. Art consultants, again as the name implies (consultancy in this context is a catch all term), were consulted in matters of designing civic cultural projects and recommending, commissioning and placing art works in public spaces. They operated as advisers, gauging the feasibility of projects and the use of both corporate and civic funds in such projects. Moreover by the eighties civic funds passed increasingly through and into the hands of corporate formations. In respect of the outcomes of the built urban environment the art consultants are an integral part of the corporate conduit. Whether naively or not, they are active agents of the Corporate Tyranny. It should be noted that some members of this new managerial class wore two hats, they were not infrequently both consultants and artists/art teachers. Certainly since the sixties both artists and art teachers have habitually, and predictably as increasing receivers of corporate largesse, taken a considerable part in shaping the AGMOAS into its current servility in front of corporate power. By the time this new managerial class of art consultants emerged the AGMOAS was already heavily and increasingly corporately regulated and manipulated, but like any class of managers the consultants were eager to promote their function within the corporate hierarchy. This kind of careerism gave and continues to give even more impetus to the corporate regulation of the AGMOAS.

Characteristic of the two previous conditions is the inflationary liberal rhetoric that has been, and continues to be, issued on behalf of the AGMOAS. Standing in sharp contrast to this rhetoric is a third condition that is particularly applicable to British art institutions starting in the 1980s, although it does strongly intertwine with the second condition outlined above. Following the US pattern, British art institutions, and this includes British art schools, became more and more dependent on corporate funds during the eighties. This inevitably meant these institutions tailored their projects and bureaucratic shape to their corporate masters. The ideology of corporate business increasingly shaped the ideology of the art institution and consequently the resources of ideological

transmission in which they were engaged, not least the art schools. The cognitive traffic of the art schools is increasingly the cognitive traffic of corporate exchange. Fine art degrees now are shaped much more closely to some degrees in art business studies—a kind of art practice business degree. Degrees are oriented more to avant-garde product-imitation and less to critical independence. Most outcomes of collector friendly degree courses, which seem to be not unusual these days, are exercises in public relations. The art schools’ fear of ideology is itself ideology since the claim to be non-ideological, to transcend ideology, is itself an ideological claim. It echoes the ideology of corporate business which has always claimed ideology to be grubby and presented all left wing political opinion as such and claimed itself, corporate political opinion, to be above it. This latter claim is itself a febrile symptom of the ideological character of corporate self-interest. It is in this framework that the common art school claim that art transcends a grubby link to social concerns is easily absorbed into the ideology of corporate business transaction. The Corporate Tyranny is just as ideological as any socialist collectivism, and more unjust than many since it is symptomatic of a society in which an unequal and income-widening gap is the norm.

A fourth condition assails the AGMOAS though it is different in character from the three conditions set out above since it is claimed that this condition rests upon certain limits of human cognition and perception. Its effects are strongly intertwined with and contributory to the social conditions produced by the other three conditions, not least because the communities addicted to the AGMOAS manifest a tacit refusal to admit there may be such a limit. If this fourth condition is the case, then it is a condition placed upon the AGMOAS as much by our biological limits as our social conditions. Thus, if it is the case then this limit, until it is admitted, is equally as debilitating as any of the social conditions. Thus once again, if it is the case then it is a permanent condition. Since it is a biological limit then any amount of social change will have no effect upon it. Steve Gould, with regards to the ‘visual’ arts, describes what he argues to be this limit as follows:

“This perpetual striving for novelty may grant us joy forever if a limitless array of potential styles awaits discovery and exploitation. But perhaps the world is not so bounteous. Perhaps we have already explored most of what even a highly sophisticated audience can deem accessible.”

Gould is suggesting a limit. He calls the point of this limit the ‘right wall’ and he explains it in contradistinction to another point that he calls, logically, the ‘left wall’. This latter point is not a limit but a starting point. The ‘right wall’ refers to cultural change and the limit that governs it; the ‘left wall’ refers to Darwinian evolution and is the point from which it evolves. Gould insists the two processes are distinct. His usage here can be summarized through another quote as follows:

“The baseball example speaks of an encroachment upon a right wall of human limitations; the history of life invokes an expansion away from a left wall of minimal complexity. In this second example, I viewed life as expanding passively into a rightward domain of increasing elaboration—but I never addressed the principle that some constraint might eventually limit the spread by acting as a right wall.”

Gould’s baseball example suggests a physical limit, whilst the ‘novelty’ example with regards to the visual arts suggests a cognitive limit. But perhaps it is worth reminding ourselves that the cognitive limit is established by the structure of the brain. Presuming there is indeed a right wall and the right wall has been reached, then, at best, all current fine art practice would be a kind of cultural maintenance. This seems to be something like the situation Gould is proposing in respect of his penchant for classical music. If it is the case that fine art practice is cultural maintenance then there is no such thing as the cultural progress when and where it is suggested by the current application of the concept of the avant-garde. Thus with this view fine art practice at its best is a repetition of maximal excellence. Warhol is, at best, only as good as Manet, and Manet is at best only as good as Goya, and so on. This poses a telling question for the concept of the avant-garde. The question then arises as to what more precisely the concept is aimed at. Since devotees of the concept of the avant-garde have never seemed to be very clear about the distinction between cultural maintenance and cultural progress, then can cultural maintenance and cultural progress be counted as the same thing? [7] In much of the writing which concerns the concept of the avant-garde in the nineteenth and twentieth centuries and up to the present there is a strong implicit suggestion that the AGMOAS is a progressive model of the artistic subject. The nomenclature of ‘challenging’ and ‘radical’ in characterizing artists is a symptom of this presupposition. With regards to the visual or creative arts, Gould expresses the following view.

“... then a third category of creative arts does face a potentially painful dilemma based on our decision to adopt an ethic of innovation that awards greatness only to those who devise a novel style (a criterion not always followed in Western history, but very strong at the moment).”

As stated above, the notion of the artist being ‘radical’, ‘challenging’, etc. presumes the AGMOAS to be progressive in some fairly marked sense. This prescriptive idea of being progressive has nothing to do with aspiring to the achievement of a more just society or a more cognitively substantial critique of the practice as practice, the latter of which might well be a critical contributor to the former. To the contrary, the application of the notion of the artist as career celebrity contributes to more than just the maintenance of an unjust society. It is an instrument of its further expansion. The primary economic characteristic of such a society is an ever widening income gap (and it is worth keeping in mind that in a society organized according to neoliberalist dogma every aspect of life falls under the concept of economic attribute). The AGMOAS has been actively used by corporate power to promote this kind of society. For the purveyors of the AGMOAS, to be progressive is not simply to merely believe that the range of accessible styles cannot ever be exhausted, it is to believe, at the same time, that a cognitively substantial style is not even a necessary condition required of the AGMOAS. One way to attempt to sidestep this issue is to claim that ‘style’ rests only on ‘visuals’ and not on language-formulated questioning, where ‘visual’ is held out in contradistinction to ‘cognitive’. But obviously accessible styles and cognitively substantial styles may not be the same thing, not least because we can always ask, accessible to whom? Remote as it may appear to cultural experts, it is perhaps at least worth acknowledging the possibility that styles accessible to a cultural expert and held by the cultural expert to be inaccessible to those the cultural expert may rank as a disinterested agent or an outright philistine, may be no more cognitively substantial than the styles accessible to the alleged philistine. This is because the styles valued by the cultural expert become repetitious as they approach the right wall. Or to put it another way; styles valued by the cultural expert, as they become repetitious and approach the right wall, may be no more cognitively substantial than those styles valued by those who the cultural expert ranks as philistines. It is difficult for the cultural expert when s/he frames it in this way to avoid being condescending. It seems before you can ask the question ‘Accessible to whom?’ you must

answer the question ‘How is the value laden term ‘cognitively substantial’ to be defined?’ There does seem to be a presumption in the claim that good or great art is ‘challenging’ and ‘radical’. In some way, ‘cognitively substantial’ work is granted the equivalency of ‘imaginatively substantial’ work. All too often, in the art schools no attempt is made to define such terms as ‘imaginative’ and ‘creative’ and therefore no attempt is made to grade them. This passes over the problem of what ‘imaginatively substantial’ may mean, in the sense that imaginative activity is, presumably, a form of cognitive activity.

The claim that being avant-garde implicitly means being radical is an art world mantra. Whether such a claim can now offer up anything in the way of cognitively substantial work is what is in dispute. According to Gould, reaching or approaching the ‘right wall’ is what he calls reaching or approaching a ‘full house.’ Nevertheless, the concept of the avant-garde does seem to represent a belief that there is such a thing as cultural progress and staying within Gould’s terminology but contradicting his argument, there is, according to champions of the AGMOAS, always a ‘new house’ to be built. Thus the matter seems to turn on whether the concept of the avant-garde can be re-assessed and redefined, or whether the concept of the avant-garde can be ditched altogether and the model of the artistic subject reinvented on a different base, or whether it can, in some way, be re-evaluated such that it requires only cultural maintenance, which, in turn, may then be held to be the same thing as reinvention which, I would argue, is just a description of the present state of the AGMOAS, despite the rhetoric of its advocates that it is ‘challenging’, ‘radical’, whatever. At this point the fourth condition of Gould’s biological limit becomes subject to interface with the sociopolitical character of the other three conditions. Suppose the AGMOAS is primarily formed by sociopolitical arrangements and not biological limits. Such a formation would pose questions about such matters as both the concept of ‘natural talent’ in relation to the AGMOAS and the oft-claimed universal transcendence of art objects. The formation also poses the question: why aspire to become an artist in relation to the AGMOAS? The first raises the question of whether or not the term ‘natural’ is a socially constituted category whilst the second is clearly a social definition. Suppose in secondary school a pupil is claimed by her teacher to be ‘naturally talented’ in, say, drawing and painting; then is the matter of being able to draw or to paint ipso facto a necessary but not sufficient condition of attaining the status of

being radical or progressive? As suggested a couple of lines back, attached to questions such as these is the further question: what is a necessary and sufficient condition of attaining the status of being radical? Or can notions of such conditions still be cogently applied to the AGMOAS? Whatever the answers to questions such as these, it is the case in natural Darwinian evolution that there is no movement toward greater complexity, no positive movement towards progress. Gould puts it as follows:

“The most impressive contrast between natural evolution and cultural change lies embedded in the major fact of our history. We have no evidence that the modal form of human bodies or brains has changed at all in the past 100,000 years—a standard phenomenon of stasis for successful and widespread species, and not (as popularly conceived) an odd exception to an expectation of continuous and progressive change. The Cro-Magnon people who painted the caves at Lascaux and Altamira some fifteen thousand years ago are us...”

Thus it seems that Titian, Turner, Picasso et al. achieved whatever they achieved with the same brain power as an artist (if we agree they are artists) who preceded them by fifteen thousand years or so. Perhaps then it may be that we will have to be content with the repetition of maximal excellence. But the fact that we can conceive of an avant-garde seems to suggest that as a species we are not content with such repetition regardless of whether we can overcome it. To be so content with maintaining our culture seems to suggest something contra our curiosity as a species. But the contest between collectivism and individualism, and the confusion it engenders, remains imbedded in the sociopolitical conditions of the AGMOAS. Certain of the cultural mandarins who promoted the American version of the AGMOAS came out firmly against socialist collectivism and were in close liaison, whether they knew it or not, with the CIA. As far as the culture bosses at the CIA were concerned the AGMOAS was a Cold War instrument and had a specific important advantage attached to it, the individuals conforming to the AGMOAS did not have to be cleared for security purposes. Such individuals need not necessarily be, but could be, entirely innocent of their manipulation by the CIA. And those, if any, who were aware of being manipulated by the CIA either did not see it as manipulation and may well have approved of it, or did not care, at least in the sense that they gave, for example, greater priority to the exposure of their work being promoted, than they did of disapproving of

being manipulated. Thus, as suggested above, there is a paradoxical sense in which corporate collectivism promoted the corporately collective version of individualism in the service of attempting to gain corporate collective supremacy. Many of the artists who came to prominence as Abstract Expressionists had previously worked on projects set up by Roosevelt’s New Deal and some had been members of the American Communist Party. The changing social framework which powered the move from socialist collectivism to corporate collectivism seems to have been hardly noticed since embracing and championing individualism seems to be the name of both the game of disguising the embracing of corporate collectivism and the game of embracing and allegedly developing the AGMOAS. This embrace can easily incorporate individuals developing or holding out a liberal political outlook. As far as the more conscious party in this transaction, the CIA, was concerned, this was a happy coincidence. Many examples of this post WWII historical condition are now on hand, and have been on hand for many years. Eva Cockcroft’s essay showed this. Perhaps one of the most conspicuous ones concerns the roles of both Nelson Rockefeller and Clement Greenberg promotion of Abstract Expressionism. During the late forties Abstract Expressionism had been fiercely attacked in the houses of the US government. One particularly vocal attack dog was a Republican Senator from Missouri named George Dondero. Dondero declared “All modern art is communistic, Cubism aims to destroy by designed disorder. Futurism aims to destroy by the machine myth...Dadaism aims to destroy by aping the primitive and insane. Abstractionism aims to destroy by the creation of brainstorm... Surrealism aims to destroy by the denial of reason.” Dondero’s claims were shared by a cabal of other figures within Congress and were sympathetically and widely reported in the conservative press. Modern artists were proclaimed to be ‘ultramodern’ and to be unaware of being instruments of the Kremlin. This latter claim emerges as particularly ironic considering what the last thirty years has disclosed about the role of the CIA in using modern art and the AGMOAS as an instrument of their Cold War confrontation. The CIA sidestepped the issue of confronting the likes of Dondero by adopting measures that were clandestine in relation to such philistine conservatives. They also wished to avoid being publicly linked to any of the American artists who brandished a liberal leftie rhetoric. It was an act of avoidance which was linked to the need to avoid confrontation with the likes of Dondero. Thus they were compelled to act clandestinely when promoting modern

artists and especially Abstract Expressionists. For the CIA, opposing Stalinist socialist realism was worth a serious pitch. Frances Stonor Saunders interviewed a CIA agent Donald Jameson involved in the pitch. He reported the following.

“We recognized that this was the kind of art that did not have anything to do with socialist realism and made socialist realism look even more stylized and more rigid and confined than it was. And the relationship was exploited in some of the exhibits. Moscow in those days was very vicious in its denunciation of any kind of non-conformity to its own very rigid patterns. So one could quite adequately and accurately reason that anything they criticized that much and that heavy-handedly was worth support one way or another. Of course, for matters of this sort [it] could only have been done through the organizations of the operations of the CIA at two or three removed, so that there wouldn’t be any question of having to clear Jackson Pollock, for example, or do anything that would involve these people in the organization—they’d just be added to the end of the line...If you had to use people who considered themselves one way or another closer to Moscow than to Washington, well, so much the better perhaps.”

As early as 1939, Clement Greenberg started to attempt to sort out the rationale for what he called enlightened patronage in his article *Avant-Garde and Kitsch in Partisan Review*. Whilst the article bears the imprint of Greenberg’s solacious 30s Marxism, it also entreats an entry point for enlightened patronage, which in the late 40s was soon to be used by the CIA. One of the most promising openings for the CIA to become ‘enlightened patrons’ was provided by Moscow’s cumbersome reaction to modern art, and these ‘enlightened patrons’ were not only fronts but often honorary and frequently active agents of the CIA. Both the ones who were aware and the one’s who were not aware of being conduits of CIA patronage and governance, constituted, by the late 40s, a considerable part of Greenberg’s ‘umbilical cord of gold.’ [8] Greenberg could not, apparently, envisage the possibility of the ‘umbilical cord of gold’ (ROD) regulating and defining the ROP. He saw it as a separate and discriminating but necessarily comfortable (that is non intrusive upon the ROP) distribution system. Whilst writing as if the ‘umbilical cord of gold’ follows the production of the artist, there is ample evidence that artists follow the ‘umbilical cord of gold.’ Not bad for a person who had once guarded Trotsky. Socialist Realism was one of the specific targets of

the reproaches of American art cultural mandarins. A clear CIA imperative was– if you think you can beat them then don’t join them. Socialist Realism was an easily located target not so much because it was so servile but because it was such a low-grade cognitive practice. In the wider culture game much more elusive to locate by American art cultural mandarins with alleged socialist sympathies was the role of the various CIA cultural fronts. But then Greenberg himself was in the CIA line of agency, whether or not at first he was aware of it. Certainly it would be hard to believe he was not fully aware of it, at least after the mid-sixties when the magazine *Encounter* was exposed as a CIA culture front in a very public array. But the case for Greenberg knowing earlier rests on the fact that the Museum of Modern Art (hereafter MoMA) in New York was a CIA cultivated institution, not least because of Nelson Rockefeller’s strong links to the agency. The Rockefeller Foundation itself was one of a number of funding fronts for the CIA. MoMA was co-founded in 1929 by Abby Aldrich Rockefeller, Nelson Rockefeller’s mother. Stonor Saunders notes the following.

“... (Nelson called it ‘Mommy’s Museum’). Nelson was a keen supporter of Abstract Expressionism, which he referred to as ‘free enterprise painting’. Over the years his private collection swelled to over 2,500 works. Thousands more covered the walls of buildings belonging to the Rockefeller owned Chase Manhattan Bank.”

From MoMA a whole network of CIA connections stretched out to embrace, regulate and corporately absorb the AGMOAS throughout the Cold War. This now, viewed from the early part of the twenty first century, is one of glaring concrete outcomes of the transfer of ‘art capital’ from Paris to New York (both in Marx’s sense and in the sense of ‘the capital city of’). During World War II Rockefeller had led an American government intelligence agency titled the Coordinator of Inter-American Affairs (CIAA). In the fifties both Tom Braden and Allen Dulles briefed Rockefeller on the agency’s projects and aims. In 1954 Rockefeller was appointed Eisenhower’s special adviser on Cold War strategy and he chaired the Planning Coordination Group, the function of which was to oversee all Security Council decisions, including CIA covert operations. John Hay Whitney (known as Jock) was a close friend of Rockefeller and a long term associate in the CIAA during World War II. Whitney was also a long imbedded trustee of MoMA. Whitney had strong links to the CIA. One of those links was William Jackson, one

of the agency’s deputy directors (1950-51). William Burden was also a close associate of Rockefeller, working for the CIAA during the war. He was also president of the Fairfield Foundation, another CIA front. Burden became President of MoMA in 1956. Burden ensured Rene d’Harnancourt was given a near autonomous status in deciding what kind of operations the Museum should conduct. D’Harnacourt remained as a Director at MoMA until 1967. Frances Stonor Saunders’ book seems to prove beyond a doubt that MoMA was a CIA culture front from the mid-forties right up until the collapse of the Soviet Union in 1989. But, as already stated earlier in these remarks, Eva Cockroft’s article, written in 1974, was an earlier piece of convincing research which made a forceful argument that MoMA was a CIA front institution.

NOTES

1. Glenn D. Lowry, Director of MoMA, New York.

2. From its earliest days, Conceptual Art perhaps had an uncomfortably close relation to promotion by logo and branding. Moves such as alleged expanded-object and post-object (text works for example) were heavily marketed as a kind of furor-image of the concept of the avant-garde as ‘progressive’ and ‘radical’.. Texts requiring what might be called the heavier type of cognitive application were absorbed into a brand promoted as, say, post-object. Cognitive work on the text took a lower position than identity of object-type. At this point branding of work type became more important than study of work—obsessive career promotion began to take priority over a cognitively worked practice.

3. There has been no more glaring and, in the end, more exposed a case of the abuses that an overly centralised neoliberal control of the media can effect than the case of the Murdoch family’s ownership of News Corporation, which they intended to use as the springboard to make their case for ownership of BSkyB. James Murdoch’s attack on and claim moral supremacy over the BBC in his address at the Edinburgh festival a few years ago is now starkly historically contrasted with hacking the phone of Millie Dowler by his media hoodlums at News Corporation.

4. Tim Bell, now Baron Bell of Belgravia, mandarin of the advertising industry, helped found Saatchi and Saatchi, leaving in 1987, to found his own agency. Bell was a close adviser to Margaret Thatcher in all her election campaigns. He was seconded to the National Coal Board during the National Union of Mineworkers strike of 1984-85, where he was virulently active in encouraging the non-striking miners in Nottinghamshire (let’s not mince words with Baron Bell—the Notts scabs). The latter, it should be remembered, soon after the end of the strike, suffered the same fate as their striking opponents. Bell was noted for his special manipulative encouragement of the anti-strike activist known as “Silver Birch,” whose real name is Chris Butcher. During the strike, and maybe still for those who are old enough to remember, in the South Yorkshire mining villages where I originated, as I was constantly reminded when on visits to my mother who still lived there at that time, Silver Birch was known as “Dutch Elm Disease.” He was promoted and funded by rabid free-marketeers and neoliberals, not least the Daily Mail. Just to press a certain point, Baron Bell has carried out work for the Pinochet Foundation.

5. The dreams of the neoliberals seemingly never stop. Today capitalist economic forecasts remain increasingly gloomy. The British economy during the course of the writing of this essay has undergone a double dip recession. The Bank of England predicts a decade of, at best, further economic sluggishness. Many banks, it turns out, have been fixing the LIBOR rate to their advantage and it follows, obviously, to the disadvantage of small businesses and ordinary punters. The neoliberal culture turns out to rest on preserving and increasing the interests of the wealthy through sharp financial practices and not a little fraud. Whilst through all this many neoliberals have, reluctantly, forfeited their bonuses, just to compound matters a majority of the British people’s elected representatives refuse a public enquiry into the wangling of the LIBOR rate. The matter of sharp banking practices being investigated by politicians is yet another neoliberal dream come true since it keeps the interests of the banking class within the orbit of the political class. At the present juncture, there are only nods and

winks toward actually changing the system. What change seems to amount to is the replacing of one figure by another to occupy the identical job within an identical capitalist ideological framework.

6. David Harvey notes one vivid event in the Corporate Tyranny’s investment in cultural projects as follows: “ They also invest in cultural capital through sponsorship of museums and all manner of cultural activities (thus making the so-called ‘cultural industries’ a favoured strategy for urban economic development). When Lehman Brothers tanked, the MoMA in New York lost a third of its sponsorship income.” (David Harvey, *The Enigma of Capital and the Crisis of Capitalism*, Profile Books Ltd, London, 2010.)

Harvey describes the relation between corporately supported cultural projects and the general urbanization of capitalist culture as follows: “Quality of urban life has become a commodity for those with money, as has the city itself in a world where consumerism, tourism, niche marketing, cultural and knowledge based industries, as well as a perpetual resort to the economy of the spectacle, have become major aspects of urban political economy. With an economy that now relies more and more on consumerism and consumer sentiment as its driving force (it accounts for 70% of the economy in the contemporary United States, compared to 20% in the nineteenth century), the organization of consumption through urbanization has become absolutely central to capitalism’s dynamics.” (David Harvey, *The Enigma of Capital and the Crisis of Capitalism*, Profile Books Ltd, London, 2010.)

It is in the phenomenon described in the latter passage cited from Harvey that the burgeoning boom in expanding and building Museums of Contemporary Art during the nineties and early noughties can be accounted as an integral part, perhaps flagship projects, of “the organization of consumption through urbanization”. The ‘ace café’ projective item, seemingly obligatory for every new or developed MoMA project, is perhaps one of the clearest demonstrations of the relation between contemporary art culture and the “organization of consumption through urbanization”. Tate Modern, for example, exhibits (perhaps a pun is intended) the entire set of characteristics noted by Harvey; consumerism, tourism, niche marketing, display of the products of the cultural and knowledge based industries and, not least, the economy of the spectacle. The Turbine Hall itself and the projects realized in it are a pretty vehement example of the latter.

7. The distinction between cultural maintenance and cultural progress is not widely drawn, nor discussed, in day-to-day art school practice. The concept of progress itself is subject to little, if any, analysis, whilst the arguments and discussions about which artist is and which is not ‘progressive’ occupies countless hours and columns of print. There is a tacit framework imbedded, since at least the turn of the nineteenth century into the twentieth, behind all this chatter that there is an achieved model of the artistic subject that is progressive. Frequently maintaining the culture is presumed, invariably undeclared, to be progressing the culture. The distinction between cultural maintenance and cultural progress perhaps warrants much more concentrated attention than it is presently given.

8. Greenberg seems to have first coined this memorable phrase in his essay *Avant-Garde and Kitsch* in Partisan Review in 1939. Despite later withdrawing from the full ramifications of his argument in this essay the art world-cum-art market has tended to demonstrate the power of wealthy collectors as an ‘umbilical cord of gold’ with the art world supinely collaborating in the process of ensuring the increasing prominence of the neoliberalist finance capital funded equation, artists as celebrities = artists who are wealthy, thus mirroring the social framework of another part of the cultural industries, the entertainment industries. There does seem, especially since the eighties, to be some strong connection between economies producing wealthy celebrity artists via wealthy collectors and the neoliberal view that money can and should be made out of money.

and Nietzsche in this—precisely because it hovered constantly, constitutively, on the edge of complete assimilation to an upper-class ethos of aesthetic novelty, refined cuisine, ‘daring’ entertainment. The closeness was a threat, and most artists succumbed to it.” These war works describe both the grunts in the trenches and the history painting as belonging to one and the same class system. Put frankly, the subject of these war works is more the ideological arrangement of art and history than it is war. Perhaps it seems perverse to use limbless grunts to discuss art, but Atkinson would argue that Conceptualism’s exclusion of political or militaristic labor has been far more harmful.

Between 1974 and the mid 1980s Atkinson produced several distinct series of drawings and paintings that proposed the figuring of histories both “hot” and “cold.” The hottest emerged in response to the maelstrom of an imminent right-wing political culture. Take the *Blue Skies* series and its channeling of neocolonial exploitation; or the “Irish Works” and their phantasmagorias of Republican paramilitaries wiring plastic-bag explosives in bunkers in Armagh; or the “History Snap/ Happy Snap” series of family vacation snapshots, burdened with the portent of nuclear war. The “betting and trying” of these works, the transition between the distant event and the newly synthesized and transmitted reportage, led Atkinson to conceive of himself as some kind of “information processor” or “semantic engine,” whose production was written in to a historical feedback loop. His embrace in the WWI works of the expressive resources “of a proxy ‘Socialist Realism’” made way in the early to mid 1980s for a more “mechanized” conception of the artist Terry Atkinson. The subsequent paintings and texts became “some kind of prosthetic device linked... to my body, the producer.”

It is at this juncture that the material of grease made its way into Atkinson’s work. Searching for a way to further the analogy of the “semantic engine” as an autonomous program—what one might call today a “media system”—he landed on the “visceral spreads and emissions” of grease. This volatile material

offered a means to convert “the image/voice/text residue” of the history works into a more explicit concern with “inscription...and a kind of mark-recording art-grunt.” The exhibition contains six examples. Fabricated on site, these Greasers consist of standardized construction materials and petroleum grease. The majority are previously unrealized and are based on a number of theoretical propositions and sketches Atkinson worked on between the late 1980s and mid 1990s. Monumentally minimalist and geometric, the works are undeniably ‘art grunt’ compared to the verbose Atkinson we find in the drawings and paintings. They are an attempt at trying to model the artistic subject through basic materiality and crude automata. Adopting the hardware/software analogy of computer science, their shaped wood slats serve as primitive motherboards into which the unstable materiality of axle grease, the “wetware,” is inserted. In later works, such as *Two Software Greaser 1*, a second software component is added in the form of a projected, scrolling text, which reads like a didactic explication of the terms and conditions of the work and its exhibition:

- C4 At an appropriate temperature grease will turn to a liquidy oil state.
- C5 Abu Dhabi is the largest oil producer in the United Arab Emirates.
- C6 The Abu Dhabi Investment Authority (ADIA), currently estimated to be worth \$875 Billion, is the world’s wealthiest sovereign fund in terms of total asset value.
- C7 The Human Rights Watch report titled “*The Island of Happiness*”: *Exploitation of Migrant Workers on Saadiyat Island, Abu Dhabi*.
- C8 A work made of grease (that is, uncontained) can, no doubt, be curated and exhibited—with suitable temperature control and a stable physical environment it may perhaps even enter a permanent collection, where it may be absorbed by the Corporate Tyranny.

This text is an excerpt from an iteration of *Two Software Greaser 1*, as shown at mumok in Vienna in 2013. Open-ended, it is scratched out and re-written each time *Two Software Greaser 1* is shown, suggesting the accumulative nature of the work’s potential readings.

Unlike the drawings and paintings, the greasers are not static and suggest a different form of figuring history. They are autonomously “self-reporting,” by which to mean, the work reports its own production and distribution. The volatility of the grease, the environmental factors such as temperature variation, or the movement of the work from the floor to the wall, or one site to another, means the work continues to change once Atkinson has relinquished control. The hardware frames the movement of the grease as a figurative gesture, mimicking the convention of the accident in abstract painting, those marks made without rules, without any notion of ‘the painting’ preceding the painting. Atkinson puts it simply, “the greased troughs generate quite a lot of decorative and extraneous incident.”

What remains at stake here for Atkinson is a critique of how artists arrive at not only aesthetics, but identities. The Greasers evoke the idea that the “given model of the artistic subject” runs “implemented in the body of the artist.” This is a confusing idea at first. For Atkinson, artistic subjecthood is an overbearing convention that pre-empts decisions to make art, or to be an artist. It is a construct that is deeply tied to social, economic and political relations. He highlights a specific construction of this artistic subjectivity as having dominated the development of twentieth-century Western culture, what he terms the “Avant-Garde Model of Artistic Subjectivity” or AGMOAS for short. Atkinson has been writing about the AGMOAS since the early 2000s, though versions of this paradigm have appeared in his writing since the mid-1970s.

In these texts Atkinson has increasingly articulated his own biographical position within the narrative of the AGMOAS. He has also made apparent the model’s intrinsic links to the rise of neo-liberalism. The year 1974 loosely coincides with the full dissolution of the gold standard, the advent of a fully floating currency, and the last gasps of a growing welfare state in the UK linked to a Labour government that within five years was unceremoniously banished from power by Margaret Thatcher. The subsequent

unchecked growth of speculation and privatization coincided with the construction of new forms of labor, and new notions of the working subject. For Atkinson this is far from irrelevant; the “progressive,” “radical,” and “challenging” artist, the defacto “Avant-Garde Model of Artistic Subjectivity” is a nascent neo-liberal entrepreneur, a *businessy* artist, who he claims, with characteristic Chomskyian aplomb, is well part of the Corporate Tyranny. In tune with the bureaucratic aura of the acronym, he surmises: “The AGMOAS is now a corporate audit.”

Terry Atkinson was born in 1939. He lives in Leamington Spa, England with his wife, artist Sue Atkinson, with whom he has frequently collaborated. This is Atkinson’s first institutional solo show in the United States.

TERRY ATKINSON

November 8–December 21, 2014
Curated by Richard Birkett

Greaser Fabrication by Brian Thackeray,
Adam LaBrie, and Harry de Rham

Thanks to Sue Atkinson, Cooper
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