

THE TASK OF the radical artist today is to attack the prevailing methods of production, distribution and consumption of art: as has been the concern of the avant-garde this century. The notion of art as confrontation went into a demise in the late sixties with the re-orientation of political activism in general. In the late seventies, punk music and its way of life brought a new working class voice to the forefront of popular culture, its hardened attitudes appropriately meeting the growing intolerance of material circumstances of urban culture. That brief manifestation and its resultant recuperation by the forces of Capital (into the language of fashion, ads and the glamorisation of misery) have served as a politicising experience for many now active in, or on the periphery of, the art world.

By taking power into their own hands, Art in Ruins (Glyn Banks and Hannah Vowles) have demonstrated through strategies of intervention in the artworld. This 'positive interference' has been seen in non-art spaces in semi-public spaces such as polytechnic galleries and foyers, alternative spaces (Chisenhale Space in London, Transmission in Glasgow) and in prestigious private galleries (Gimpel Fils in London).

Art in Ruins make arrangements of ruins of culture; they are manipulators of the discarded which embody the dead ideologies of the past and present. The objects which they use are never neutral, since they have a prehistory; these are re-activated in their mixed media installations. As Kienholz claimed to understand a culture by what he found in its garbage cans and flea markets, Art in Ruins speculate on ours by what they find in its antique shops, museums, discos, architecture and popular culture. Unlike traditional mediums of art where one looks at a unique creation made by the artist, one revolves uneasily in a constructed environment of things taken by the artists. Notions of originality and authenticity are undermined through the manipulation and re-arrangement of already existing artifacts. On a superficial level, these 'artworks' do not appear aesthetically pleasing or display exemplary technical skill; good taste and a sense of balance are turned upside down. This is not simply the reversal of academic traditions which are useless in coming to terms with the crisis of our 'post-modern social condition' but highlights also the fragmentary character of art and the alienating privilege of being an artist today.

The methods at the disposal of Art in Ruins crosses boundaries, from installation arrangements and critical writing to organising their own exhibitions, often in collaboration with others such as John Coleman in the early eighties (when they operated under the name Common Knowledge) or with the group that emerged out of the 'Our Wonderful Culture' show at

the Crypt in '85. This group, comprising Banks and Vowles, Ed Baxter, Stefan Szczelkun, Andy Hepton, Simon Dickson and Karen Eliot collaborated on the 'Ruins of Glamour, the Glamour of Ruins' exhibition at Chisenhale Space in London and in the 'Desire in Ruins' exhibition at Transmission.

What characterises these shows was an aggressively anti-aesthetic stance and a ' nihilistic deconstruction'. Writing in Performance Magazine in '86 (no. 40), Art in Ruins wrote:

"With the straw covered floor, the sheets of corrugated iron scattered around, and the 'over-hanging' of the work drew attention beyond the neutral (natural) white space of the modern world, towards a different, 'corrupted' context - a context which challenged the content of the work, the 'integrity' of the artist and the 'authority' of the artwork, and in which the audience finds itself at the centre of the debate about decisions concerning quality, relevance and meaning in our museum culture."

These are 'extra-artistic' factors which influence many artists today



WHITE TRASH

and which is informed by analytical theory, the identification with other oppositional enclaves and in locating art practice within a wider context of resistance to the forces of capitalism. Art in Ruins combine this informed position with wit and irony, in one sense by parodying their own roles by dressing in black to 'mourn their own

deaths as creators of meaning' and by deciding to operate through the practice of art in the first place. In their practice, the line between creative and critical forms become blurred and the object of artmaking becomes a tactical necessity. In this sense, they may be identified with a 'post-modernism of resistance' as Hal Foster puts it in the

introduction to the book 'Post Modern Culture'.

The notion that post-modernism has represented a breaking down of barriers between artforms, where the past becomes a concept to plunder, that modern myths of progress are now redundant is used as much as an excuse by 'post-modern' artists for politicised action and critique as it is by those who are positive and precise about what they use, what they criticise and why they are criticising it. Art in Ruins not only engage in 'semantic guerrilla warfare' and in a 'nihilistic deconstruction', but argue the significance of doing so. Those artists who say that anything goes, that ideology is dead, that politics doesn't matter because it doesn't work, are merely serving the interests of capitalism through the idea that reality is so complex, that the world is in such a state of crisis, that there is nothing to be done and if we did anything it would be worthless tomorrow anyhow. The art world today comprises of too many artists trying to infiltrate it as if it were something they were not already

complying to. This way of thinking is shared by the intellectualism of the new curators and critics for whom 'political art' is tailored. As Banks puts it:

"...it has become normal practice for both 'radical' and 'conservative' artists alike to define themselves as dispossessed members of society and it is perhaps here this dispossession then, is defined; that is, how artists define their relationship to their concept of their audience. It is in the citing of the artist's resentful 'bad faith' and its relationship to a 'whole way of life' which defines the role of culture as a critical and oppositional activity."

It is not surprising, however, that those complicit with the presentation of history through the museum will partially succumb in using Art in Ruins to reaffirm the very institutions which their practice essentially undermines. The 'repressive tolerance' of that system will utilise whatever attacks it in order to prove its liberalism. Art in Ruins have the versatility and awareness not to leave the present field of culture to them or to mix willfully with them. They avoid taking a clearly identifiable position (and perhaps, therefore, a manageable one), and don't stay still long enough to be categorised, comforted, or co-opted.

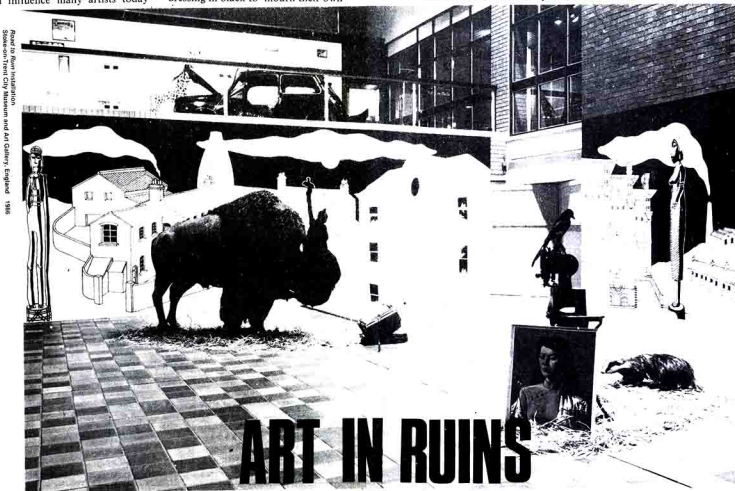
The work of Art in Ruins is appropriately 'of its time'. Its effect is all-pervading. It annoys us and amuses us, but it doesn't entertain or comfort.

To a radical critic, Art in Ruins are too radical. To a reactionary critic they are cynical, anti-art and full of 'unrelieved pessimism', attitudes they might amuse themselves with. But that misinterpreted pessimism is, in fact, an opening out of possibilities. Their work is there to be questioned, not ignored; it questions us and makes us questions ourselves as viewers, it questions itself, what has gone before it and what surrounds it in the present. It brings on a vertigo effect out of which a questioning process emerges.

In the confrontation of established values and hierarchies, the creation of challenging installations within the gallery and beyond is one way we have of attacking the art of the past and the conservatism of the present. We are revealed by our white trash.

The glamour of the artworld and the seduction of power will not circumvent the collisions inherent in a culture of contention.

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Art in Ruins (Glyn Banks and Hannah Vowles) are the new artists in residence at Edinburgh University from October '87 to March '88.

ART IN RUINS