

# Mulheimer Freiheit

## THE RETURN OF THE LIVING DEAD

As the hero of George Romero's (low budget) horror film 'Zombies - Dawn of the Dead' warns us: 'When there is no room left in hell, the dead will rise up and walk the earth.' A grim reminder, when authority ceases to be representative, to beware the dispossessed lest they rise up in revolt against everything held sacred to the prevailing order and inherit the ruins of a shattered ideology.

Revenge is as good a motive for doing something as any other.<sup>1</sup>

The way in which art can be used as a repressive authority in the interests of museum culture is clearly illustrated in a recent article on 'criteria of quality in the visual arts of the twentieth century' by Willi Bongard:

The greatness of an artist can further be measured by the degree of social commitment that his art manifests . . . Joseph Beuys is the prime example of a committed artist of this century. He is an artist about whom the uninformed public still continue to ask whether he is not a charlatan after all . . . For in an age that is pampered and used to sensations it is not so easy to scandalise and irritate, as Joseph Beuys, the man with the hat has done for the past two decades. Such a man must 'have something'. It is no accident that, for the second time, he has been placed number one in a table of the 100 top contemporary artists in the business magazine *Capital* . . . Surely by now, it should have given the greatest sceptics something to think about, that Beuys has been the only one of his fraternity to be invited five times in a row to take part in the Kassel Documenta.

In this essay Bongard, using the rhetoric of 'common sense', seeks to 'naturalize' the cultural phenomenon (make absolute the relative value) hopefully disguising the 'hidden set of rules, codes and conventions through which meanings particular to specific social groups (i.e. those in power) are rendered universal and given.

It is clear that the contradictions of contemporary (German) society which for Beuys are 'magically resolved' through his art are denied by the aestheticizing authority of the museum, as the art is transformed to become an authority of style, personal vision and commitment. That it should be made to seem 'natural' for the museum to be the protector of the social-

ly-committed artist in the face of opposition from society-at-large, which the artist scandalizes and irritates, seems particularly ironic in the case of Beuys who has become a 'myth' and a millionaire through informing the (art) world that everyone is an artist.

If it seemed that the last possible strategy of the professional artist of the (modernist) avant-garde was to assert the value of the living creative potential of the mass of all human beings (everyone is an artist) against the neutralizing aestheticism of museum culture (High Art), then either art was going to cease being 'Modern' or artists would cease being 'professional'. As it turned out by the beginning of the eighties it was to be both:

Now we are putting a stop to the proliferation of worthless revelations from current ideology. For too long the masses of the dilettanti have stood by and seen how evanescent the verities of the artistic upper crust are, and how a fresh seed is always planted in their ashes, to be watered by the gardeners of national culture until it blossoms. Never mind the colour of the blossoms. To have a hand in this mechanism of 'modern art' is what the amateur has always longed for. Only educational privilege has prevented him. In 'wild' music this privilege has now been abolished, not because anybody wanted it abolished or could have ordered its abolition, but because the masses will now only accept messages - and pay handsomely for them - which match their own horizon. It is hardly worth saying that the senders themselves now come from this class. It is even less worth saying that this class is not the defunct proletariat, but the classless mass of the advanced democracies . . .

Having absorbed the lessons of both Warhol and Beuys many young German artists adopted the strategy of Punk; exploiting the contradictions of society's (modernist) belief in re-invention of self and a strict adherence to 'traditional' values; and the *dramatization* and *representation* of the fragmented nature of existence in this Modern world, (having neither a belief in a future nor an understanding of the past).

Thus it was that the punks turned towards the world a dead white face which was there and yet not 'there'. Like the myths of Roland Barthes, these 'murdered victims' - emptied and inert - also had an alibi, an 'elsewhere', literally 'made up' out of vaseline and cosmetics, hair dye and mascara. But paradoxically in the case of the punks,



Genevieve 1983 by Peter Bommels, in the Mulheimer Freiheit exhibition

this 'elsewhere' was also a nowhere - a twilight zone - a zone constituted out of negativity . . . Once inside this desecrated circle, punk was forever condemned to act out alienation, to mime its imagined condition, to manufacture a whole series of subjective correlates for the official archetypes of the crisis of modern life . . . converted into icons these paradigms of crisis could live a double life at once fictional and real. They reflected in a heightened form a perceived condition: a condition of unmitigated exile, voluntarily assumed.<sup>2</sup>

Thus Mulheimer Freiheit, six German artists, dispossessed consumers of culture, having 'no heroes' and 'no future' and holding nothing sacred (a disturbing absence of 'permanently sacred signifiers'), form a 'group without ideology' engaged in 'semiotic guerrilla warfare'. Having 'juggled styles and cultural stereotypes with ideas about the act of painting itself' to produce at the same time an art that is both 'dramatic' and 'meaningless', an art which shatters the rule of (modernist) common sense and triumphantly refuses (like punk itself) to be assimilated and therefore neutralized by the aestheticizing authority of the museum.

The so-called 'Young Fauves' who are currently at the forefront of art patrons' interest are interesting, not least because they lack all those signs of quality that I have drawn up and because they think that they can do without quality as a matter of principle. They produce works which satisfy the demands neither of originality, nor of continuity and consistency, nor of techni-

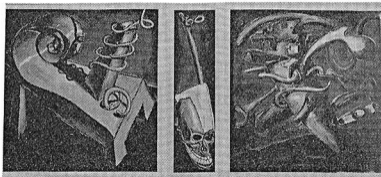
Mulheimer Freiheit, ICA main gallery, Jan 11-Feb 12.

que – and, what is more, they couldn't care less about commitment of any sort.<sup>5</sup>

That Mulheimer Freiheit as a group represent 'a moment of change' within contemporary culture, a moment that has passed, seems to make it entirely appropriate that their first show in this country should be their last as a group. It is not surprising in a country where 'one knows perfectly well who one is, and if one forgets, someone will tell one p.d.q.' that critics ignore the implications of fragmentation, and that many artists have ignored the do-it-yourself attitude inherent in Punk, preferring instead to inherit and maintain a 'tradition'.

Just as Punk could now seem to have done nothing more than re-invent the music business, it may also seem that the huge success of the 'punks of the palette' is due *merely* to a 'hunger for pictures' which has resulted only in the market displacing the museum as authority. However, perhaps the success of Mulheimer Freiheit in a Germany 'divided against itself' and the continued existence of spectacular sub-cultures in a class-ridden 'democratic' Britain testify to the fact that the creation of culture is *merely a problem of access*.

No-one needs artists to tell them that today anything can be art, but everyone needs art to remind them that reality can



*Untitled Triptych* 1982 by George Jiri Dokoupil

be anything – that all values are social and that everything is coded. There is no 'escape' – only the creative participation in the manipulation of codes and the changing of meaning.

Ladies and Gentlemen, from the ruins of a destroyed city and the fragments of a shattered ideology, Mulheimer Freiheit, brought back from the grave, proudly present for your entertainment the Second Bombing, the latest spectacle in the theatre of art.

Art in Ruins

#### The Return of the Living Dead References

1. George James Sowden of Memphis, the 'radical' Italian design group, in conversation with the author 1983
2. Willi Bongard, 'Pock and Balsa' *Studio International*, August 1983
3. Walter Bachauer, 'The Dilettante Genius – on Wild Music and Painting in Advanced Democratic Society.' Catalogue to 'Zeitgeist', Weidenfeld & Nicholson, London/Berlin 1982
4. Dick Hebdige, 'Subculture – The Meaning of Style' New Accents, Methuen, London/New York 1979
5. Willi Bongard. *op.cit.*