BANGING YOUR HEAD AGAINST A BRICK WALL

BANKSY

THE QUICKEST WAY TO THE
TOP OF YOUR BUSINESS

IS TO TURN IT UPSIDE DOWN

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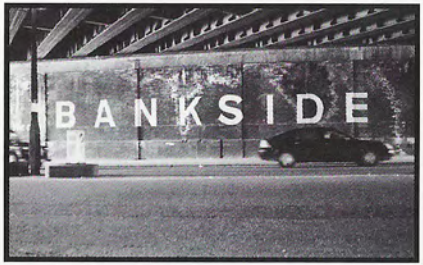
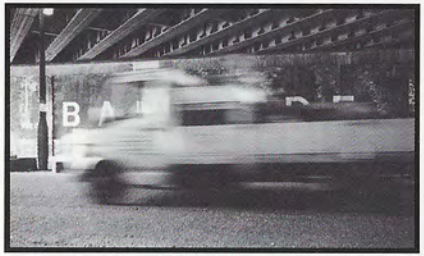
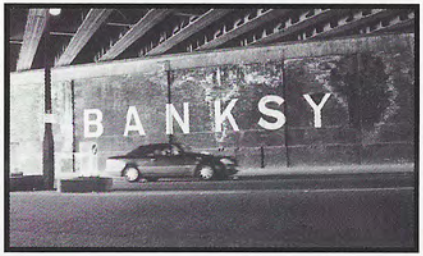
THE SOUTH BANKSY SHOW







Southbank, London 2001

BANGING YOUR HEAD AGAINST A BRICK WALL

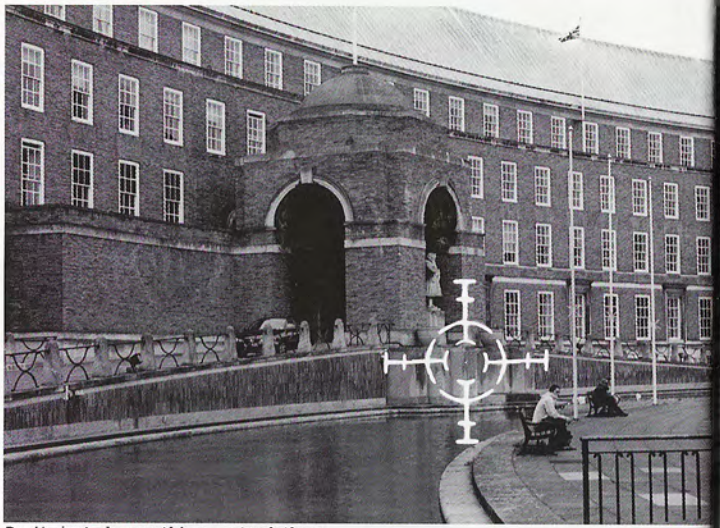
You could say that graffiti is ugly, selfish and that it's just the action of people who want some pathetic kind of fame. But if that's true it's only because graffiti writers are just like everyone else in this fucking country.

Someone recently asked me if I thought most graffiti writers were really just frustrated artists like myself. Well I'm frustrated by many things but trying to get accepted by the art world isn't one of them. This seems difficult for some people to understand - you do not paint graffiti in the vain hope that one day some big fat tory will discover you and put your pictures on his wall. If you draw on walls in public then you are already operating on a higher level. The irony is that despite having to scuttle around at night like Jack the Ripper with a marker pen, writing graffiti is about the most honest way you can be an artist. It takes no money to do it, you don't need an education to understand it, there's no admission fee and bus stops are far more interesting and useful places to have pictures than in museums.

Some people think you should have better things to think about than trying to think about better things. But the instinct is still there. Life is unfair and the world is full of cripples, death and deviousness.

In response to this, painting pictures seems a pointless way to spend your time. Your average plumber does more for humanity than some git that makes abstract art or paints seaside views full of boats. At least graffiti has a fighting chance of meaning a little more to people. Graffiti has been used to start revolutions, stop wars and generally is the voice of people who aren't listened to. Graffiti is one of the few tools you have if you have almost nothing. And even if you don't come up with a picture to cure world poverty you can make someone smile while they're having a piss.

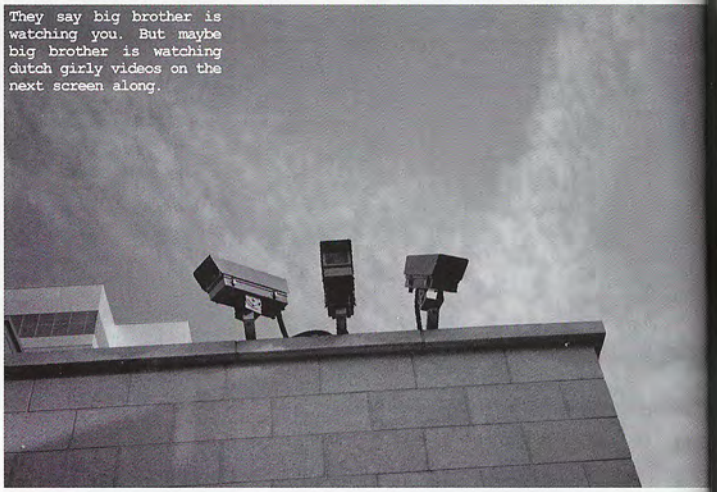
Graffiti ultimately wins out over proper art because it becomes part of your city, it's a tool; "I'll meet you in that pub, you know, the one opposite that wall with a picture of a monkey holding a chainsaw". I mean, how much more useful can a painting be than that?



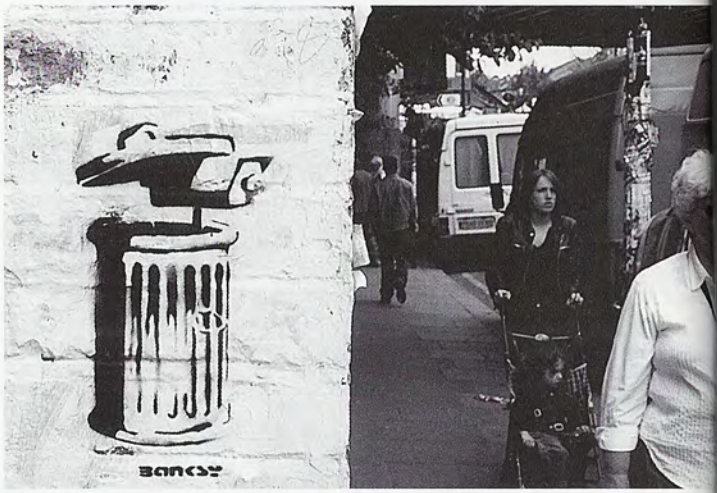
Don't just do something - stand there

Pulling the plug on city hall
Council House, Bristol 2001

SECRETS, LIES AND BEADY LITTLE EYES



They say big brother is watching you. But maybe big brother is watching dutch girly videos on the next screen along.



The bugs don't work

Getting paranoid is an occupational hazard of illicit street painting, which is good. Your mind is working at its best when you're being paranoid. You explore every avenue and possibility of your situation at high speed with total clarity. I'm not interested in looking at things made by people who aren't paranoid, they're not working to their full capacity.

We can't do anything to change the world until capitalism crumbles. In the meantime we should all go shopping to console ourselves.

The corrupt and brutal regime of President Ceausescu of Romania was infamous the world over. His ferocious government had run the country emphatically for many years, crushing any signs of dissent ruthlessly. In November 1989 he was re-elected President for another five years as his supporters at Party Conference gave him forty standing ovations.

On December 21st the President, disturbed by a small uprising in the western city of Timisoara in support of a Protestant Clergyman, was persuaded to address a public rally in Bucharest.

One solitary man in the crowd, Nica Leon, sick to death with Ceausescu and the dreadful circumstances he created for everyone started shouting in favour of the revolutionaries in Timisoara. The crowd around him, obedient to the last, thought that when he shouted out "Long live Timisoara!" it was some new political slogan. They started chanting it too. It was only when he called, "Down with Ceausescu!" that they realised something wasn't quite right. Terrified, they tried to force themselves away from him, dropping the banners they had been carrying. In the crush the wooden batons on which the banners were held began to snap underfoot and women started screaming. The ensuing panic sounded like booing.

The unthinkable was happening. Ceausescu stood there on his balcony, ludicrously frozen in uncertainty, his mouth opening and shutting. Even the official camera shook with fright. Then the head of security walked swiftly across the balcony towards him and whispered "they're getting in". It was clearly audible on the open microphone and was broadcast over the whole country on live national radio.

This was the start of the revolution. Within a week Ceausescu was dead.

Source: John Simpson BBC News.

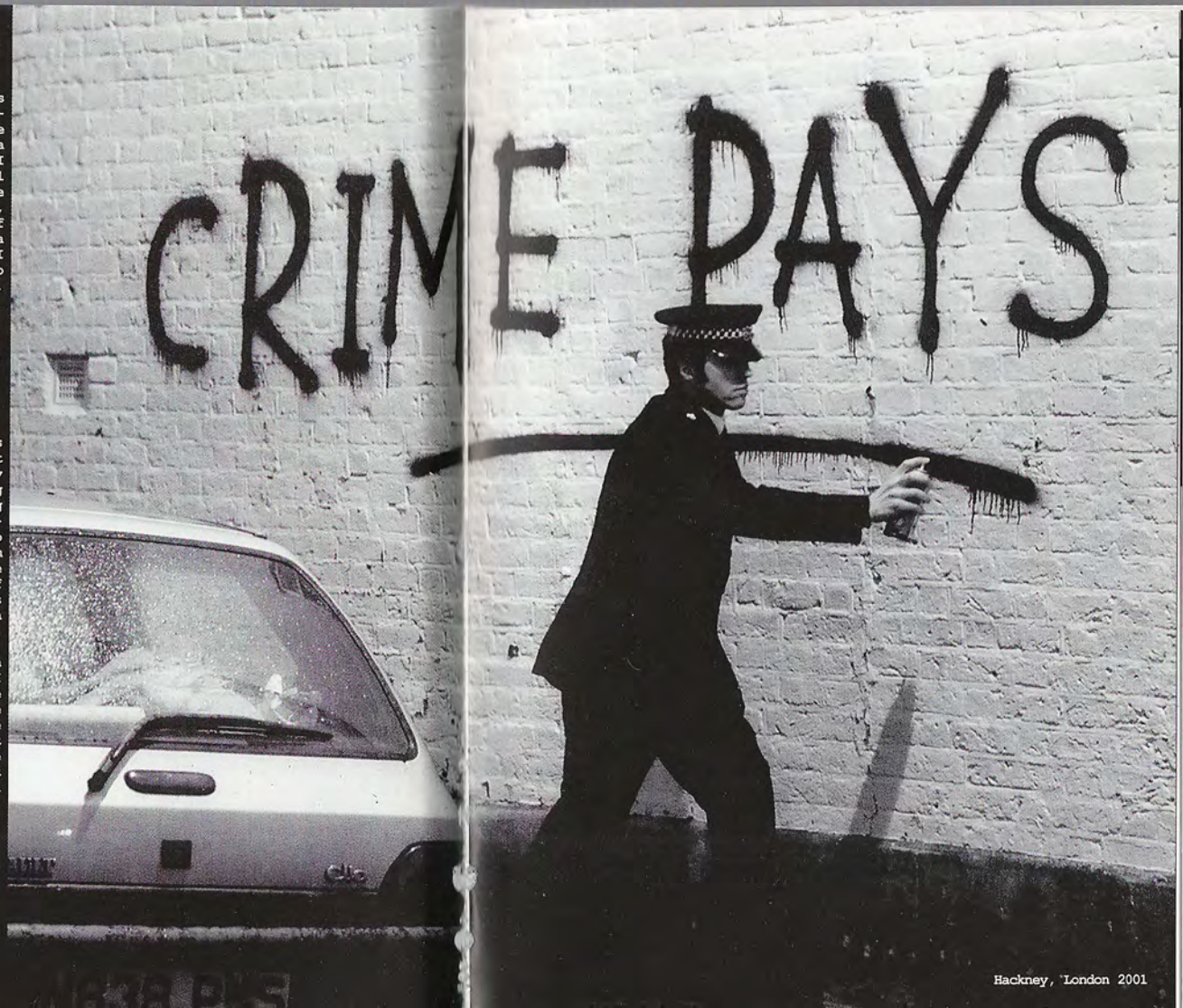
VILLAINS

I like ironies unless they're real. I was arrested for painting a picture about corruption over a billboard. As a result I spent 40 hours in a cell with the cops taking the piss and telling me lies, followed by a spell of community service and a hefty fine for which I never got a receipt and no record appeared to be kept.

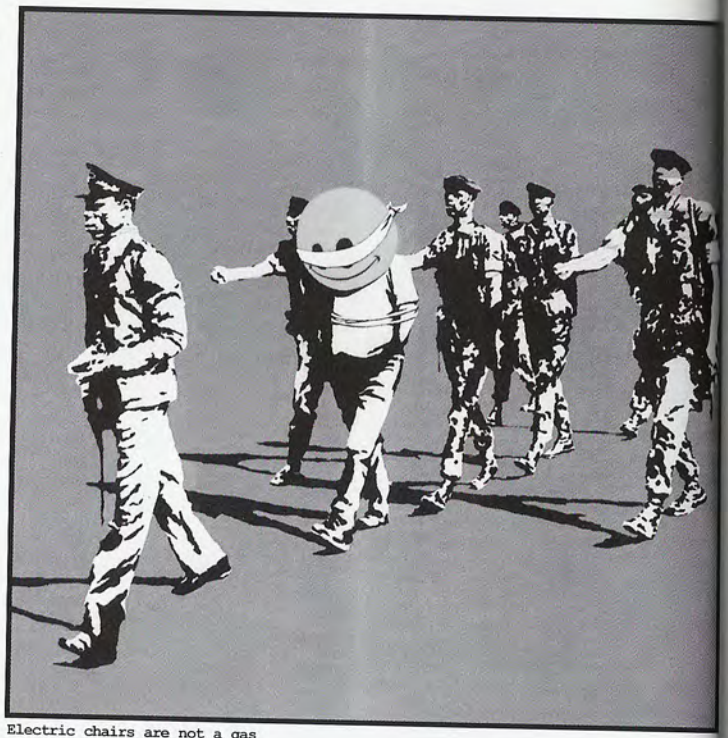
There are no exceptions to the rule that everyone thinks they are an exception to the rules.

My main problem with cops is that they do what they're told. They say 'Sorry mate, I'm just doing my job' all the fucking time. And every time someone says 'If it was down to me it would be ok, but I'm following orders' a little bit inside of you dies. If you say it as often as cops do then there isn't much left.

Sometimes I feel like an inside-out policeman. I guess I do believe some people become cops because they want to make the world a better place. But then some people become vandals because they want to make the world. a better-looking place.



Hackney, London 2001



Electric chairs are not a gas

ANYONE WHO BELIEVES IN CAPITAL PUNISHMENT SHOULD BE SHOT

When I was nine years old I was expelled from school. It was punishment for swinging one of my classmates round and round before dropping him onto a concrete floor. He was taken away from school by an ambulance that had to pull right into the playground and pick him up on a stretcher.

The next day I was made to stand in front of the whole school at assembly while the headmaster gave a speech about good and evil before I was sent home in disgrace.

The unfortunate part of this story is that I never actually touched the kid. It was my best friend Jimmy who had put him into casualty. Me and a boy called Martin watched Jimmy grab the kid's hand and swing him until he was too dizzy to stand up and when he let go the kid just seemed to fly off and land on his head. It wasn't even malicious, just stupid. However, Jim was a big chap for his age and could be very persuasive. So when we noticed the kid wasn't getting up Jim convinced Martin to say that it was me who had done it. The only other witness was the kid himself who didn't regain conciousness for a week.

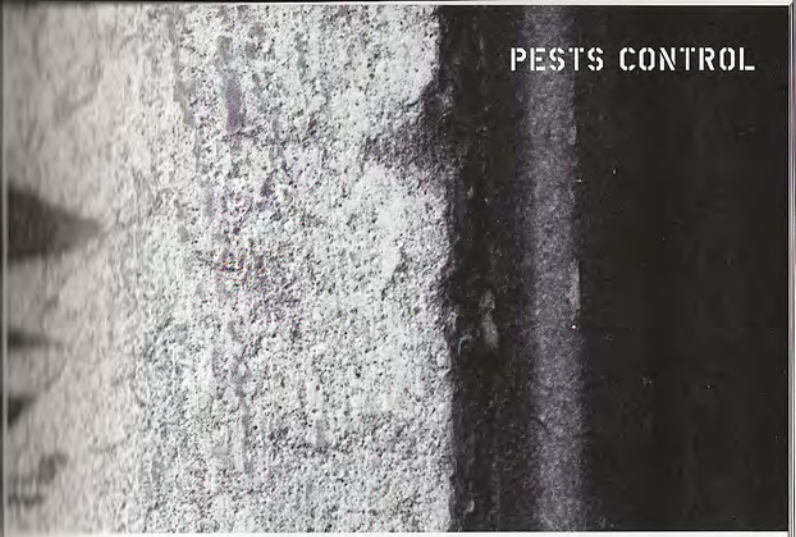
I tried many times to explain that I hadn't done it, but the boys stuck to their story. Eventually my mum turned to me and said bitterly that I should have the guts to admit when I was wrong and that it was even more disgusting when I refused to accept what I'd done.

So I shut up after that.

The kid sustained a fractured skull and some mental problems. He couldn't remember how it had happened and he didn't return to school for a long time.

I think I was lucky to learn so young that there's no such thing as justice and there's nothing you can do about it. The more useful lesson I learnt was that there's no point in behaving yourself. You will probably be punished for something you never did anyway. People get it wrong all the time.

Anyone who believes in capital punishment should be shot.



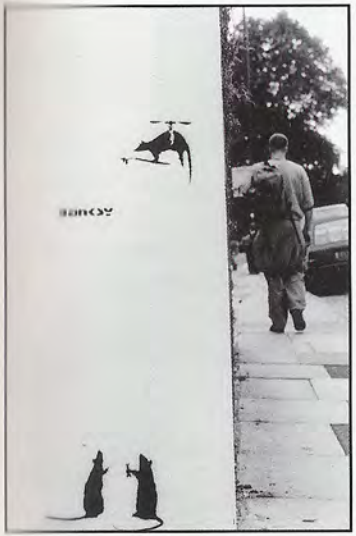
I was at home drawing and listening to Radio One late at night when the dj became so annoying I grabbed some paint and drove to the studios on New Cavendish Street. I'd just stuck a stencil of a rat playing on some turntables to the side of the building when a riot van pulled round the corner. I started walking off as the van drove past and took the next corner. I turned back and got my paint out just as the same van pulled up again, having just gone round the block. I straightened up and walked to my car as the cops pulled up very slowly and stopped 20 yards up the road.

I'm pretending to check paperwork on the passenger seat as the stencil, still taped to the building, flaps in the breeze ten feet away, with a full can of paint sat on the floor in front of it. I'm sitting there for what feels like a very long time trying to work out if the cops saw the stencil as a big saloon car pulls up behind me and out gets Zoe Ball and her driver. He opens her door and she goes into the building.

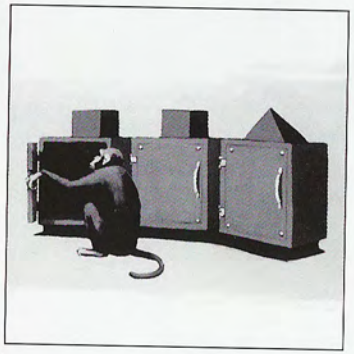
I'm still watching the riot van when I notice Zoe Ball's driver has come over and picked up my can of paint, inspecting it closely. I turn on my engine as a cop finally gets out of the van and walks over.

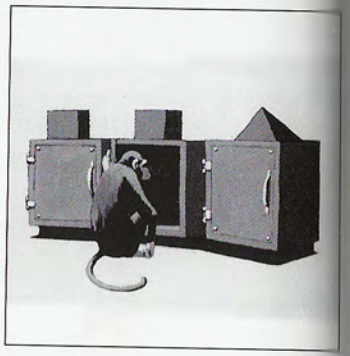
I hear him say "Excuse me Sir, can I have a look at that?" in a patronising way. The driver suddenly looks a bit perturbed. As I'm pulling out he's laughing nervously and turning out his pockets.

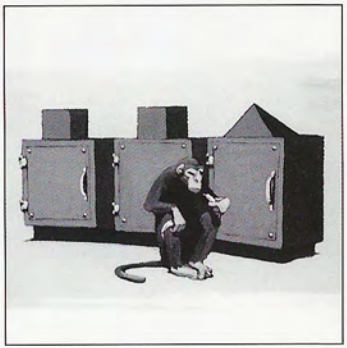
Win the rat race and you're still a rat



SIMPLE INTELLIGENCE TESTING IN DUMB ANIMALS







A lot of people never use their initiative, because no-one told them to.

CHEEKY MONKEY

They say that if you gave a thousand monkeys a thousand typewriters at some point you'd have yourself a novel. I was wondering if you gave a thousand monkeys a thousand sticks of dynamite how long would it take for them to make the city a more beautiful looking place.

"The urge to destroy is also a creative urge."
Pablo Picasso

DON'T BELIEVE THE TYPE

Doing what you're told is generally overrated. In fact it's been said that more crimes are committed in the name of obedience than disobedience. It's those who follow any authority blindly who are the real danger.

BY ORDER

NATIONAL HIGHWAYS AGENCY

THIS WALL IS A DESIGNATED GRAFFITI AREA

PLEASE TAKE YOUR LITTER HOME

EC REF. URBA 23/3666

EXISTENCILISM

day 1

day 7

day 9

day 15

day 1

day 12

day 18

day 15

day 1

day 1

day 25

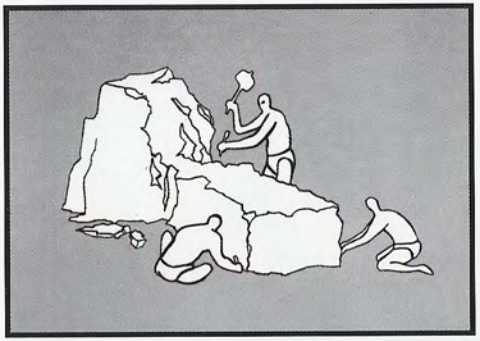
WEAPONS OF MASS DISTRACTION

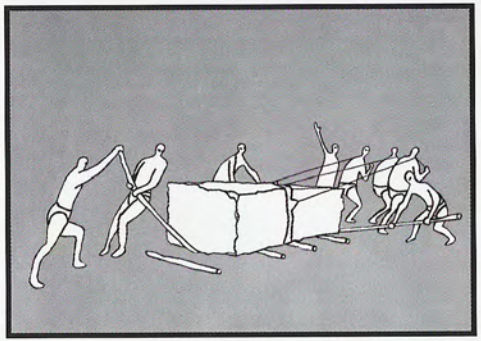
People are fond of using military terms to describe what they do. We call it bombing when we go out painting, when of course it's more like entertaining the troops in a neutral zone, during peacetime in a country without an army.

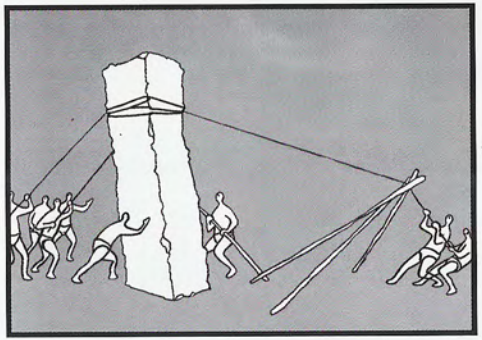
Why all the bombs? Because it's healthy to think about bombs all the time, because it's difficult to get your head round the fact that humans have the hardware available to make their entire species extinct. Nobody talks about it anymore but they say this is why we've all become so into money, because at the back of our minds we all know that atomic bombs have taken our future away from us.

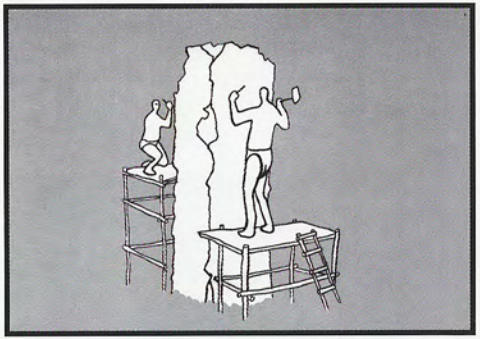
A wall is a very big weapon. It's one of the nastiest things you can hit someone with.

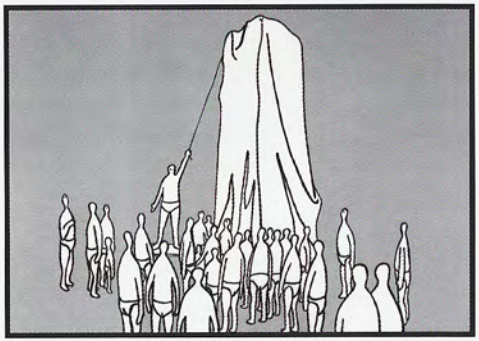
"Only boys with small dicks paint pictures of big guns" - a girl in the pub overlooking Mona Lisa, Soho.

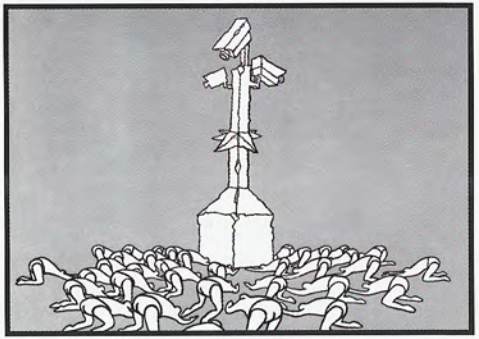












ONLY THE RIDICULOUS SURVIVE

Vandalised oil paintings

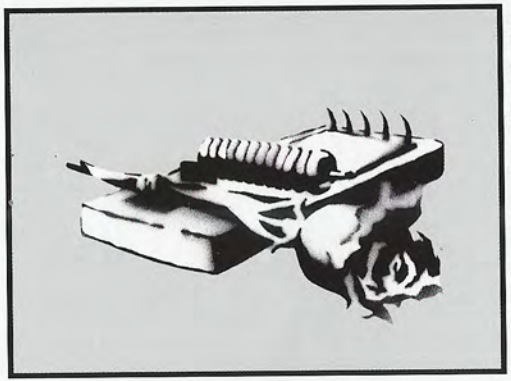
Urine the money, urine the money

Call The Antiques Roadshow, it's a fucking classic

Someone famous once said: "It takes two people to make a piece of art. One person to make the art and another person to stop them from destroying it." Which is more poetic than saying: "It takes two people to make a piece of art. One person to make the art and another person to come round later from the council and sand-blast it off."

EVERY PICTURE TELLS A LIE

Beauty is in the eye of the eroder



It's great when you love someone so much you can sleep with other people behind their back and it doesn't even matter

"Only when the last tree has been cut down and the last river has dried up will man realise that reciting red indian proverbs makes you sound like a fucking muppet"

Every time I hear the word culture I release the safety catch on my 9mm

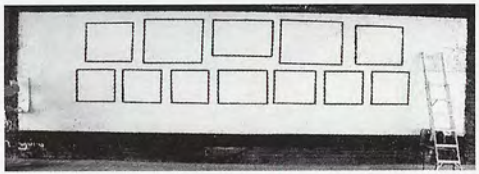
Lying to policemen is never wrong

ZEN AND THE ART OF MINDLESS VANDALISM

We came out of a pub one night arguing about how easy it would be to hold an exhibition in London without asking for anyone's permission. As we walked through a tunnel in shoreditch someone said: "You're wasting your time, why would you want to paint pictures in a dump like this?"

A week later we came back to the same tunnel with two buckets of paint and a letter. The letter was a forged invoice from a mickey mouse Arts organisation wishing us luck with the 'Tunnel Vision mural project'. We hung up some decorators signs nicked off a building site and painted the walls white wearing overalls. We got the artwork up in twenty five minutes and held an opening party later that week with beers and some hip hop pumping out the back of a transit van.

Six months later someone knocked a hole in the wall and built a superclub in the middle of the piece. If I had a pound for every time that happened.



I'm walking home at 7am after a night doing loads of damage when I turned the corner onto my street and see a police car parked directly opposite my house on the garage forecourt. I look straight ahead and keep walking but just as I get to the gate I see the blue lights start flashing and the siren goes off. I panic, drop the stencils and turn to run. When I look back I see the beaming face of a mechanic behind the wheel, flashing me a big Jamaican smile as he turns the siren on and off again. I stand there as his boss comes out of the garage and tells him to knock it off, but the bastard is still laughing at me.

I LOVE THE SMELL OF VANDALISM EARLY IN THE MORNING

A beginners guide to painting with stencils

• Draw or copy your image on a piece of paper.

• Glue the paper onto a bit of card using good glue.

• Cut straight through drawing and card at the same time using a very sharp knife. Snap off blades are best. The sharper your knife the better the stencil looks. As the Grim Reaper said to his new apprentice: "You must learn the compassion suitable to your trade - a fucking sharp edge."

• Ideal card should be about 1.5mm thick - much fatter and it's too difficult and boring to cut through. Any thinner and it gets sloppy too quick.

• Find an unassuming piece of card as a folder to hold your stencil in and leave the house before you think of something more comfortable you coud be doing.

• Get a small roll of gaffa tape and pre-tear small strips ready to attach stencil to the wall.

• Shake and test can of paint before you leave. Cheap British paint is fine but some brands bleed more than others. Matt finish comes out better and dries quicker.

• Apply paint sparingly.

• Wear a hat.

• Move around the city quickly. Acting like a sad old drunk if you attract attention.

•Pace yourself and repeat as often as you feel inadequate and no-one listens to a word you say.

Never paint graffiti in a town where they still point at aeroplanes

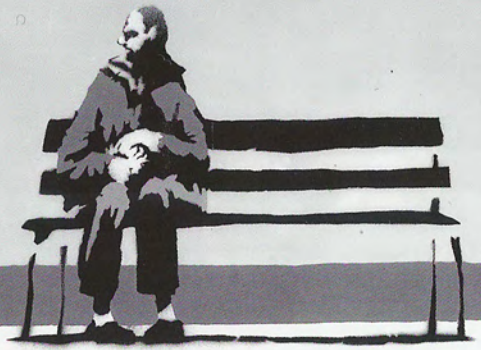
BOMB MIDDLE ENGLAND

People who get up early in the morning cause war, death and famine.

DERIDE AND CONQUER

Who sacked all the clowns?

Weston Super Mare



"It's a little bit embarrasing to have been concerned with the human problem all one's life and find at the end that one has no more to offer than 'Try to be a little kinder'."

Aldous Huxley

YOUR LETTERS

Banksy
I first became aware of your work through sleazenation and that busta rhymes cover. I would be grateful if you could tell me where else I can catch any other pieces of your work in shoreditch or the rest of london.
I have just started work as a car park attendant, night shift in swiss cottage. The car park is XXXXXXXX and is partially underground. There are a lot of crappy tags but there is great scope to do something there. I am only working there for another six weeks so if you are interested mail me.

Lexbudda

Dear XXXXXXX
We received the artwork roughs from your client Banksy today with some disapointment. He does not appear to have understood the project brief which we supplied to you and his ideas fall somewhat short of what we were anticipating. As I have explained previously nothing of an offensive or overtly political nature sits comfortably with the XXXXXXX brand image. Although we are aiming at a more 'edgy' feel in this campaign the images he supplied are entirely unsuitable. I regret to say myself and XXXXXXXX feel there is little point in continuing to seek Banksy's contribution to the rest of the campaign. Please note that the agreed design fee will not be released until all outstanding artwork relating to this project is submitted to our office. Best wishes for the future

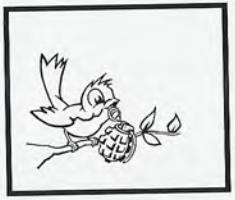
XXXXXXXX

Yes Banksy,
Just a quick note to say thanks for all the pictures. I live in Montpelier and we have two of your pieces at the end of our street. Thought you might be interested to know we had the police here last week because a neighbour was burgled and I asked them what they think of your stuff. One said he thought that stick man on the side of the police station was funny and they hope they don't catch you.
All the best

Andy

Banksy
I read in Level magazine that you are trying to etch grafitti into limestone but were unsure of how to do it. I did a little work with steel plate etching, we would use a laquer to coat the back of the plates to stop them dissolving. This could then be removed with meths. The acid we used was about 20% nitric acid, but any reasonably strong acid should do the trick, ie pickling vinegar...

Ed, School of Chemistry, University of Bristol



Mindless authority figures in operation

But you already mugged me once, back there ten minutes ago

Time to raise the steaks

Emails should be sent to: banksy@banksy.co.uk
Banging your head against a brick wall, Vol I is dedicated to the good people of Bristol. Additional lyrics by Mike Tyler, layout by Jez Tucker, photography by Steve Lazarides. Further copies available from selected bookshops & www.banksy.co.uk

Bacon butty served here

Kill Gary Glitter

"Nearly a hundred pictures are featured here. Each and every one of them a pathetic cry for help."

The Guardian

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2 Guy Debord (b. 1931) Writings from the Situationist International

A thread runs through the French avant-garde from Baudelaire to Surrealism which focuses on the unexpected, the bizarre, the magical aspects of the condition of modernity; these aspects are supposedly experienced as revelations by those who know how to read the modern city. Always incipiently revolutionary, after the effective demise of Surrealism in the post-war period, this cultural tradition was developed by the Situationist International: an organization formed in 1957, reaching a high point of effectiveness in the May Events of 1968, and disbanding in 1972. The SI emerged as a synthesis of the Movement for an Imaginist Bauhaus (itself descended from Cobra, and including Asger Jorn as a leading member), and the Lettrist International (involving Guy Debord). Twelve issues of the *International Situationist* bulletin were issued. Texts represented here embody the movement's key concepts: the dérive; detournement; and centrally, the concept of the spectacle. All extracts were written by Debord and are taken from the *Situationist International Anthology*, edited and translated by Ken Knabb, California, 1981, pp. 50–4, 55, 307–8, and 74–5. (Individual titles and dates of composition and publication are given with the selections.)

I Report on the Construction of Situations . . .

Revolution and Counterrevolution in Modern Culture

First of all we think the world must be changed. We want the most liberating change of the society and life in which we find ourselves confined. We know that this change is possible through appropriate actions.

Our specific concern is the use of certain means of action and the discovery of new ones, means more easily recognizable in the domain of culture and mores, but applied in the perspective of an interaction of all revolutionary changes.

What is termed culture reflects, but also prefigures, the possibilities of organization of life in a given society. Our era is fundamentally characterized by the lagging of revolutionary political action behind the development of modern possibilities of production which call for a superior organization of the world. [. . .]

One of the contradictions of the bourgeoisie in its phase of liquidation is that while it respects the abstract principle of intellectual and artistic creation, it at

first resists actual creations, then eventually exploits them. This is because it must maintain a sense of criticality and experimental research among a minority, but must channel this activity toward strictly compartmentalized utilitarian disciplines and avert any concerted overall critique and research. In the domain of culture the bourgeoisie strives to divert the taste for innovation, which is dangerous for it in our era, toward certain degraded, innocuous and confused forms of novelty. Through the commercial mechanisms that control cultural activity, avant-garde tendencies are cut off from the segments of society that could support them, segments already limited because of the general social conditions. [. . .]

The very notion of a collective avant-garde, with the militant aspect it implies, is a recent product of historical conditions that are simultaneously giving rise to the necessity for a coherent revolutionary program in culture and to the necessity to struggle against the forces that impede the development of such a program. Such groups are led to transpose into their sphere of activity organizational methods created by revolutionary politics, and their action is henceforth inconceivable without some connection with a political critique.

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Toward a Situationist International

Our central idea is that of the construction of situations, that is to say, the concrete construction of momentary ambiances of life and their transformation into a superior passional quality. We must develop a methodical intervention based on the complex factors of two components in perpetual interaction: the material environment of life and the comportments which it gives rise to and which radically transform it.

Our perspectives of action on the environment ultimately lead us to the notion of unitary urbanism. Unitary urbanism is defined first of all by the use of the ensemble of arts and technics as means contributing to an integral composition of the milieu. This ensemble must be envisaged as infinitely more far-reaching than the old domination of architecture over the traditional arts, or than the present sporadic application to anarchic urbanism of specialized technology or of scientific investigations such as ecology. Unitary urbanism must, for example, dominate the acoustic environment as well as the distribution of different varieties of food and drink. It must include the creation of new forms and the detournement of previous forms of architecture, urbanism, poetry and cinema. Integral art, which has been talked about so much, can only be realized at the level of urbanism. But it can no longer correspond to any of the traditional aesthetic categories. [. . .]

Our action on behavior, linked with other desirable aspects of a revolution in mores, can be briefly defined as the invention of games of an essentially new type. The most general goal must be to extend the nonmediocre part of life, to reduce the empty moments of life as much as possible. One could thus speak of our action as an enterprise of quantitatively increasing human life, an enterprise more serious than the biological methods currently being investigated.

This automatically implies a qualitative increase whose developments are unpredictable. The situationist game is distinguished from the classic conception of the game by its radical negation of the element of competition and of separation from everyday life. The situationist game is not distinct from a moral choice, the taking of one's stand in favor of what will ensure the future reign of freedom and play. This perspective is obviously linked to the inevitable continual and rapid increase of leisure time resulting from the level of productive forces our era has attained. It is also linked to the recognition of the fact that a battle of leisure is taking place before our eyes whose importance in the class struggle has not been sufficiently analyzed. So far, the ruling class has succeeded in using the leisure the revolutionary proletariat wrested from it by developing a vast industrial sector of leisure activities that is an incomparable instrument for stupefying the proletariat with by-products of mystifying ideology and bourgeois tastes. The abundance of televised imbecilities is probably one of the reasons for the American working class's inability to develop any political consciousness. By obtaining by collective pressure a slight rise in the price of its labor above the minimum necessary for the production of that labor, the proletariat not only extends its power of struggle, it also extends the terrain of the struggle. New forms of this struggle then arise alongside directly economic and political conflicts. It can be said that revolutionary propaganda has so far been constantly overcome in these new forms of struggle in all the countries where advanced industrial development has introduced them. That the necessary changing of the infrastructure can be delayed by errors and weaknesses at the level of superstructures has unfortunately been demonstrated by several experiences of the twentieth century. It is necessary to throw new forces into the battle of leisure, and we will take up our position there. [. . .]

The construction of situations begins on the ruins of the modern spectacle. It is easy to see to what extent the very principle of the spectacle – nonintervention – is linked to the alienation of the old world. Conversely, the most pertinent revolutionary experiments in culture have sought to break the spectator's psychological identification with the hero so as to draw him into activity by provoking his capacities to revolutionize his own life. The situation is thus made to be lived by its constructors. The role played by a passive or merely bit-part playing 'public' must constantly diminish, while that played by those who cannot be called actors but rather, in a new sense of the term, 'livers,' must steadily increase.

So to speak, we have to multiply poetic subjects and objects – which are now unfortunately so rare that the slightest ones take on an exaggerated emotional importance – and we have to organize games of these poetic objects among these poetic subjects. This is our entire program, which is essentially transitory. Our situations will be ephemeral, without a future; passageways. The permanence of art or anything else does not enter into our considerations, which are serious. Eternity is the grossest idea a person can conceive of in connection with his acts. [. . .]

June 1957

II Theory of the Dérive

Among the various situationist methods is the *dérive* [literally: 'drifting'], a technique of transient passage through varied ambiances. The dérive entails playful-constructive behavior and awareness of psycho-geographical effects; which completely distinguishes it from the classical notions of the journey and the stroll.

In a dérive one or more persons during a certain period drop their usual motives for movement and action, their relations, their work and leisure activities, and let themselves be drawn by the attractions of the terrain and the encounters they find there. The element of chance is less determinant than one might think: from the dérive point of view cities have a psychogeographical relief, with constant currents, fixed points and vortexes which strongly discourage entry into or exit from certain zones.

But the dérive includes both this letting go and its necessary contradiction: the domination of psychogeographical variations by the knowledge and calculation of their possibilities. In this latter regard, ecological science – despite the apparently narrow social space to which it limits itself – provides psychogeography with abundant data.

The ecological analysis of the absolute or relative character of fissures in the urban network, of the role of microclimates, of the distinct, self-contained character of administrative districts, and above all of the dominating action of centers of attraction, must be utilized and completed by psychogeographical methods. The objective passional terrain of the dérive must be defined in accordance both with its own logic and with its relations with social morphology. [. . .]

Chance plays an important role in dérives precisely because the methodology of psychogeographical observation is still in its infancy. But the action of chance is naturally conservative and in a new setting tends to reduce everything to an alternation between a limited number of variants, and to habit. Progress is nothing other than breaking through a field where chance holds sway by creating new conditions more favorable to our purposes. We can say, then, that the randomness of the dérive is fundamentally different from that of the stroll, but also that the first psychogeographical attractions discovered run the risk of fixating the dériving individual or group around new habitual axes, to which they will constantly be drawn back.

* * *

The lessons drawn from the dérive permit the drawing up of the first surveys of the psychogeographical articulations of a modern city. Beyond the discovery of unities of ambiance, of their main components and their spatial localization, one comes to perceive their principal axes of passage, their exits and their defenses. One arrives at the central hypothesis of the existence of psychogeographical pivotal points. One measures the distances that effectively separate two regions of a city, distances that may have little relation with the physical distance between them. With the aid of old maps, aerial photographs and experimental dérives, one can draw up hitherto lacking maps of influences, maps whose inevitable imprecision at this early stage is no worse than that of the first

navigational charts; the only difference is that it is a matter no longer of precisely delineating stable continents, but of changing architecture and urbanism.

Today the different unities of atmosphere and of dwellings are not precisely marked off, but are surrounded by more or less extended and indistinct bordering regions. The most general change that the dérive leads to proposing is the constant diminution of these border regions, up to the point of their complete suppression.

(1956) *Internationale situationniste*, no. 2, December 1958

III Detournement As Negation And Prelude

Detournement, the reuse of preexisting artistic elements in a new ensemble, has been a constantly present tendency of the contemporary avant-garde both before and since the establishment of the SI. The two fundamental laws of detournement are the loss of importance of each detourned autonomous element – which may go so far as to lose its original sense completely – and at the same time the organization of another meaningful ensemble that confers on each element its new scope and effect.

Detournement has a peculiar power which obviously stems from the double meaning, from the enrichment of most of the terms by the coexistence within them of their old senses and their new, immediate senses. Detournement is practical because it is so easy to use and because of its inexhaustible potential for reuse. Concerning the negligible effort required for detournement, we have already said, 'The cheapness of its products is the heavy artillery that breaks through all the Chinese walls of understanding' (*Methods of Detournement*, May 1956). But these points would not by themselves justify recourse to this method, which the same text describes as 'clashing head-on against all social and legal conventions.' Detournement has a historical significance. What is it?

'Detournement is a game made possible by the capacity of *devaluation*,' writes Jorn in his study Detourned Painting (May 1959), and he goes on to say that all the elements of the cultural past must be 'reinvested' or disappear. Detournement is thus first of all a negation of the value of the previous organization of expression. It arises and grows increasingly stronger in the historical period of the decomposition of artistic expression. But at the same time, the attempts to reuse the 'detournable bloc' as material for other ensembles express the search for a vaster construction, a new genre of creation at a higher level.

The SI is a very special kind of movement, of a nature different from preceding artistic avant-gardes. Within culture the SI can be likened to a research laboratory, for example, or to a party in which we are situationists but nothing that we do is situationist. This is not a disavowal for anyone. We are partisans of a certain future of culture, of life. Situationist activity is a definite craft which we are not yet practicing.

Thus the signature of the situationist movement, the sign of its presence and contestation in contemporary cultural reality (since we cannot represent any common style whatsoever), is first of all the use of detournement. [. . .]

At this point in the world's development all forms of expression are losing all grip on reality and being reduced to self-parody. As the readers of this journal can frequently verify, present-day writing always has an element of parody. 'It is necessary,' states *Methods of Detournement*, 'to conceive of a parodic-serious stage where the accumulation of detourned elements, far from aiming at arousing indignation or laughter by alluding to some original work, will express our indifference toward a meaningless and forgotten original, and concern itself with rendering a certain sublimity.'

The parodic-serious expresses the contradictions of an era in which we find ourselves confronted with both the urgent necessity and the near impossibility of bringing together and carrying out a totally innovative collective action. An era in which the greatest seriousness advances masked in the ambiguous interplay between art and its negation; in which the essential voyages of discovery have been undertaken by such astonishingly incapable people.

Internationale situationniste, no. 3. December 1959

IV Preliminaries Towards Defining a Unitary Revolutionary Program

Capitalism: a Society Without Culture

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5

Present culture as a whole can be characterized as alienated in the sense that every activity, every moment of life, every idea, every type of behavior, has a meaning only outside itself, in an elsewhere which, being no longer in heaven, is only the more maddening to try and locate: a utopia, in the literal sense of the word, dominates the life of the modern world.

6

Having from the workshop to the laboratory emptied productive activity of all meaning for itself, capitalism strives to place the meaning of life in leisure activities and to reorient productive activity on that basis. Since production is hell in the prevailing moral schema, real life must be found in consumption, in the use of goods.

[. . .] The world of consumption is in reality the world of the mutual spectacularization of everyone, the world of everyone's separation, estrangement and nonparticipation. [. . .]

7

Outside of work, the spectacle is the dominant mode through which people relate to each other. It is only through the spectacle that people acquire a (falsified) knowledge of certain general aspects of social life, from scientific or

technological achievements to prevailing types of conduct and orchestrated meetings of international statesmen. The relation between authors and spectators is only a transposition of the fundamental relation between directors and executants. It answers perfectly to the needs of a reified and alienated culture: the spectacle/spectator relation is in itself a staunch bearer of the capitalist order. The ambiguity of all 'revolutionary art' lies in the fact that the revolutionary aspect of any particular spectacle is always contradicted and offset by the reactionary element present in all spectacles.

This is why the improvement of capitalist society means to a great degree the improvement of the mechanism of spectacularization. This is obviously a complex mechanism, for if it must be most essentially the propagator of the capitalist order, it nevertheless must not appear to the public as the delirium of capitalism; it must involve the public by incorporating elements of representation that correspond – in fragments – to social rationality. It must sidetrack the desires whose satisfaction is forbidden by the ruling order. For example, modern mass tourism presents cities and landscapes not in order to satisfy authentic desires to live in such human or geographical milieus; it presents them as pure, rapid, superficial spectacles (spectacles from which one can gain prestige by reminiscing about). Similarly, striptease is the most obvious form of the degradation of eroticism into a mere spectacle.

8

The evolution and the conservation of art have been governed by these lines of force. At one pole, art is purely and simply recuperated by capitalism as a means of conditioning the population. At the other pole, capitalism grants art a perpetual privileged concession: that of pure creative activity, an alibi for the alienation of all other activities (which thus makes it the most expensive and prestigious status symbol). But at the same time, this sphere reserved for 'free creative activity' is the only one in which the question of what we do with life and the question of communication are posed practically and in all their fullness. Here, in art, lies the basis of the antagonisms between partisans and adversaries of the officially dictated reasons for living. The established meaninglessness and separation give rise to the general crisis of traditional artistic means – a crisis linked to the experience of alternative ways of living or to the demand for such experience. Revolutionary artists are those who call for intervention; and who have themselves intervened in the spectacle to disrupt and destroy it.

20 July 1960

V Perspectives for Conscious Alterations in Everyday Life

Capitalist civilization has not yet been superseded anywhere, but it continues to produce its own enemies everywhere. The next rise of the revolutionary movement, radicalized by the lessons of past defeats and with a program enriched in proportion to the practical powers of modern society (powers already

constituting the potential material basis that was lacking in the so-called utopian currents of socialism – this next attempt at a total contestation of capitalism will know how to invent and propose a different use of everyday life, and will immediately base itself on new everyday practices, on new types of human relationships (being no longer unaware that any conserving, within the revolutionary movement, of the relations prevailing in the existing society imperceptibly leads to a reconstitution of one or another variant of this society).

Just as the bourgeoisie, in its ascending phase, had to ruthlessly liquidate everything that transcended earthly life (heaven, eternity), so the revolutionary proletariat – which can never, without ceasing to be revolutionary, recognize itself in any past or any models – will have to renounce everything that transcends everyday life. Or rather, everything that claims to transcend it: the spectacle, the 'historical' act or pronouncement, the 'greatness' of leaders, the mystery of specializations, the 'immortality' of art and its importance outside of life. In other words, it must renounce all the by-products of eternity that have survived as weapons of the world of the rulers.

The revolution in everyday life, breaking its present resistance to the historical (and to every kind of change), will create the conditions in which *the present dominates* the past and the creative aspects of life always predominate over the repetitive. [. . .]

The critique and perpetual re-creation of the totality of everyday life, before being carried out naturally by all people, must be undertaken in the present conditions of oppression, in order to destroy these conditions.

An avant-garde cultural movement, even one with revolutionary sympathies, cannot accomplish this. Neither can a revolutionary party on the traditional model, even if it accords a large place to criticism of culture (understanding by that term the entirety of artistic and conceptual means through which a society explains itself to itself and shows itself goals of life). This culture and this politics are worn out and it is not without reason that most people take no interest in them. The revolutionary transformation of everyday life, which is not reserved for some vague future but is placed immediately before us by the development of capitalism and its unbearable demands – the alternative being the reinforcement of the modern slavery – this transformation will mark the end of all unilateral artistic expression stocked in the form of commodities, at the same time as the end of all specialized politics.

This is going to be the task of a new type of revolutionary organization from its inception.

17 May 1961

Seeking Deeper Contact

Interactive Art as Metacommentary

Erkki Huhtamo[1]

Abstract: The term 'interactivity' has been applied to such a diverse range of technological forms that its meaning has become unclear. Furthermore, a number of contradictions underlie the concept and raise innumerable questions. This article argues that one way of approaching this problematic area is through the analysis of interactive art, since much recent work can be read as a 'metacommentary' on the state of interactivity. Through a detailed discussion of a small selection of work and their modes of address, the paper endeavours to demonstrate how interactive art can de-mythicise and de-automate prevailing discourses and applications of interactivity and thereby undertake a cultural critique of the nature of interactivity.

Introduction 'Interactivity' has become one of the keywords of the techno-saturated culture of the 1990s. We have seen a proliferation of all kinds of *things interactive* from computer games and interactive television to interactive banking, shopping and networking. Interactivity is featured daily in a growing number of public discourses, from entertainment and education to marketing and even art. This proliferation and simultaneous diversification has obscured rather than clarified the concept and the range of meanings assigned to it. For example, it is not easy to fit the various 'off-line' and 'on-line' applications (epitomised by the differences between CD-ROM-based multimedia and the Internet) under the same 'interactivity umbrella'. As early as 1990, one critic called interactivity the 'already soggy buzzword of the 90s'.[2] If it ever had any conceptual integrity, it is quickly disappearing. The word, and its most fashionable derivative, *interactive media*, are rapidly becoming mere floating signifiers.[3]

Yet, one might argue that the spreading of computer-mediated interactivity in the realm of our everyday lives *does* make a difference: it changes our relationship to the audio-visual experience by accustoming us to a new subject position.[4] A case in point is video and computer games, which have been instrumental in the process. They are ubiquitous and have a strong holding power, persuading the player into repeated, cyclical intercourse. They 'automate' the interaction, leading the player to 'think with his/her fingers'. Yet, instead of just being a bystander, the player is also given a sense of being an agent. The games challenge him/her, promising mastery as a reward for

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surmounting increasingly complex obstacles. The player enters 'microworlds', not just to observe, but to reorganise and to – at least virtually – change them as well.[5] The subject position constituted by computer-based games seems more dynamic and 'responsive' than those constituted by mainstream cinema and broadcast television.[6]

Thus, it has been asserted that interactive systems position us in a 'conversational' situation: '[t]he model of interaction is a conversation versus a lecture'.[7] But with whom or with what this conversation takes place (e.g. the machine, the software, the maker 'behind' the software, oneself, other people or 'avatars', non-human but human-like entities etc.) is a much more complex question. And the nature of the 'conversation' obviously depends on the application in question. On-line interaction, for example, is not merely a new channel of 'human-to-human' interaction *via* the Internet (as opposed to the 'isolation' of playing with Nintendo's *Virtual Boy*, for example) – as has been suggested by its champions – but a highly complex system of interfaces, information filters and virtual partnerships with human *and* non-human partners. The nature of interactive networking specifically and its conversational modes, however, lay beyond the scope of this article and would require a separate study.

Brenda Laurel and other interface researchers have also proceeded from the notion of human-computer 'conversation' to that of the *common ground*.[8] The metaphor of conversation implies an exchange between more or less distinct entities separated/mediated by an interface (concrete/mental), whereas the idea of common ground is more symbiotic: it implies sharing 'mutual knowledge, mutual beliefs, and mutual assumptions'.[9] If both human and computer can gradually learn to inhabit this shared terrain, so the argument goes, the result will be the growing 'transparency' of the interface (to the point of its 'disappearance') and the eventual dissolution of their respective identities. The basic assumption is that there is a growing 'naturalness', immediacy and intimacy to the human-machine relationship.[10]

However, these notions are problematic, particularly if viewed from a wider social and cultural perspective. Yet this problematic is by no means new; issues relating to the human-machine encounter have been raised since the advent of the industrial revolution.[11] The relationship has most often been presented in terms of clear polar opposites, with the machine positioned, for instance, as the humble servant to its human 'master' or as a rebellious monster.[12] In the age of interactivity, this oppositional logic seems to be in the process of being superseded by one of integration and merger: cyborg logic. The traditional distinctions seem to be collapsing, but, of course, the figure of the cyborg has its own cultural contradictions.

Some of the problematics and contradictions underlying 'interactivity' become evident if we look at interactivity in relation to such concepts as

automation, anthropomorphism and immersion. Automation as a cultural idea has been deeply intertwined with the idea of modernisation.[13] Automated machines were said to eliminate physical work, but they also eliminated (continuous, tactile) contact with the machine which functioned independently (yet safely under control). In a sense the television set was a 'paradigmatic' piece of automated technology, just like the automatic washing machine: the active intervention of the human subject was restricted to certain controlling and programming functions.[14] If interactivity really has become a paradigmatic model for our relationship to technology, it needs to be related to the wider social and ideological questions raised by the aftermath of modernity. Why embrace interactivity in place of the (seemingly) greater ease offered by automatic devices? Why desire a constant intercourse with machines instead of a simple sense of mastery? That said, *is* there a clear-cut distinction?

Interactive systems are also often presented in anthropomorphic terms, with the interface disguised as a 'face', a partner with human-like attributes. But is technology really getting more human-like or are we becoming more machine-like: cyborgs? What are the psychological and cultural effects of anthropomorphised technology? Shouldn't computerised gadgets be presented as what they 'really' are – non-human entities – instead of dressing them up as our peers? Yet, what if the anthropomorphism extends, after all, 'beneath the surface', to the 'soul' of the machine? And finally, the concept of immersion is often evoked in connection with interactive technology. It refers to the 'bond' created between the user and the machine, defining the moment of (virtual) 'penetration' into the system. Although immersion seems to imply an active 'rush' (resonating with masculine sexual connotations) *into* something, its equation with interactivity would be misleading. 'Being immersed' into something can be a passive experience, too, aided by the temporary suspension of one's own will.

Towards a new assessment of interactivity

And there are other questions to ask. Do interactive systems have a liberating or rather a *constraining* effect on us (e.g. in 'interactive marketing')? How much of their 'interactive potential' is hype – simulated rather than 'real'? Should interactive systems contain a didactic subtext explicitly guiding the user or should they be 'intuitive', relying on trial and error? What possibilities do interactive systems offer for counter-readings and counter-uses? Does it matter that many of them are 'toy-versions' of those developed by the military-industrial complex for surveillance and destruction? For, as Margaret Morse has shown, there isn't necessarily any phenomenological difference between the experience of playing a video game and waging a 'remote-controlled' war: '[t]he virtual presentation does not necessarily signal the appropriate degree of belief to lend what we see, hear and experience. A simulation can become remote action and be virtually identical as to the look and response of symbols on display.'[15]

One way of approaching these questions is by analysing interactive artworks, since it can provide at least some partial answers. Since the late 1980s there has been a significant surge in interactive art practices – although their 'roots' and 'preforms' can of course be traced back to earlier periods, from Dadaism and Constructivism to the 'participatory' and 'responsive' art forms of the 1960s.[16] This surge is obviously related to the emergence of interactive technology from the R&D environment and its establishment as a commonplace authoring tool, a media-cultural consumer item and a bulging discursive figure.[17] Yet, just like the field of interactivity in general, the field of interactive art is not homogeneous, but split between different production and exhibition contexts – schematically identified as 'the art world' and 'the computer world' – which impose their own definitions.[18] Some interactive installations are independent productions or supported by public-cultural funds, whereas other pieces claiming the label of 'art' have originated within or on the fringes of the military-industrial complex. And in the case of interactive artworks produced within or on the fringes of the corporate world, it could be claimed that their main intention is to promote products and to camouflage the less philanthropic aspects of corporate profiles.[19] In this sense interactive art is part of the obscurity and lack of definition surrounding the concept of interactivity. However, a significant proportion of interactive art is *also* actively trying to make sense of itself, as well as of the more general context.

Whereas the technological art of the 1960s and 1970s often had a scientific and formalistic orientation (aimed at unleashing the unused and undiscovered potential 'hidden' in new technologies), much recent work highlights the ideological, cultural and social issues enveloping technology and largely giving it its identity. Such works can be read as a continuing 'metacommentary' on the state of interactivity, and a discussion of some of this kind of work forms the main focus of this article. The term 'metacommentary' is used to refer to an art practice which continuously de-mythicises and de-automates prevailing discourses and applications of interactivity 'from the inside', utilising the very same technologies for different ends. It probes (and sometimes anticipates) technological breakthroughs and, most importantly, raises ethico-philosophical issues. By displacing prevailing applications from their culturally legitimised sites, such an art practice undertakes a cultural critique of the nature of interactivity. At the same time, it is also concerned with its own historical roots and preforms which are traced back beyond the digital era.[20]

It would be misleading, however, to claim that such work represents the entire spectrum of interactive art. There is, for example, much significant artistic activity in the field of artificial life – such as the work of Christa Sommerer and Laurent Mignonneau, Karl Sims, Michael Tolson, to name but a few – which is more closely related to the scientific and formalistic lineage mentioned above. Yet even here, it is important to

make a distinction between a creative software engineer and an artist, difficult though it may be. Art is not just about building gadgets or writing innovative code; it is about cultural consciousness, ethics and the politics of representation. Due to space limitations, however, I have chosen to exclude this body of work, as well as the artistic activity currently taking place on the Internet. This is not to suggest that such work is not relevant to my argument, but rather that I have specifically focused my investigation on some of the ways *other* kinds of interactive art practices are contributing to a new assessment of interactivity. Although this limits the range of work under consideration, the aim is to demonstrate an argument, rather than present a comprehensive survey.