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The Fate of the Avant-garde:
Contemporary Art in Glasgow and the Postmodernism of Resistance

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Preface

This essay is not offered up as comprehensive account of contemporary political art in Glasgow. The word space available has not allowed for an exhaustive discussion of all the individuals and events which contribute to that story. Instead, I have attempted to present and discuss a representative sample of the alternative art scene in the city, as it has developed over the past few years, in addition to looking at political art work which situates itself in the mainstream of the art world.

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Abstract

This thesis examines the question of left wing cultural politics in the postmodern era and art in Glasgow, c. 1985 - 1992. The work is based on original research, including a series of interviews between the author and various members of the art community in Glasgow.

The introduction sets out the theoretical background to the dissertation, clarifying the usage of the terms 'avant-garde' and 'postmodernism of resistance'. The 'avant-garde' is identified as the impulse to protest against the status quo in modernism, while the 'postmodernism of resistance' is the inheritor of that project in the era beyond modernism. The problematics of counter-culture in the present are then discussed, with the conclusion that there are indeed ways in which a postmodernism of resistance might operate.

The empirical section of the thesis - chapters two to four - discusses the Glaswegian art scene in terms of the question of resistant postmodernism. Chapter two looks at painters in the mainstream art world, concentrating on the work of Ken Currie and Margaret Hunter. Chapter three looks at artists initiatives and site specific work in the city, dividing this scene into three camps: young artists who work in this way in the absence of opportunity in the official gallery circuit, but in the hope of breaking into this world; the radical socialist art scene; and, the feminist initiative Women In Profile. The fourth chapter discusses the work of Cranhill Arts, a community arts project in the Greater Easterhouse area.

The thesis concludes that Glasgow does support a radical arts scene. A number of groups and individuals in the city have dedicated themselves to promoting a culture of resistance and the artistic expression of dissent. These artists can claim to be successful in their endeavours in as far a they set up the conditions whereby their work can forcefully communicate its critique of dominant culture and politics to its chosen audience.

Contents

Chapter One - Introduction

Introduction

"And yet this much is clear: in the face of a
culture of reaction on all sides, a practice of
resistance is needed"[1]

This dissertation seeks to examine the fate of the avant-garde
project in this, a post-avantgardiste era; that is, to explore the
possibility of a "postmodernism of resistance".[2] Modernist art
had, in its hey-day, a certain critical force. Now, however,
thinkers on the Left feel that this modernist impulse to criticism
of the status quo has been neutralised, just as modernism itself
has become the new establishment. What, then, are the
possibilities for effective political critique through art in the
period beyond modernism? The work on hand hopes to address
this issue in relation to a specific and concrete object of study -
the contemporary Glaswegian art scene. Glasgow was chosen
because it offers rich ground for such an enquiry. The city has
experienced an art boom in recent years, as a result of the
'Glasgow Boys' phenomenon of the 1980's, and the build up to the
much-hyped European Capital of Culture celebrations in 1990. In
Britain, it has become the main focus of attention outside London
for the art world and its media, and this has nourished a thriving
local art scene.

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[1] Hal Foster, "Postmodernism: A Preface", The Anti-Aesthetic, ed. H.Foster,
Washington, 1983, p. xvi.
[2] Ibid., p.xii.

Before going on to look at the actual situations and production of artists in Glasgow, it seems necessary to define my usage of the term 'avant-garde' and the concept of the 'postmodernism of resistance'. In this chapter, I wish to establish my understanding of the parameters and agenda of the historical avant-garde movements, and thus to clarify my understanding of what is meant by the 'avant-garde project'. I will argue that it is identifiable with the modernist protest against capitalist society. This chapter will go on to offer an account of how the fate of the historical avant-garde has conditioned the circumstances in which contemporary art with an oppositional agenda has to manoeuvre, and to discuss the problematics of cultural resistance generally at the present time.

The Notion of the Avant-garde

"The concept of the avant-garde is highly ambiguous. There is not a single definition of this term but many. In the last one hundred and fifty years, since the concept first began to be used, members of different art movements and their critics have defined it in a variety of ways. Many authors use the term to refer to almost any art movement while others apply it to certain types of art styles rather than others, generally those that are in opposition either to dominant social values or to established artistic conventions. "[3]

Given the significance of the notion 'avant-garde' as a key term in the understanding of oppositional art practices in the 20th century and given its vagueness of meaning in general usage, I would like first to discuss the main, competing definitions of this

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[3]Diana Crane, The Transformation of the Avant-Garde - The New York Art World 1940 - 1985, 1987, p. 11.

concept in order to establish its history and to arrive at a clear and specific usage for the purpose of this dissertation.

'Avant-garde' is a military metaphor of French origin which, in the 19th century, was adopted to designate the radical Left in politics, and from here, became applied to certain cultural and artistic phenomena. At first, it referred to the production of artists sympathetic to these politics and later to the aesthetic avant-garde or artists who made a practice of transgressing stylistic norms.[4] These latter two usages are still the subject of theoretical dispute. Recently, two important strands of theorising about the nature and definition of the avant-garde have been represented by Renato Poggioli and Peter Bürger respectively, in books which share the same title: The Theory of the Avant-Garde.[5] The former reflects the approach of Anglo-American scholarship, where 'avant-garde' and 'modernism' have been understood as congruent terms, used interchangeably in many cases.[6] This understanding of the term corresponds to its usage to describe aesthetically transgressive art movements. The latter forges a historically specific characterisation of the avant-garde, fixing the term to the avant-garde movements of the twenties and thirties, and thus to art with a radical social agenda.

Poggioli's theory of the avant-garde reflects a broad and influential tradition of thought on the subject. For Poggioli, then,

[4]Renato Poggioli, The Theory of the Avant-Garde, Cambridge, Mass.,1968, p. 9-11.

[5]Peter Bürger, The Theory of the Avant-Garde, Minneapolis,1984, and Poggioli, op. cit.

[6]Jochen Schulte-Sasse, "Foreword: Theory of Modernism versus Theory of Avant-Garde", in Bürger, op. cit., pp. xiv-xv.

as for thinkers in the English speaking tradition ranging from Clement Greenberg to Rosalind Krauss, the avant-garde is equated with modernism. The two are conflated as a culture of negation and transgression, of anti-tradition, of resistance to the vulgarity of capitalist society, a cult of the new and original, of radical stylistic innovation, where modernism is a monolith characterised by succeeding vanguard movements. The assumption entailed by this approach is that avant-garde art derives from the dichotomy between cliched forms and experimental ones, between conventionality and originality, where those experimental forms are a cathartic, therapeutic response to the debasement of public languages when put at the service of instrumental reason in bourgeois, capitalist society.[7] In this tradition of thought, the radical shift towards avant-garde rejection of cliched forms, in short, the shift to modernism, occurs in the mid 19th century, though its roots are to be found at the beginning of the bourgeois era in the late 18th century with the Romantic cult of originality.[8]

Schulte-Sasse has pointed out that Poggioli's theory, based on the positing of the dichotomy between avant-garde and conventional forms, "cannot accomplish what must be the primary task of a 'theory of the avant-garde': to characterise with theoretical accuracy the historical uniqueness of the avant-garde movements of the 1920s..."[9] Because it would have to be stretched to cover art from the 18th century onwards it would become "an empty slogan, no longer able to help us distinguish romanticism,

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[7] Ibid., p. viii.
[8] Ibid., pp. ix, x, xii.
[9] Ibid., p. x.

symbolism, aestheticism, the avant-garde and postmodernism from each other."[10]

Peter Bürger's approach avoids this pitfall by locating a radical historical shift from aesthetic modernism to the historical avant-garde at the turn of the 20th century. Thus, he is able to give a precise and historically specific definition of the term 'avant-garde', characterising it as a phenomenon which, while conditioned by the development of art as an institution in bourgeois society, is fundamentally distinct from what had gone before.

Bürger does not recognise the usage of 'avant-garde' as a word for a general feature of modernism - the cult of the new allied to iconoclasm and hatred of tradition. His proposal is that the term describes the period in art history when artists, enabled to recognise art as an institution as a result of the historical development of art as an autonomous sphere in bourgeois society, turn around and criticise the institutional form it takes:

> "With the historical avant-garde movements, the social subsystem that is art enters the stage of self-criticism. Dadaism, the most radical movement within the European avant-garde, no longer criticises schools that preceded it, but criticises art as an institution and the course its development took in bourgeois society."[11]

For Bürger, as for Adorno et al., art since the Enlightenment has been characterised by an increasing tendency towards separation

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[10]Ibid., p. viii.
[11]Bürger, op. cit., p. 22.

from society and from the life practice of men, in parallel with the division of labour and the emergence of distinct spheres of academic enquiry. He does not wish to offer a correct historical explanation for this, but is content to say that it must be attributed to a combination of many factors.[12] Art in the bourgeois era, then, has a special status, which Bürger feels is best described as 'autonomous'. The concept of autonomy is a very complex one and to give a full account of its meaning would exceed the scope of this essay, but suffice to say that for Bürger, autonomous art is relatively independent in the face of demands that it be socially useful. It is a sphere set apart from the means-ends rationality of the rest of life.[13] This increasing separateness is characterised within art itself by the withering of the category of content in art in favour of form. The development reaches its apotheosis in late 19th century aestheticism when art itself becomes the subject of art. At this point for Bürger:

"The apartness from the praxis of life that had always constituted the institutional status of art in bourgeois society now becomes the content of works. Institutional frame and content coincide."[14]

The tension created by this development triggers the radical shift in the history of art which Bürger postulates as the avant-garde phenomenon:

"At the moment it has shed all that is alien to it, art necessarily becomes problematic for itself. As institution and content coincide, social ineffectuality stands revealed as the essence of

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[12]Ibid., p. 38.
[13]Ibid., p. 24 - 25.
[14]Ibid., p. 27.

art in bourgeois society, and thus provokes the
self-criticism of art. It is to the credit of the
historical avant-garde movements that they
supplied this self-criticism."[15]

Thus, the culmination of the formalist impulse in art triggers two
key reactions. First, the completion of the historical development
towards the autonomy of art as an institution. Second, artists
recognise art's institutional nature and consequently see that the
price they pay for autonomy is the loss of the power to affect
society. According to Bürger, it was the project of the historical
avant-garde movements, that is, Dada and Surrealism, to break
out of this ivory tower and bring art into the praxis of life.[16]
However, that did not mean putting art at the service of society as
it stood, or reintegrating it into the bourgeois everyday. Bürger,
with Adorno, sees the retreat into 'l'art pour l'art' as a form of
rebellion, a severing of art's ties with a society it did not want to
serve. From this viewpoint, aesthetic modernism was a stance of
resistance, a place of intellectual hibernation in bad times - hence
Adorno's repeated attempts to vindicate it.[17] According to Bürger,
the historical avant-garde assented to aestheticism's rejection of
the bourgeois everyday. It sought, however, to attack art's
institutional status in the attempt to use it as a vehicle for social
change. By breaking down the boundaries between art and life,
the attempt was to organise a new life practice from a basis in
art.[18]

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[15]Ibid., p. 27.
[16]Ibid., p. 49.
[17]Ibid., p. 33 - 34.
[18]Ibid., p. 49.

Of the two approaches to the avant-garde outlined above, I consider Bürger's the more useful for thinking about cultural politics in the present. With Schulte-Sasse, I feel that theories of the avant-garde which equate it with modernism stretch the concept too far, leaving it unwieldy and unproductive. Bürger makes the important distinction between Dada and Surrealism and the modern movements which preceded them on the basis of the former movements' social and political ambitions, contrasting with the latters' concern with formal innovation and rejection of things extraneous to art. He characterises the 'avant-garde' as the moment in art history when certain artists became aware of art's institutional status in modern society, and saw how its function and power are circumscribed by that status. On the basis of this recognition, their project became that of criticising art as an institution [self criticism] in an attempt to make it a vehicle for radical social change.

Bürger's theory isolates a usage of the term avant-garde to designate art with a radical social agenda as opposed to a radical aesthetic agenda. This avant-garde can be associated with an aspect of modernism which is important to the discussion of a postmodernism of resistance. Jürgen Habermas has identified it as 'the incomplete project of modernity',[19] that is, the impulse in modernism to explicit criticism of and resistance to capitalist society in the name of the Enlightenment ideals of liberty, equality and fraternity. The failure of the avant-garde [characterised in this way] to deliver its mission has left its project

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[19]Jürgen Habermas, "Modernity - An Incomplete Project", in Foster, op. cit., pp. 3-15.

more pressing than ever, and has conditioned the landscape in which contemporary art with critical political ambitions has to move.

The Failure of the Avant-garde and its Effect.

" ...modernism, at least as a tradition, has 'won' - but its victory is a Pyrrhic one no different than defeat, for modernism is now largely absorbed. Originally oppositional, modernism defied the cultural order of the bourgeoisie and the 'false normativity' [Habermas] of its history; today, however, it is the official culture. As Jameson notes, we entertain it: its once scandalous productions are in the university, in the museum, in the street. In short, modernism, as even Habermas writes, seems dominant but dead."[20]

"once the signed bottle drier has been accepted as an object that deserves a place in a museum, the provocation no longer provokes; it turns into its opposite. If an artist today signs a stove pipe and exhibits it, that artist certainly does not denounce the art market but adapts to it."[21] (Fig.1)

It is beyond doubt, then, that the historical avant-garde movements failed to achieve their utopian objective . Art as an institution proved resistant to attack, and the attempt to transform society from within art has, of course, been unsuccessful: art did not merge into other activities in the context of a new society, a society characterised by such unalienated labour. On the contrary, as Bürger, Foster et al. have pointed out, the productions of the avant-garde were absorbed by the institution art, becoming grist to the mill. One important

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[20]Foster,op. cit., p. ix.
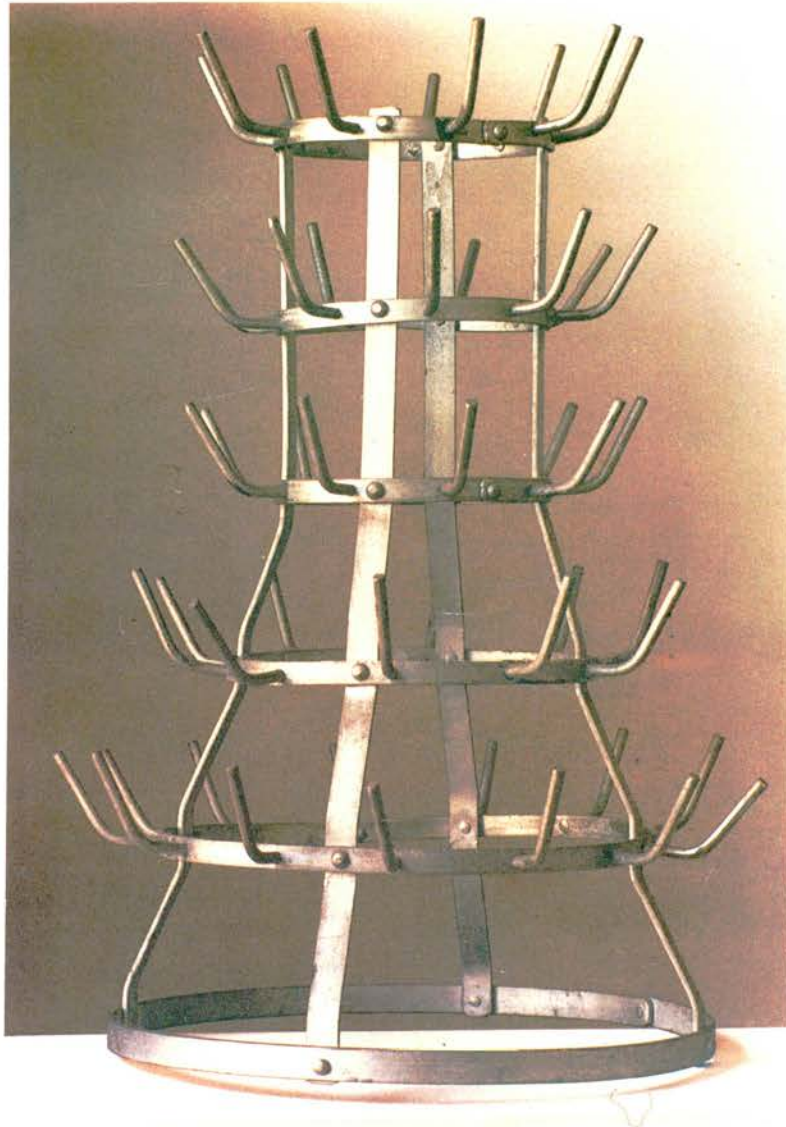[21]Bürger, op. cit., p. 52.

Fig.1 Marcel Duchamp, <u>Bottle Drier</u>, 1914.

Readymade: galvanised iron bottle drier.

consequence of this has been the expansion of the category art, the stretching of the definition of the artistically acceptable, a development which has problematised the issue of politically oppositional art, shifting the arena in which it might operate. As Bürger has put it, the successors to the mantle of the avant-garde must consider that:

> "a contemporary aesthetic can no more neglect the incisive changes that the historical avant-garde movements effected in the realm of art than it can ignore that art has long since entered a post-avantgardiste phase."[22]

I would now like to look at this development in more detail; it seems necessary to give a brief account of the avant-garde's line of action and then to look at its results.

The avant-garde attack on art's autonomy status in bourgeois society was perpetrated through a network of interconnecting strategies, concentrating on both the production and consumption of art works. For example, there was the attempt to undermine the process whereby art objects are commodified and, concomitantly, to subvert the view of such works as acts of original individual creativity. Concrete instances of this line of attack might include the Readymades of Duchamp. Duchamp's practice of buying mass produced objects, [about which he claimed to feel totally indifferent] signing them, and placing them in an art gallery, ridiculed the conventions of artistic production and the popular view of creativity and mocked the sacrosanct status of the art object. Another such tactic was the staging of Dadaist events

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[22]Ibid., p. 57.

and performances where the audience would be whipped up into a collective response, often one of verbal abuse and fisticuffs. These were one-off occasions and although some of their flavour might be recaptured through photographs and contemporary accounts, as art works they were not reducible to object form and were not therefore easily recuperable by the market.

This last example introduces another important strategy in the avant-garde attack on art's autonomy, that is, the attempt to alter the context of reception for art. The dadaist practice of instigating a collective response to an art work subverted the convention governing this in our culture - that of individual, solitary contemplation before the object. In changing the way in which art was to be consumed, the aim was to erase the distinctions between its consumption and production. Benjamin, theorist and associate of the avant-garde movements, identified this as an imperative for artists committed to revolutionary politics:

> "Only by transcending the specialisation in the process of production which, in the bourgeois view, constitutes its order, is this production made politically valuable; and the limits imposed by specialisation must be breached jointly by both the productive forces that they were set up to divide."[23]

> "What matters therefore is the exemplary character of production, which is able first to induce other producers to produce, and second, to put an improved apparatus at their disposal. And this apparatus is better the more consumers it is able to turn into producers, that is readers or spectators into collaborators."[24]

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[23]Walter Benjamin, "The Author as Producer", <u>Modern Art and Modernism</u>, Frascina & Harrison eds., London, 1982, pp. 215 - 16.

[24]Ibid., p. 216.

To end the distinction between art practice and life practice would be to attack the division of labour under capitalism, to undermine one of the vital structuring principles of the status quo. Examples of such tactics in Surrealism and Dada might include Tzara's instructions for the writing of a Dada poem and Breton's for the writing of automatic texts, pieces which have the character of recipes. The idea was that such activities would not be designated artistic, but would be so integrated into the rest of life as to be indistinguishable as such.[25]

The antics of the avant-garde did have a certain temporary effectiveness. These movements exerted a degree of radical force in that the meanings generated by their productions were antagonistic to the established order. In their hey-day, they were able to shock and offend the audience for art. But shock as a strategy can only be effective in the short term and the endeavour to produce revolutionary social change on the part of the avant-garde foundered. Indeed, because it was absorbed, the long term effect of the avant-garde protest was to enrich and expand art as a category and thus to consolidate its function under capitalism. Art's institutional nature was unaffected, its autonomy status was unbreached, therefore its function remained the same. Any change brought about by the avant-garde could only be internal to art; on the level of the content of art works, as with previous modernisms. Once the initial horrified public reaction had worn off, the productions of Dada and Surrealism acquired that very marketable glamour of notoriety and novelty, just as

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[25]Burger, op. cit., p. 53

those of the aesthetic modernists had before them. Ironically, the potential for their absorption and commodification lay in their very radicality and iconoclasm, which, powerless as such, was recuperable to the market. Inevitably, then, the avant-garde found its way into museums and private collections, and its protagonists became grand old men of the art world.

The failure of the avant-garde project had two important consequences. The first, as indicated above, was the transformation of the category of the work of art. As Bürger has put it, the traditional concept of the organic work of art was destroyed and replaced by a new one, that of the inorganic work.[26] A space was opened in the artistic fold for a range of divergent activities and works. After the Readymades, photo-montages, performance events and films had been accepted as art works, a precedent had been set for pop, conceptual and performance art. These more recent movements have sprung up from within the canon, and therefore their manifestations cannot function as gestures of protest in the same way as those of the historical avant-gardes did.

The second consequence of the failure of the avant-garde to change society was to draw attention to art's social function and status in the first place, and to raise the question of whether radical cultural politics are possible at all, given that status and the failure of the attempt to change it from within the fold. Influential theorists on the political left have usually interpreted

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[26]Ibid., p. 59.

art's institutional function in society as a profoundly ambiguous one. The vital contribution of the historical avant-garde was to make art as an institution visible by attacking it, thus making its theorisation possible. The question of how or whether art could be a means of resistance to bourgeois society was addressed by such theories. I want now to outline two different understandings of the resistant impulse in modernism, and its potential, which come from within that body of theory. These two approaches have been highly influential on the debate about art and politics in modernism, and are therefore important in setting a background to the contemporary discussion of cultural politics.

For many theorists, the autonomy of art in modernism is a phenomenon which has to be understood in its contradictions - it works negatively and positively in relationship to bourgeois society, both undermining and sustaining the status quo. Adorno conceived of autonomous art, in the sense of high modernism, as an endangered medium which resists the general tendencies of capitalist society, but which, in this very resistance, is socially ineffective because of lack of communicable content. Aesthetic modernism was a space cleansed of practical interests: even the activity of critical reflection on society was foregone. It resisted the subjugating forces of the times by creating a realm free of instrumental reasoning and the cliched linguistic or visual forms of the every-day, free of reference to anything external to art, resistant to recuperation through its opacity. Adorno adhered to the Hegelian axiom that art must be related to social totality, but, for him, art abstained from communication and reflection on society. This meant, as mentioned above, that art provided a

place of hibernation in bad times, but, concomitantly, could not be an agent for social change.[27]

Adorno, then, was a champion of aesthetic modernism, seeing it as a beleaguered position beyond the subjugating, totalising arena of capitalism. His theory of culture is ultimately pessimistic. Schulte-Sasse has written of Adorno and Derrida that -

> "Both theories are limited because they take capitalist, bourgeois society to be closed, a monolith without ruptures that would allow intervening practice. Both theories attach themselves to a social and political pessimism in the face of the monolith."[28]

Adorno's influence on the debate about modernism has been considerable. His thought informs the work of contemporary theorists who subscribe to the notion that capitalism is a totalising force, beyond whose meanings we cannot move and which therefore successfully dominates our understanding of reality.

Theories of modernism influenced by Marcuse, conceive of the negative/positive balance of art's autonomous status in a different way. For Marcuse, art performs a contradictory function in relationship to capitalism in that it protests against society but compensates for what society lacks. Psychological needs which are not satisfied in every day life can find a home in art, which then becomes the domain of creativity, individuality, irrationality etc. Thus, art realises the image of a better order, but in fiction

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[27] Here I have borrowed from Schulte-Sasse's account of Adorno's theory of modernism. For the full account, see Schulte Sasse, op. cit., pp. xv - xix.

[28] Ibid., p. xxx.

only. Ultimately, this works to affirm the status quo, relieving the pressures which make for political change.[29] This account of art's function in society does not necessarily make for pessimism about the potential of a critical cultural politics. Thomas Crow has argued in favour of the potentially disruptive power resident in this Marcusian conception of modernist art:

> "As it [*high capitalism*] displaced resistant impulses, it also gave them a refuge in a relatively unregulated social space where contrary social definitions could survive, and occasionally flourish. Much of this was and is, obviously, permitted disorder. Managed consensus depends on a compensating balance between submission and negotiated resistance within leisure - Marcuse's 'repressive desublimation'. But once that zone of permitted freedom exists, it can be seized by groups which articulate for themselves a counter-consensual identity, an implicit message of rupture and discontinuity."[30]

Crow thus points out that some form of cultural resistance is possible within the fold of commodity culture, an issue which will be examined in the next section.

In summary, Marcuse's analysis of art's social function is more useful to the topic on hand than Adorno's theory. Adorno gives an account specifically of *modernist* art and its ambiguous nature. He saw aesthetic modernism as a space for resistance when understood as distinct from mass culture, which was the propaganda machine of capitalism. At the present time, when art and culture are considered to have moved beyond modernism, the

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[29]Bürger, op. cit., p. 50.
[30]Thomas Crow, "Modernism and Mass Culture", Pollock and After: The Critical Debate, Frascina ed., 1985, p. 246.

distinctions between high and low culture are blurred, if, indeed, as Crow has argued[31], they were ever distinct. The autonomous realm of modernist art, as characterised by Adorno, does not now exist, or at least, is no longer a bastion of resistance. Thus in the contemporary context, Adorno's theory can offer no hope. Because Marcuse addresses the position and function of art in commodity culture generally, his ideas are pertinent to the current period. Moreover, his dialectical conception of art's function in relation to capitalism allows for optimism about the project of cultural resistance, even in a situation where everything is ultimately recuperable to the market. For Crow, following Marcuse, art is ultimately affirmative to capitalist culture, but in the process, sets up a constantly shifting space for dissent. I would like to explore this idea of a shifting space for dissent in the context of a discussion of a postmodernism of resistance.

So far, this essay has considered the idea of the avant-garde in an attempt to trace the history of politically radical art in the modern era. The first section outlined a more specific meaning for the term avant-garde - that of the modernist impulse of resistance to capitalist society, which was associated in its most radical and self conscious form with the historical avant-garde movements. This section set out some ideas about the state of art and politics in modernism given the failure of that avant-garde to cause revolutionary change. My intention has been to sketch a background to the issue of resistant culture now. Specifically, I wanted to establish my own understanding of what Habermas

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31 Ibid.

calls 'the incomplete project of modernity', linking it with Bürger's account of the avant-garde and its project. The idea has been to give an outline of the impulse in art towards critical engagement with society, an impulse which is often identified with modernism. Next I want to discuss the fate of this 'avantgardist' impulse in the era of postmodernism; to examine the possibilities for an effective culture of resistance at the present time.

A Postmodernism of Resistance?

> "As for the postmodern revolt against all that, however, it must be stressed that its own offensive features - from obscurity and sexually explicit material, to psychological squalor and overt expressions of social and political defiance, which transcend anything that might have been imagined at the most extreme moments of high modernism - no longer scandalize anyone and are not only received with the greatest complacency, but have themselves become institutionalized and are one with the official or public culture of western society."[32]

> "But how can we exceed the modern? How can we break with a program that makes a value of crisis (modernism), or progress beyond the era of Progress (modernity), or transgress the ideology of the transgressive (avant-gardism)?"[33]

Numerous accounts have been written about the question of postmodernism as it concerns the Left, both positive and negative. Theorists such as Jürgen Habermas consider the idea that we are now in a postmodern era to be a false account of the present, proffered by right wing academics and by those on the left who

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[32]Frederic Jameson, Postmodernism or the Cultural Logic of Late Capitalism, London,1990, p. 4.

[33]Foster, op. cit., p. ix.

are naive about its implications. For Habermas, there has been no postmodern break. We are still in a modern era in which the modernist impulse to protest is as vital and necessary as ever. However, following Peter Bürger, it can be said that the failure of the avant-garde project marked the death of modernism in Habermas's sense. Frederic Jameson, writing from a Marxist standpoint in <u>Postmodernism or the Cultural Logic of Late Capitalism</u>, offers an analysis of the resultant situation. He figures among many theorists who have detected an epochal shift, a distinctive historical break with modernism. For Jameson, 'postmodernism' is a term which describes a new historical reality, and as such it would be inappropriate either to celebrate or condemn it. He conveys the mood of the new period with a spatial metaphor: in entering the postmodern, we have entered "the world space of multinational capitalism" a field of stylistic and discursive heterogeneity without a norm.[34] In this arena - the disorientating, debilitating, totalising arena of "global space" [35] - art is wholly absorbed by the multinational capitalist 'machine'. For Jameson, no white space beyond this exists in which protest can be set up. There is no vantage point whence to criticise. Modernism set up its protest through the practice of deviating from norms. At a time when there are no norms in that traditional sense, this protest becomes impossible:

> "No theory of cultural politics current on the Left today has been able to do without one notion or another of a certain minimal aesthetic distance, of the possibility of the positioning of

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[34]Jameson, op. cit., p. 54.
[35]Ibid., p. 49.

the cultural act outside the massive Being of capital, from which to assault this last."[36]

Given this, we have a situation where:

"...we all, in one way or another, dimly feel that not only punctual and local countercultural forms of cultural resistance and guerilla warfare, but also even overtly political interventions like those of 'The Clash' are all somehow secretly disarmed and reabsorbed by a system of which they themselves might well be considered a part, since they can achieve no distance from it."[37]

Thus for Jameson, the possibilities for cultural protest at the present are extremely restricted, if not practically non-existent. Certainly, he feels that criticism as such is no longer an option. Of the cultural critic and moralist he says:

"...the latter, along with the all the rest of us, is now so deeply immersed in postmodernist space, so deeply suffused and infected by its new cultural categories, that the luxury of the old fashioned ideological critique, the indignant moral denunciation of the other, becomes unavailable."[38]

He suggests that the only way forward lies in finding artistic forms through which to represent the "unrepresentable" - J.F. Lyotard's 'postmodern sublime' - to attempt to map the inexpressible and overwhelming complexity of this new world space in order that we might begin to find our feet again. Jameson, then, gives an eloquent and insightful account of contemporary cultural politics, but his theory offers no scope for a

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[36]Ibid., p. 48.
[37]Ibid., p. 49.
[38]Ibid., p. 46.

postmodernism of resistance beyond the new form of realism he proposes. What Schulte-Sasse says of Adorno can also be applied to him: his theory, like Adorno's is socially and politically pessimistic in the face of the monolith of capitalism. As Jameson himself has said:

> "What happens is that the more powerful the vision of some increasingly total system or logic - the Foucault of the prisons book is the obvious example - the more powerless the reader comes to feel. Insofar as the theorist wins, therefore, by constructing an increasingly closed and terrifying machine, to that very degree he loses, since the critical capacity of his work is thereby paralysed, and the impulses of negation and revolt, not to speak of those of social transformation, are increasingly perceived as vain and trivial in the face of the model itself."[39]

It is vital to get beyond this theoretical impasse in order to think productively about the possible forms which oppositional art now could take. While many thinkers argue persuasively that we are living within a totalising, oppressive cultural system, against which there can be no effective protest, it has also been argued that every era contains ideological ruptures to be exploited and offers alternatives of thought.[40]

One way to 'key out' of totalising thinking is to understand contemporary culture as a space where dominant and subordinate ideologies compete with each other to control our view of the world.[41] Because culture is the medium through which we construct our understanding of reality, individual art works and

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[39]Ibid., pp. 5 - 6.

[40]Schulte-Sasse, op. cit., p. xxix.

[41]I have taken my understanding of the concept of ideology from Nicos Hadjinicolaou, quoting Althusser in "Art History and Class Struggle", in Frascina and Harrison eds., op. cit., pp. 243-248.

artists tell stories about the nature of things. Inevitably, those stories come from specific viewpoints and can be used to serve specific interests. When they are told compellingly, they become powerful educational tools, objects which have the ability to suggest, shape and reinforce ideas. Art works can be critical of the world view which serves the interests of dominant groups in society, or they can comply with it, either actively or passively. Jameson argues that art works which are critical of dominant ideology cannot exist at present. In an era where everything coexists numbly within the system of multinational capitalism, there can be no ideology, critical or otherwise.[42] However, though the idea might seem tempting from the perspective of art world ennui, the contemporary period is not characterised by some blank, even-handed plurality of world views, but by the existence of competing and antagonistic ones. Some of these are more dominant than others, and together they represent different groups and interests within society. It is possible, then, that a critique might be launched from an antagonistic perspective against the world view of a dominant group, but the question remains whether that antagonistic perspective can be expressed at all, given the tendency for the ideology of dominant groups to impregnate that of dominated ones, and the ability of dominant groups to appropriate the means of communication for their own use - to mould language itself. The problem for art works which seek to be critical of dominant ideology is that of finding a way to articulate protest. This involves clearing a space in which to voice criticism from within the fold of the art world, an institution

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[42]Jameson, op. cit., p. 53.

which, following Marcuse, is affirmative to society as it is. Though this is an extraordinarily complex endeavour, many artists have attempted it. In order to explore the ways in which it might be done, it is worth discussing some of the strategies these artists have used in the recent past.

Perhaps one of the most important strategies involved is the creation of knowledge about our present situation. The work of Hans Haacke is notable in this respect. He has made art works on a diverse range of contemporary subjects, from drawing attention to the umbilical cord of gold which exists between museums and the corporate world, to publicising <u>American Cynamid's</u> exposing of its female work force to toxic substances which affect foetal growth. The fact that Haacke's work has the power to sting was shown by an American museum's refusal to allow him to print a list of the business affiliations of its trustees and sponsors as part of a catalogue of his work. Clearly, then, certain artistic activities are still not permissable.

One method of negotiating a space for dissent within the art world which has a long-standing history is that of re-appropriating and subverting signs, symbols, visual languages and media. Numerous critics on the Left have dismissed this as a tactic on the grounds that there is nothing new about it. This is symptomatic of a conceptual confusion prevalent in modernism whereby the new and shocking is conflated with the radical. As argued above, newness and shock tactics for their own sake tend to feed market forces as much as anything else. Re-appropriation of language, subversion and ridicule can be an effective means of critique,

even if that critique can only have a temporary and provisional effect - no one can guarantee an absolute and permanent association between signifiers and signifieds. Many feminist artists have employed these tactics.[43] Examples might include Nancy Spero, (fig.2) whose recent work culls men's images of women from a range of historical sources, to re-inscribe them in her own celebratory narrative. Therese Oulton is engaged in a related process. She has stated that she is working to create her own private language of expression out of the overloaded, public language of painting, specifically the tradition of old master painting, whose methods she appropriates and subverts. Artists such as Barbara Kruger and Cindy Sherman also use working methods which rely on appropriation and subversion of images, symbols and media which come from advertising and popular culture (fig.3). These works co-opt power from the images and media whose original meanings they have derailed.

Two other important strategies which artists have used in their attempts to make oppositional art have been involvement with community arts projects, and the setting up of site-specific artists' initiatives outwith the normal institutional context for art. Such tactics involve seeking new audiences for art from within groups in society who are normally excluded from the art world and from visual literacy. Community arts projects often teach artistic skills to people who would have no other access to this knowlege. Thus, they empower such individuals by giving them a means of

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[43]I do not wish to suggest that this constitutes some patented 'feminist' method of art making, but rather that some of the most impressive examples of this type of work now come from artists informed by feminism.

Fig.2 Nancy Spero, <u>Chorus Line I</u>, 1985.

Print collage on paper.

Barbara Kruger, *Untitled* (Your body is a battleground), 1989, photographic silkscreen/vinyl, 284.5x284.5cm.

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Fig.3 Barbara Kruger, <u>Untitled</u>, 1989.

Photographic silkscreen/vinyl.

expression and by enabling them to read and decode the artistic productions of dominant groups. Examples of such activities in Glasgow will be discussed in a subsequent chapter of this dissertation.

Artists initiatives are also involved in the process of addressing new audiences for art. Because they bypass the gallery and museum system, artists involved in this type of activity have a greater degree of autonomy and self determination. Although the funds for their activities often come from the public purse - in this country from the Arts Councils and local authorities - they do not have to pander to curatorial taste or to market demands, nor does the work they make have to fit in with the programme or image of a specific gallery. For this reason, they have more freedom to make polemical and issue-based work and to take it to the context in which they would like it to be seen, or to make site specific work in a variety of environments. Outstanding examples of this type of activity include Gran Fury, the New York based A.I.D.S. pressure group, who mounted a billboard campaign on New York's buses in 1989 (fig.4). Lucy Lippard's essay on the movement for cultural democracy, Trojan Horses: Activist Art and Power,[44] which explores the issue of oppositional art at length, describes a number of artist initiatives committed to a radical political agenda, also based in New York. There, one artists' group squatted a derelict building and created an exhibition on housing and property- The Real Estate Show.[45]

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[44]Lucy R. Lippard, "Trojan Horses: Activist Art and Power, Art After Modernism, Brian Wallis ed., New York, 1984, pp. 341 - 358.
[45]Ibid., p. 354.

Fig.4 Gran Fury, <u>Kissing Doesn't Kill</u>, 1989.
Poster panels on New York City buses.

Artists' initiatives and community arts projects can wield real critical power in that they are able to reach out to new audiences and to take their work to non-art world situations. Though this type of activity has to operate within the parameters of what is possible in contemporary culture, given the low level of visual literacy amongst the wider public, and though it is subject to restraints, albeit of a different kind than those operating in the context of galleries, museums and the art market, it creates a new arena for art beyond the ivory tower of the art world.

In this last section, I have argued against the tendency on the part of some left wing theorists to conceive of the contemporary situation in terms of some totalising, oppressive monolith of capitalism. I have argued that there are ways in which a culture of resistance at the present time might operate. Specifically, I would like to suggest, on the basis of the above examples, that a postmodernism of resistance might work through manipulating and negotiating the givens of the context in which we find ourselves. Unlike the historical avant-garde which set itself up to attack bougeoise culture from outside, it operates in the knowledge that it is inside capitalist culture and must constantly work to re-create an artificial and shifting space for dissent beyond an ever-tumbling wave of repressive appropriation. Modernist metaphors for artistic radicalism: 'transgression', 'progression beyond', 'shock tactics'; are obsolete and misleading in this situation. They obscure the debate about productive ways forward for critical culture.

So, what about radical artistic culture in Glasgow? Does it exist and if so, where is it? After all, the city was once famed as a hotbed of revolution and was acclaimed more recently as the <u>Cultural Capital of Europe 1990</u>. The rest of my thesis will be devoted to answering this question by looking at various types of artistic activities based in Glasgow over the past eight years.

Chapter Two - Glasgow Girls and Boys

Introduction

> "The formula was right - take a number of high profile, sought after artists - add to this a number of relative unknowns, and token representation of women - combine all of these with the clout of several 'high profile' reviewers, possibly the best conventional art venue in Scotland and a clinical 'media hype', and there you have it - a major movement in contemporary art. A veritable Renaissance."[1]

In this chapter, I wish to look at the question of resistant culture in postmodernism and that celebrated generation of figurative painters who graduated from Glasgow School of Art's Department of Painting and Drawing in the 1980's. These artists have two things in common - easel painting and figuration. Their work is otherwise very different in its concerns, ethos and inspiration. Exhibitions such as New Image Glasgow, New Generation and The Vigorous Imagination[2], along with the writing of figures like Clare Henry[3] and Anthony Jones[4] have created the illusion that some kind of group cohesion has existed between them, or that they constitute a movement. This is not the case, as a closer examination of their output and statements

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[1]From a review of The Vigorous Imagination by David O'Vary, in Variant 3, 1987, pp. 34-35.

[2]New Image Glasgow was at the Third Eye in 1985, New Generation was a series of exhibitions at the Cyril Gerber Gallery, and The Vigorous Imagination - New Scottish Art was at the Scottish National Gallery of Modern Art in 1987.

[3]Clare Henry is the art critic of the Glasgow Herald. Henry claims to have been the first critic to 'discover' the new generation of Glasgow painters, see The Vigorous Imagination catalogue, S.N.G.M.A., Edinburgh, 1987, pp. 19-22.

[4]Anthony Jones was director of the Glasgow School of Art during its period in the mid 1980's. He is currently the director of the R.C.A.. See bibliography for examples of his writing on the Glasgow painters.

will show. However, I will not be concerned here with debunking the mythology surrounding their rise to fame and the politics thereof, nor will I attempt to explain the international success of certain of their number in the context of the Neo Expressionist, 'postmodernist' boom of the last decade. That story requires a book unto itself. Instead, I will discuss the painters from this group whose work seems interesting to the general theme of my dissertation.

In the previous chapter, I suggested that in the contemporary period, all space (metaphorically speaking) for articulating messages, stories and ideas which are critical or which run contrary to dominant ideology, has to be opened out from within the fold of dominant culture. In this respect, painting, that most traditional and conventional of media, is of great interest. An effectively critical art practice whose means were easel painting and the official gallery and museum circuit would be paradigmatic of a resistant postmodernism in that sense. A number of artists on the international scene are quite self consciously involved in this type of project, notably Alexis Hunter, the New Zealand feminist artist who returned from film and photography to painting in the 1980's (fig.5), and Thomas Lawson, born in Glasgow and now resident in America. At the beginning of the eighties, Lawson wrote an influential essay on the subject, entitled Last Exit Painting, in which he characterised painting as the last exit for the radical artist. Of the critical potential of painting he says:

> "The appropriation of painting as a subversive
> method allows one to place a critical aesthetic at the

Fig.5 Alexis Hunter, <u>An Artist Looking for her Muse</u>, 1982.
Acrylic on paper.

centre of the market place, where it can cause the
most trouble. For, as too many conceptual artists
discovered, art made on the peripheries of the
market remains marginal."[5]

However, with one notable exception, the new Glaswegian figurative
painters have been working in innocence of this idea. Ken Currie
aside, none of these artists took up painting with a self conscious and
politically radical agenda in mind, although some of the female
painters can be argued to be expressing thoughts of a politically
oppositional nature as a by-product of the process of making
painting about their lived experience. As for the more renowned of
the Glasgow painters - Steven Campbell, Adrian Wizsnieski and
Stephen Conroy - their work does not make claims to contribute to
any culture of resistance, nor are they concerned with addressing
politically oppositional themes. Thus, a discussion of their painting
would not be of relevance here.

Peter Howson, who is often see as forming a two man movement
with Ken Currie, is a more ambiguous case. Howson's work has two
main themes, both highly charged politically. On the one hand, he
depicts Glaswegian, working class, masculine leisure activities: in
Howson's painterly world, these form a brutal, ugly quintessence of
machismo. On the other hand, he has made a series of paintings of
male down-and-outs: the 'noble dosser' theme. For Howson, the
dosser has become a symbolic entity, a mystic figure who is both a
victim of society and one who lives outside it; who rejects what it has

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[5]Thomas Lawson, "Last Exit Painting", <u>Art After Modernism,</u> ed. Wallis, New York,
1984, pp.163-164.

to offer; a 'conscientious objector' of sorts. Howson's painting, then, is concerned with the depiction of Glasgow's underclass in two modes: the romantic and the grotesque. One critic has said of him that:

> "He courts melodrama in poses and situations he puts his characters in; the effect is to produce a kind of popular imagery, a folk history of Glasgow working class life."[6]

While Howson's work is undeniably melodramatic, the assertion that it is a form of folk history or popular imagery is highly questionable. If Howson's paintings were a genuine form of folk history, that is, an expression of Glaswegian underclass experience from the inside, in the way that, for instance, the novels of James Kelman are, then they might have some claim to constitute a critical cultural act. As it is, Howson deals with his subject matter in a voyeuristic manner; his paintings show us these lifestyles from the outside. (fig.6) We are invited to partake in the spectacle of the 'noble dosser'; (noble savage?) and the amateur boxing ring. Far from contributing to any resistant culture from within the fold, these works function as a form of pornography; the "No Mean City" view of the Glaswegian underclass male, whom Howson packages as grotesque entertainment for art world audiences. As Malcolm Dickson has put it:

> "To romanticise or fictionalise the downtrodden is to avoid painful realities; real agony and poverty exist beneath the glossy surface of the new Glasgow image and one sees only too clearly why Howson, for example, has made his name crafting a patronising

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[6]The Vigorous Imagination - New Scottish Art, catalogue, S.N.G.M.A.,1987, p.78.

Fig.6 Peter Howson, <u>The Heroic Dosser</u>, 1986.
Oil on canvas.

view of Glasgow 'lowlife' for rich art and business
types."[7]

Howson, in meeting a market demand for romantic / exotic figurative imagery in painting, (the formula which the dealers have come to rely on from the new generation Glaswegian painter), has more in common with Campbell, Conroy, Wizsnieski, Watt and others than he does with Currie. In fact, of the famous group of contemporary Glaswegian painters, only two artists can be argued to be contributing to oppositional culture through the medium of painting. They are Ken Currie and Margaret Hunter, and the rest of this chapter will be devoted to a discussion of their work.

The scarcity of Glaswegian painters working traditionally whose work seriously addresses social issues is undoubtedly the result of the nature of the art market in Scotland. The art buying public here is small and its taste is extremely conservative. Of the numerous commercial galleries and dealers in Scotland, only a few specialise in high-brow contemporary art. Thus Glasgow, unlike many of its European counterparts, is unable to support a truly divergent painting scene. Malcolm Dickson has drawn attention to politically committed, left-wing, Glaswegian painters of his acquaintance who have had little or no success, some of whom have given up painting.[8]

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[7]Malcolm Dickson, Variant 3, 1987, p. 29.

[8]From a conversation between myself and Dickson, a graduate of G.S.A. dept. of painting and drawing who has given up art work and now edits Variant, the radical Scottish Arts magazine. Also, see Dickson, op. cit.

Ken Currie

"The orthodoxy is that figurative painting has had its day, that artists will totally reject this old fashion and work with new technology to produce images. I don't think it's over as a medium. Painting has only touched on a fraction of the issues which affect us all."[9]

From the beginning of his career, Ken Currie has been explicitly committed to the artistic exploration of political and social issues from a left wing perspective. In this respect he is distinct from other prominent, contemporary Glaswegian painters.

The direction which Currie's painting took in the early part of his career was set while he was a student at Glasgow School of Art, Department of Painting and Drawing, in the late 70's and early 80's. During that period, several forces were converging to shape his work. Nonplussed by abstract landscape, which was the dominant style of the school at that time, Currie began to explore figuration as a means of expression with the encouragement of tutors like Alexander Moffat. In tandem with this came a growing fascination with the derelict industrial landscape of Glasgow's east end, and a quasi-religious conversion to Communism. He became an active member of the Communist Party at the age of twenty one:

"When I was at art school, I thought that you couldn't be a modern artist and not be in the Communist Party. I thought they were one and the same thing. You had to be politically committed to be a modern artist. That idealism was reflected in

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[9]Ken Currie, interview conducted by the author, 1992.

the pictures which were trying to create a realist
iconography that could articulate images of the
history of the people of Glasgow and of Scotland, and
of how that history had a bearing on their current
concerns and struggles."[10]

In the spirit of his political convictions, he spent the two years after
leaving art school, 1983-85, working with the Cranhill Arts Project, a
community based arts workshop in the east end of Glasgow which
had developed out of an artist in residence scheme. The artist in
residence there was a peer of Currie's at art school, Alastair
McCallum.[11] At Cranhill, Currie was involved in film making, and the
creation of posters and banners for Trade Unions and the May Day
celebrations. Despite some excellent work produced at this time,
including the highly regarded Clyde Film documentary[12], his
experience of community work was clearly a bitter one. It drove
him to concentrate exclusively on studio-based painting and graphic
work from 1985 onwards.

"I think if you wanted to be genuinely politically
active as an artist you would end up doing things
like posters, video, working directly with
community groups and so on. That depends on the
kind of artist you are, and you only find that out by
working in these mediums. Some artists are very
good at that kind of work and some are bad at it. I
happen to be very bad at community art. I don't
particularly like working with people."[13]

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[10]Ibid.

[11]The Cranhill Arts Project is the subject of a subsequent chapter.

[12]The Clyde Film, Cranhill Arts, 1985.

[13]Interview with Currie, 1992, op. cit.

Currie's painting to date has passed through three distinct phases. He is probably better known for his early work, corresponding to the years 1985-87, which he refers to in an earlier quote.[14] This includes works such as the series of murals he was commissioned to make for the Peoples Palace Museum, (fig.8) which are images inspired by Scottish labour history,[15] and his heroic worker portraits, for instance The Self Taught Man, 1986 (fig.7), and Shipyard Poet, 1987. Through these works, Currie gave expression to a mythological and celebratory conception of the working classes in Scotland and their political history. Ian Spring has commented that Currie, at this time, offered a visual elaboration of a pre-existent body of myths: the story of Red Clydeside and the notion of the self taught proletarian.[16] Spring has expressed doubt about the spirit in which the paintings of this phase in Currie's work were created. Of The Self taught Man, he says:

> "What does all this mean? It is quite difficult to say whether Currie accepts or parodies this notion of self improvement - and this indeed, is the problem with all of his work. The accepted answer is that his

[14]See quote attached to footnote no. 9.

[15]The most important commission from this period in Curries' career, these works are in fact oil on canvas, not murals, and are on permanent display in the room under the cupola at the Peoples' Palace Museum. The decision not to paint onto the wall itself was a practical one. For purposes of visibility and dramatic emphasis, the paintings were executed to be hung leaning inwards over the spectators below. They are entitled as follows:
Weavers' Struggles: The Calton Massacre
Radical Wars: Let Truth And Justice Be Woven Together, Liberty Is Our Fabric
Great Reform Agitation: Union Is Strength
The Socialist Vision: Workers Of The World Unite!
Red Clyde: We Can Make Glasgow A Petrograd, A Revolutionary Storm Second To None
Fight Or Starve: Wandering Through The Thirties
The UCS: The Fight For Our Right To Work
Unfurling Our History: Our Future

[16]Ian Spring, Phantom Village, Edinburgh,1990, pp. 110 - 117.

Fig.7   Ken Currie, <u>The Self Taught Man</u>, 1986.
Silkscreen/ Lithograph

Fig.8 Ken Currie, The Socialist Vision...Workers of the World, 1987.

Panel four, Glasgow History Mural, People's Palace Museum.

Oil on canvas

work employs pastiche - which does not have the reductive connotations of parody. Yet there seems to be a dangerous naiveté implicit in this approach."[17]

Currie's own account of this period clarifies the nature of his approach. He admits that his early works were the product of an "unrestrained idealism"[18] At this point he had whole heartedly and uncritically embraced communism as a political creed, and had ambitions to create a new type of painting on a heroic scale, combining socially committed subject matter with modernist form. In this he was inspired by a range of different artists: Courbet, Gericault, Delacroix, Leger, Rivera. In particular he and McCallum aspired to the left wing culture of the inter war years:

"The original idea of modernism existed in Europe between the wars. Artists saw art as inextricably linked with revolution. They saw art and the revolution as being the same thing. They felt you can't have a political revolution without a revolution of the visual image."[19]

"That whole revolutionary culture which flourished in Europe between the wars remains the richest and most inspiring reservoir of historical precedent and, naively, we thought it possible to reproduce that culture in Scotland in the nineteen eighties. In perceiving what we recognised as a period of reaction in Britain, with the ascendancy of the New Right, we saw parallels in particular in Weimar Germany and realised that there could not be a

[17]Ibid., p.116.
[18]Ken Currie, 1988, "Statement on the development of my work 1980 - 1988" Ken Currie, exhibition catalogue, Third Eye Centre, Glasgow, 1988.

[19]Interview with Currie, 1992, op. cit.

better time in which to produce this new kind of painting."[20]

The crowded and heroic tableaux of the Peoples' Palace murals epitomise the type of work born of that ambition. (fig.8) Rather than being a wry and knowing parody of a certain artistic/political stance, they are an unselfconscious expression of youthful political enthusiasm, products of the ardour of a new convert.[21] The work from this period seems to fall somewhere between an attempt at agit-prop and an attempt to create a monument to the Scottish labour movement. In fact, it gives expression to Currie's personal and mythological understanding of that movement rather than to its historical reality. During this period, Currie himself understood his work to be, in part, a didactic exercise, indicating perhaps that he had genuinely mistaken a corpus of myths - the heroic, self taught worker/revolutionary and the glorious unity of the working class struggle - for historical truth[22]. Because of the sincerity of Currie's artistic intent, the early paintings lay themselves open to the criticism that they are naive. This is a fault which Currie has noted himself, judging by the direction his work has taken since. In summary, it might be said, with Spring, that this early work functions as nostalgia; that at best, it presents an inspiring and heart warming version of the political struggles of the Glaswegian working

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[20]Currie, 1988, op. cit.

[21]I met the artist for the first time in 1987 during the installation of his work at the People's Palace. I had a lengthy conversation with him at this time, during which this sincere attitude was evident.

[22]See quote attached to footnote 10.

classes for a modern audience, but that it can have no real political clout:

> "Unfortunately in the New Glasgow, a particularly reactionary and puritanical Glasgow, the revolutionary myths of Red Clydeside are interesting and entertaining, but redundant as real social comment."[23]

In 1987, after the completion of the People's Palace Murals, Currie's work underwent a significant change in direction. This second phase began with some of the paintings shown at the 1988 Third Eye exhibition - for example, In the City Bar, 1987, and Boys Night Out, 1988. (fig.10) It reached its fullest expression in paintings such as the Scottish Stoics triptych, 1989/ 1990, (fig.11) which is in the collection of the Kelvingrove Museum. This new period was characterised by a swinging change in the mood of Currie's work. The celebratory and nostalgic imagery of the earlier period disappeared and was replaced by a dark expressionism, which drew on the uglier and more dismal aspects of contemporary Glasgwegian life for inspiration.[24] In his 1988 statement, which dates from the beginning of the new phase, Currie described the motivation behind this move:

> "In completing the People's Palace Mural I realised that I no longer wanted to deal with history in the direct way, as represented by the mural. I felt that my new commitments lay in the realities of today and my own urban experiences. In confronting these experiences I decided to attempt to approach them under two broad headings that would allow me

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[23]Spring, op. cit., p.114.

[24]The darker mood of Currie's painting since late 1987 has continued to date. In his most recent works, which will be discussed below, this mood is taken to its extreme.

> to freely explore every aspect of the times we live in as I had felt slightly constrained previously by working on the mural. I wanted to explore the tension, broadly speaking, between self-education and self-destruction in our communities and, as a consequence, bigger themes like construction and destruction, war and peace."[25]

In paintings such as <u>Saturdays,</u> 1987 (fig.9), this duality of themes can still be seen. A young mother manages to read a political textbook while manoeuvring a pushchair up the Gallowgate. The earnest studiousness of the girl is juxtaposed with the spectacle of the child she is pushing - a miniature thug wielding a toy missile and fighter plane. But the positive side of the equation is pushed out in other paintings in favour of more brutal themes, and this tendency becomes more marked with time. In retrospect, Currie has said of this work that it had moved:

> "...towards a more critical kind of painting which looks at the effects of the capitalist system. The capitalist system still exists. I was looking at the victims of it; the people who are exploited and oppressed and so on in the streets of Glasgow today. It was still a very anti-capitalist, pro-socialist thing."[26]

In <u>Boys Night Out</u>, 1988, (fig.10) three nightmarish figures trample an old man. They represent three of the more brutalising forces at play in the 'real' Glasgow. Protestant and Catholic sectarianism take the form of two masked figures with accordion and flute and drum respectively, while between them strides the figure of death in a Liberty cap, beating a drum with 'hope' written on it. This figure

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[25] Currie, 1988, op. cit.
[26] Currie, interview,1992, op. cit.

Fig. 9   Ken Currie, <u>Saturdays</u>, 1987.

Oil on canvas

Fig.10 Ken Currie, Boys Night Out, 1988.

Oil on canvas

might be read as a personification of the corrupt aspects of the political left in Glasgow, or it might be a more wide reaching allusion to the effects of communism in the Eastern Block. In any case it is interesting, given that at this time, Currie's personal political outlook was undergoing an upheaval. Of his disillusionment with the Left, he said:

> "I think I just got worn down by a mixture of things. My experience of actual socialists in the contemporary movement - I found I got very disillusioned by them themselves. In fighting the beast of capitalism, they had taken on some of the more ugly aspects of it themselves. I could see how a certain kind of socialist politics would lead to the gulags, would lead to the polarisation of everything....Through my experience of working in the movement I met a lot of people whom I felt were beyond repair as characters. How could these people be involved in constructing a new society when they themselves were flawed? Flawed by the very system they were trying to attack. There was that and the experience of going to Eastern Europe on many visits and seeing the reality of Stalinism. This made me realise that it was very dangerous to be uncritically idealistic about a political faith."[27]

It seems reasonable to surmise, then, that Currie's disillusionment with his former political creed, and the wariness and criticality born of that experience were largely responsible for the disappearance of the triumphant theme of self-improvement from his work, circa 1988. By 1989, he was making the Scottish Stoics triptych, (fig.11) a grim vision of society's victims. This comprises three huge canvases, each portraying an individual surviving in some ruinous state of physical and mental deterioration. These paintings manage to communicate an overpowering sense of human wretchedness, and

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[27]Ibid.

Fig.11 Ken Currie, <u>Scottish Stoics Triptych</u>, 1989/1990.

Oil on canvas.

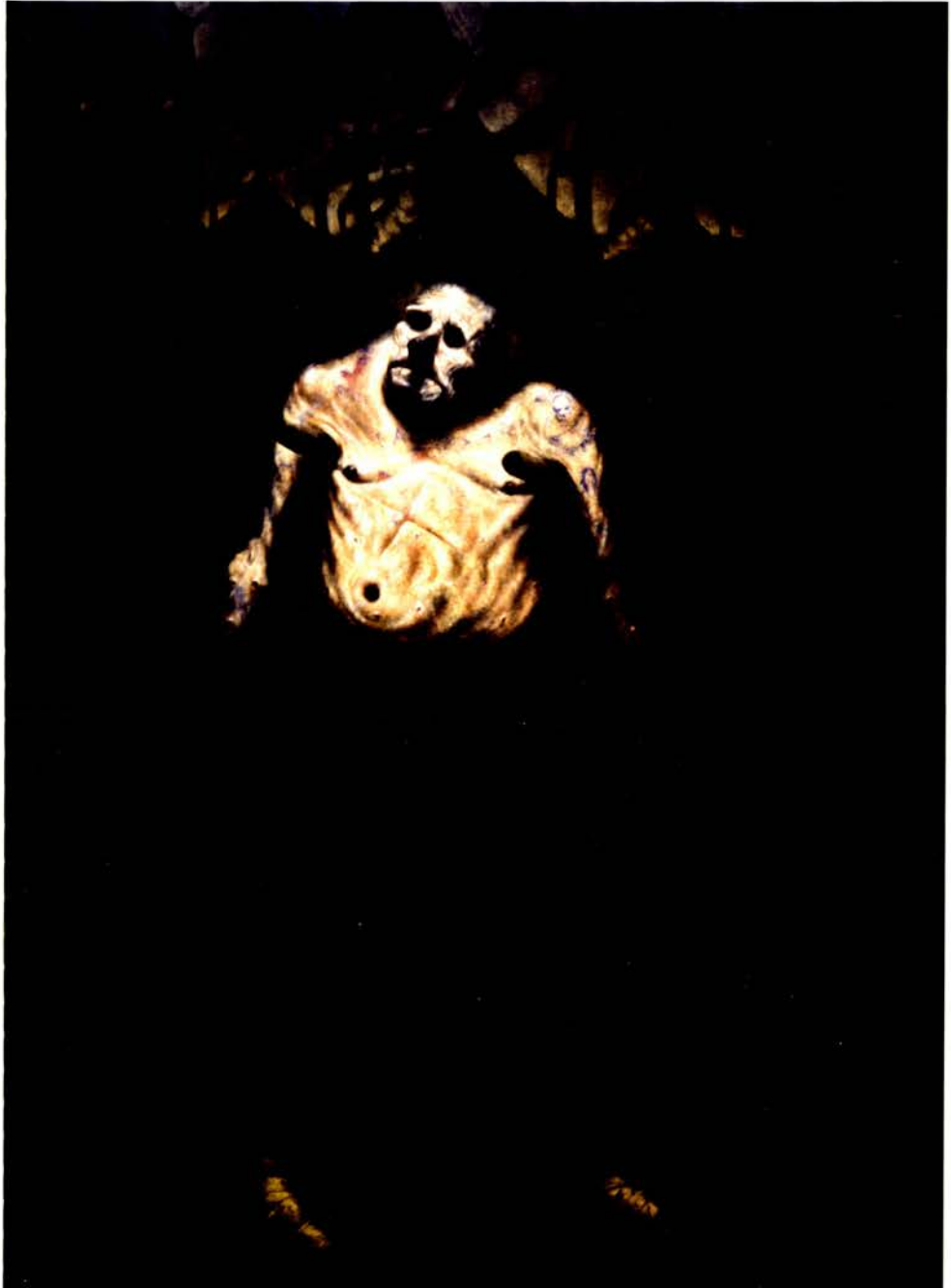a) Left panel, <u>Prostitute</u>.

Fig. 11   Ken Currie, Scottish Stoics Triptych, 1989/1990.
Oil on canvas.
b) Central panel, Cripple.

Fig. 11 Ken Currie, <u>Scottish Stoics Triptych</u>, 1989/1990.

Oil on canvas.

c) Right panel, <u>Worker</u>.

this is due in equal measure to their monumental scale, to Currie's skilled handling of the paint, and to the graphic description of abused flesh. The bitter tone of the triptych and its harsh realism contrasts heavily with the idealism of the earlier period. Painted from the perspective of a certain political and artistic maturity, it is more profound as political comment and more powerful as art. It could also be said that its emotional force is derived from Currie's use of first hand observation and experience.

The <u>Scottish Stoics</u> triptych prefigures Currie's most recent body of work in terms of its profundity, its murky palette and its rendering of human beings in a state of living decay. In fact he has taken these elements to a new extreme recently. In 1991 to 1992, Currie collaborated with the Glasgow Print Studio to produce a series of etchings entitled <u>The Age of Uncertainty</u>. In these works, he reduced his use of colour to black on white, with a surfeit of black. In terms of handling, mood and subject, they recall the printmaking of Goya and Hogarth, and, especially, the war etchings of Otto Dix.[28] Although the dark mood of the paintings from the late 80's is carried through to this work, it no longer draws on contemporary Scotland for subject matter. There has been a move away from the particular to the generic, both in the imagery, which is more allegorical and no longer specifically Glaswegian, and in the ideas explored: the eternal themes of human evil and suffering.

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[28]Throughout his career, Currie has made extensive and intelligent use of art historical examples. An adequate discussion of this phenomenon would require more space than is available for it in this dissertation. See Bill Hare's essay in the catalogue of <u>The Age of Uncertainty</u> for a discussion of the parallels between Currie and Goya.

In works such as <u>The Age of Uncertainty</u> (fig.12) and <u>The Constructors</u> (fig.13) there is no explicit political comment. However, they resonate with allusions to our troubled contemporary situation, and with critical observations about the nature of humankind. Some works turn a satirical eye on the idealistic themes of Currie's own earlier work. In <u>The Age of Uncertainty</u>, corpse-like figures with empty eye sockets stumble around a crowd scene, fumbling with open books, while in <u>The Constructors</u> a number of grotesque figures are swinging ladders around in a chaotic manner in the middle of a strident and disorderly crowd. This last etching contrasts ironically with the <u>People's Palace</u> murals. Currie has said of his recent work that it was an enquiry into human evil and destructiveness in an attempt to create knowledge about the possibilities for society. It has also been an explicit rejection of the utopian thrust of his early production:

> "I became very worried about the idea of utopias, of trying to force societies into utopias. This idea of 'the means justifies the end', and that in order to build Utopia you have to make sacrifices. These experiences built up and I started to become more sceptical about my own political viewpoints. I started to question them, and in doing so I began to ask deeper questions about human beings, about human nature, as opposed to the Marxist idea, [...], the idea that we're a product of the environment and the economic system under which we operate. I wanted to see to what extent there are traits within us which are innate rather than part of the environment. So I started to get into more psychological stuff."[29]

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[29]Currie, interview, 1992, op. cit.

Fig.12 Ken Currie, <u>The Age of Uncertainty</u>, 1991/1992. *Etching.*
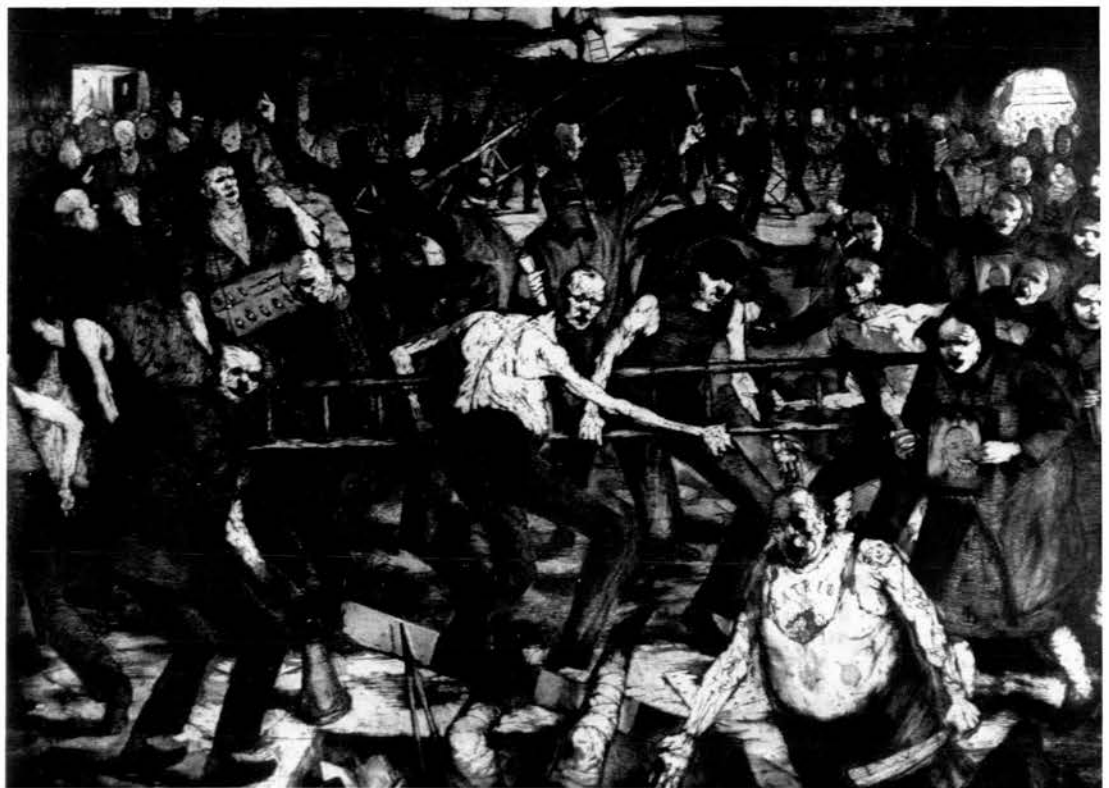

Fig.13 Ken Currie, <u>The Constructors</u>, 1991/1992. *Etching.*

Of the political ambitions of this most recent work, Currie has said that:

> "The question is, to what extent can we genuinely create a new moral order? Can a situation exist where we live to a certain degree in harmony with each other? To be able to come to a conclusion about that requires vast knowledge. I do not yet have enough knowledge to come to any conclusion. My work is a continuing enquiry into that...There's a phrase of Gramsci's I keep returning to: "The optimism of the will; the pessimism of the intellect." You have a will to change things, but you're not going to delude yourself about the potential for change. You're going to keep going, you're going to challenge it, you're not going to let depressing realities walk all over you. You have to constantly challenge, constantly seek out knowledge, constantly enquire, constantly maintain a sceptical, critical, vigilant faculty about you."[30]

This strategy of wariness is an essential one for a socialist artist who chooses to work in the mainstream. It is the price of safeguarding the critical power of one's work and of protecting one's artistic integrity. While Currie works in the awareness that the critical and didactic force of his painting, printmaking and drawing is not automatically negated through its commodification within the art market,[31] he will only sell his large scale works on the condition that they be publicly displayed and that they are not bought with the intention of being resold at a profit. In this way he attempts to ensure that the idea and image remain accessible to a wider public, even though the object is in private hands.

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[30]Ibid.

[31]Currie makes a distinction between the image/ idea and the art work as object.

Currie's work and professional attitude, then, has undergone a sea change of late. The charge of naiveté cannot be levelled at the bitter allegory and dark realism of recent years, nor can it be levelled at Currie as a professional, who appears to have no illusions about the nature of the institutions through which art must be disseminated. The artist remains committed to socialism and to painting as a medium. He is confident in the unique communicative power which figurative painting offers, but is aware that the critical edge of his work must be constantly fought for.

In summary, I would argue that Currie's more mature work is a significant contribution to critical culture. It has a critical power which derives from its artistic power. It is both technically accomplished and intelligent, metaphorically resonant and intellectually profound. Moreover, it has a pathos which overrides its often satirical tone. Currie, then, has succeeded in conjoining his practice as an artist with his politics, within the constraints imposed on such a project at present. However, as mentioned above, he is the only successful painter in Glasgow at the moment with overt political motivation. I propose to look next at Margaret Hunter, who is one of the most interesting and accomplished female painters to emerge from Glasgow in the eighties. While Hunter's painting has no political commitments as such, it does contemplate aspects of society and politics as they affect individual lives, filtered through the medium of the artist's personal experience and creative process.

Margaret Hunter

"I really do work intuitively. Some things I do deliberately, but I generally find that the answers come later."[32]

"She began to draw constantly and without inhibition. The experience of being tested in the fire entered the work. The work became a record of its own experience. The tragic history and easy cosmopolitanism of Berlin produced in Hunter just the right fusion of all her own often inchoate experiences of doubt and longing, of self expression and self imaging. Now the incessant inscribing of paper and canvas drew into itself, and combined and held there, in lyrical balance, the experiences and narratives of a host of new friends and acquaintances, and subsequently times and places."[33]

It is ironic that Margaret Hunter has been seen as part of the Campbell - Conroy - Wisniewski phenomenon by those who are busy tracing some fictive new movement in Scottish art. Hunter is an artist who's creative energy derives in part from her sense of being an outsider. For her, outsider status is a vantage point from which to gain a heightened perspective of her surroundings. Not to suggest that this artist is in any way a recluse[34]. On the contrary, the absence of some comfortable, parochial group identity has allowed her to see resonances of self in the wider environment, especially in the people and situations of the new Germany, the country where she lives for part of the year.

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[32]Interview with Margaret Hunter conducted by the author, 1992.
[33]John Griffiths; from an unpublished article.
[34]In developing the metaphor of Hunter as outsider, I intend this to mean an intellectual or emotional viewpoint from which to make art. I do not intend it as comment on the artist's social life, which is by her own account a lively one.

Hunter came to art school late in life. She was thirty three years old and divorced with two children. Thus, from the beginning, she had had experiences which set her apart from most art students. After having seen an exhibition of the work of Georg Baselitz, she decided to try to do a postgraduate degree with him at the <u>Hochschule der Künste</u> in Berlin. The process of getting to Berlin and of surviving once she got there as a foreigner who didn't speak the language was a baptism of fire for her. It paid off enormously, both in terms of inculcating a determination to persevere with her career, despite set backs, and in artistic terms. The contact with Baselitz, the experience of being separated from her family and of being virtually inarticulate in a foreign metropolis gave her work a new spontaneity and profundity:

> "His advice [*Baselitz*] was to draw constantly, and that's really when I started to draw all of the time. I amazed myself with the kind of drawings I came up with. They were drawings which I would never have done in Glasgow. I remember thinking, 'My goodness, where is this coming from?' It felt really mad sometimes. It was almost like digging down inside yourself and bringing everything up. It dawned on me later on that because I couldn't speak the language very well - I was stuttering and stumbling over words...I went there being able to say 'Ja' and 'Nein' - the drawing became my means of expression. If I was feeling lonely and so on, I could express the things I was thinking about. I was split from my family, from my children, whom I'd never been away from before, and was in a big, buzzing, international city, which, after Fairlie and Glasgow, was quite an experience."[35]

One of the most impressive features of Hunter's work is her ability to call forth physical, painterly symbols to express complex feelings and

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[35]Margaret Hunter, interview, 1992, op. cit..

ideas. Though they are formed intuitively and unselfconsciously through the process of working with physical media, they have an astonishing metaphorical scope and poignancy. It is from here that the communicative power of her art derives. One example of such a symbol is the spiral or coil which appeared in her work from the early days in Berlin:

> "The idea of the snails came because I was thinking that everything which is important, you carry around with you, like a snail carrying a house on its back. The snail came into the pictures only a few times. Then I started using the coil from the snail in the stomachs of the figures. I was thinking that the stomach is the centre of feeling. It's where you feel worry, fear. If you're in love, the feeling isn't in your heart, it's in your stomach."[36]

Later, the figures began to appear with the coils held aloft triumphantly, as in the drawing illustrated, (fig.14) which is from an invitation to an exhibition opening. Perhaps they celebrate the artist's survival of her quest.

In giving such compelling expression to Hunter's alienation in Berlin, both as an outsider and a woman, and in celebrating her triumph over the potentially destructive effects of this status, such work constitutes an emancipatory cultural act. It articulates the reality of an individual who had to fight against the odds in terms of age, sex, family commitments, lack of finance, and the problems faced by foreigners, to achieve what she has achieved. Hunter, then, gives form to and communicates what theorists have called "the discourse of others" - the narratives of those who are considered 'other' in
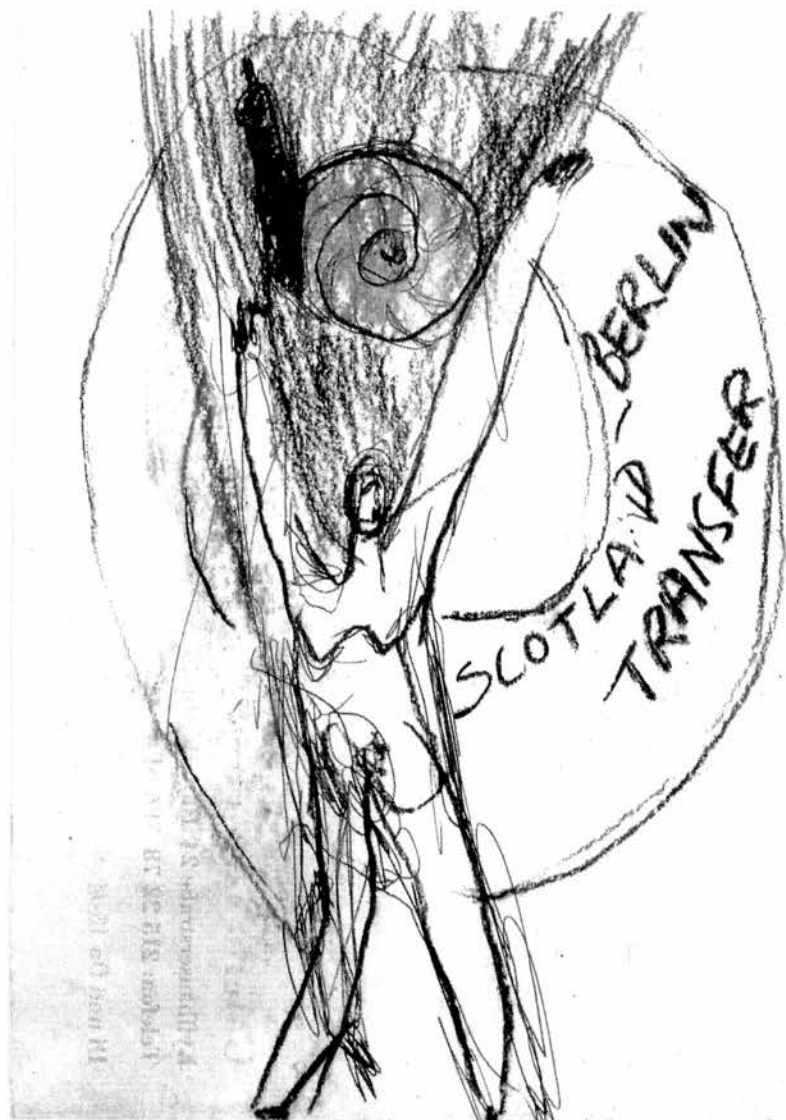
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[36]Ibid.

Fig.14 Margaret Hunter, <u>Berlin Scotland Transfer</u>, 1986.
Postcard - private view invitation.

some respect by the groups who dominate in society. From this, it can be argued that although Hunter is not making political art, she is making art which is politically significant.

For many centuries, women have been a 'muted' group in Judeo-Christian culture. Although there have always been women working in the liberal arts, these were the exception rather than the norm. Moreover, their own expression, especially in the case of artists, was often muffled by the conventions of a medium which was shaped by men. As a result, the issue of how and whether women can express themselves through the public language of art has dominated feminist discussions about women as artists. The question of whether women can find a voice or shape a language through which to express their different life experience - what Helène Cixous has called *l'écriture feminine* - is a fundamental one. Many feminist artists are committed to this project, and have succeeded in creating a language for themselves out of traditional media and imagery. Margaret Hunter, although she is not self consciously and avowedly a feminist artist, has succeeded in forging just such a personal, symbolic language of paint.

The nature of her symbolic language can be seen again in recent works. <u>Lines of Continuity</u> (fig.15) calls to mind the idea of Russian Babushka dolls: a figure enclosed in a yellow colour field carries the image of a face in its stomach. On seeing a third head above that of the main figure, one realises that the yellow zone is in fact the body
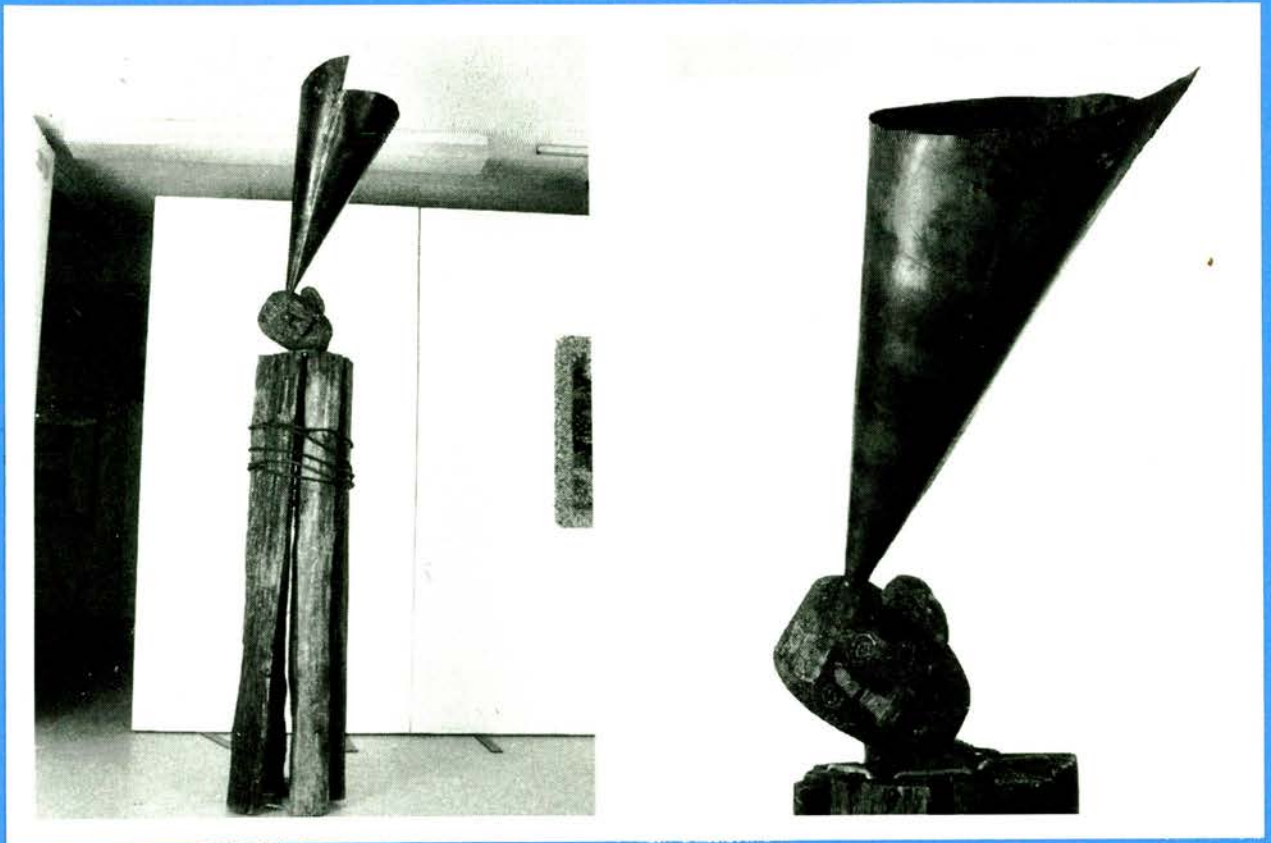
Fig.16 Margaret Hunter, Nürnberger Trichter, 1992.
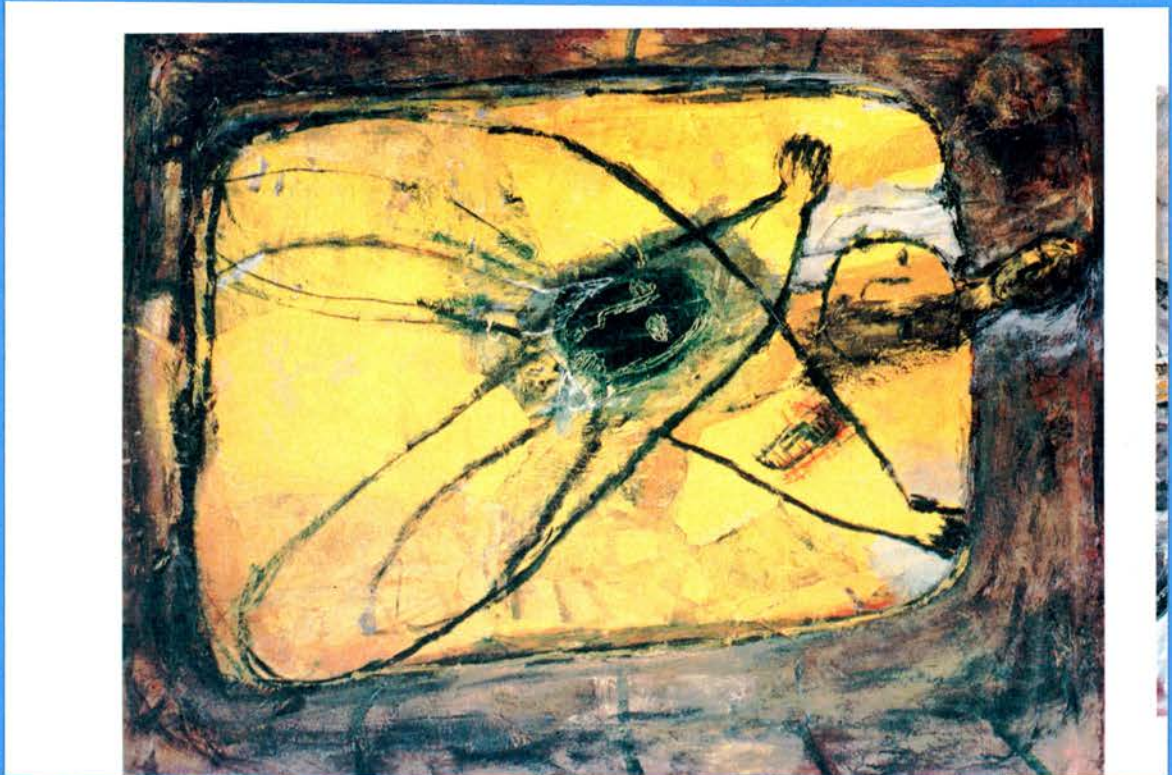*Wood, rope and copper.*

Fig.15 Margaret Hunter, Lines of Continuity, 1992.
Mixed media on canvas.

of a third figure. The following comment made by Hunter in interview is particularly telling in relationship to this painting:

> "I think that because I have a daughter of my own, I look at my relationship with my mother and myself and my daughter, and I think, 'Where does she stop and I begin?' and 'Where does my daughter start?' Because we overlap. Our lives are so similar. They overlap in so many ways that it's difficult to see yourself as an individual, with an individual identity. Your identity is through other people. Looking at your mother, you took on the kind of things which were important to her. My daughter and I are very close. I don't know whether that's good or not, because when my mother died, it was a terrible blow. It's like losing an arm. You've lost part of your person."[37]

Lines of Continuity is a moving contemplation of a theme which is at the heart of female identity and thus of feminist debate. The mother/daughter relationship is one of the most complex and intense in most women's lives. It is the primary formative relationship, affecting individuation of self, the learning of how to relate to others, and of femininity. It is where we learn our feminine identities. In The Reproduction of Motherhood, the feminist psychoanalyst Nancy Chodorow has theorised that because women tend to be the primary carers of children in our society, sexual identity in both sexes is learnt in relation to the mother. In establishing a sexual identity, men have to differentiate themselves from their mothers and therefore are forced to identify with their fathers, who tend to be more remote figures. Women on the other hand, continue to identify with their mothers throughout their lives: they never fully individuate and consequently have more flexible ego boundaries,

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[37]Ibid.

according to Chodorow.[38] In <u>Lines of Continuity</u>, Hunter has found clear and resonant symbols to articulate her own personal experience of the mother/daughter relationship: the motif of figures within figures and the use of warm yellow (radiance, warmth, energy, light, sun) to designate the area contained by their bodies. In light of this, this fact is quite illuminating:

> "It's interesting that most of the people who buy my work are women, and generally of about my age - late 30's/ 40's - with a family and career. There's obviously this balancing between career and family ties and the traditional role - the guilt feelings and so on. I think my work reflects that."[39]

This sense of the haziness of the boundary between self and world, or rather of the interconnectedness between the two, is dealt with in terms of other themes elsewhere in Hunter's work. An example of this is the sculpture <u>Nürnberger Trichter</u>. (fig.16) The idea of the cone as a form came through noticing the bronze cones which result from the lost wax bronze casting process. As happens so often with Hunter, her initial attraction to the cone was an aesthetic one. Realisation of its symbolic value came later. In <u>Nürnberger Trichter</u>, a large cone is embedded in a wooden head on a plinth. The artist had already envisaged the imagery of head and cone when she heard about the idea of the *Nürnberger Trichter*, a joke expression for a cone or funnel through which to pour in knowledge. The phrase comes from a 17th century educational reform pamphlet in which the author claimed he could pour in a complete knowledge of German

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[38]Chris Weedon, <u>Feminist Practice and Poststructuralist Theory,</u> Oxford, 1982, pp. 58 - 59.
[39]Hunter, interview,1992, op. cit..

poetry into student's heads in six hours without the use of Latin. The sculpture can be read as a comment on the plight of the East Germans, with whom Hunter feels an affinity. Metaphorically speaking, they have to learn the Western system in 'six hours' in order to survive in the new Germany. Like Hunter, the East Germans are outsiders in a certain sense; "others" in relation to a West German norm.

In conclusion, Margaret Hunter is not an avowedly left wing artist making self consciously "political" art. However, she is an artist who's work is profoundly significant, politically. As mentioned, she works intuitively, with an immediate agenda which is almost purely aesthetic. Later on in the creative process she will recognise the symbolic value of the images and forms which have emerged. Often she finds she has given form to thoughts, experiences and feelings which touch her own life. In this way, by reflecting a life lead in one of the most interesting and politically charged cities in Europe, and the understanding of self which came with the move there, her work alludes to fraught political questions: femaleness, identity, alienation, both societal and personal. It also expresses more utopian concepts: connectedness, empathy, contemplation, self knowledge.

Conclusion

It has been my contention that of all the famous generation of Glaswegian painters who place their practice in the art market and the traditional gallery context, only Ken Currie and Margaret Hunter

are making significant contributions to critical culture. In both these cases, the critical power of the work derives from its emotional force and from a profound desire on the part of the artists to communicate the things they are feeling, observing or discovering about themselves and about humanity. Neither artist is making work with the market in mind: rather, they bring work which is the product of self expression to the market. Both were drawn to figurative painting because its expressive qualities had an instinctive appeal for them rather than for other reasons. This integrity of expression reverberates in their work and adds to its communicative power.

I have outlined above how Currie and Hunter are contributing, in their different ways to a culture of resistance. In concluding this chapter, I would like to suggest that they have something in common with other artists who make effectively critical painting, something which is vital to all critical art practice; that is, their work is powerfully communicative without being crass or propogandistic. They have developed a compelling personal language of expression through which they communicate their perspective on their environment.

Chapter Three - Artists' Initiatives and Artists' Self Determination in Glasgow.

Introduction

In recent years, there has been an upsurge of artist-initiated activities and events in Glasgow. The first signs of this development appeared in 1983 with the opening of the <u>Transmission Gallery</u>, Glasgow's first and only artist-run gallery. In the years 1990 to 1991, it burst forth as a full blown artistic phenomenon, becoming the main activity of a certain section of the younger generation of Glaswegian artists - those who graduated from G.S.A. from 1988 to 1990.

The new development is interesting historically, being a phenomenon which had never been seen before in Glasgow. It is also very pertinent in relation to the question of a critical and politicised art culture in the city. The idea of artists joining together to work outside the network of museums, galleries and dealerships has always been associated with radicalism, either political or aesthetic. It has a long and illustrious history. There are affinities with the independent exhibitions and artists' colonies of the 19th century. In the twenties and thirties, it was the *modus operandi* of the historical avant-garde movements. In the sixties, seventies and eighties, a plethora of artist-run galleries, exhibitions and events cropped up in cities such as New York and Berlin. This phenomenon was born in tandem with performance art and conceptualism. Later, particularly

in New York, it was associated with the more radical and politically motivated section of the art community[1].

Given that the notion of the artists' initiative has been around in one form or another for a long time, why should it be such a latter-day development in Glasgow? Why has it surfaced now and not before? There are a number of factors which might have been at work here, and these are different in the case of each of the groups I will be discussing in this chapter. Another question which occurs is whether these Glaswegian initiatives are committed to a politics and culture of resistance or not? Again, the politics concerned have been different in the case of each group.

The groups concerned are roughly three in number, with areas of overlap between them. These are: a large group of recent graduates from <u>Glasgow School of Art</u>, the core of whom came through the environmental art department; a small number of left wing and politically motivated artists who cluster around various political/cultural organisations in the city, some of whom have been involved with <u>Variant</u> magazine; and, the group of feminist artists who constitute the organisation <u>Women in Profile</u>.

This chapter is divided into three sections, corresponding to each group. The first deals with those recent graduates of the <u>Glasgow School of Art's Environmental Art Department</u> who organised and

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[1] See Lucy Lippard, "Trojan Horses: Activist Art and Power" <u>Art After Modernism</u>, ed. B. Wallis, New York, 1984, pp. 341-358, for an interesting account of 'activist art' in the U.S.A.

participated in events such as the <u>Windfall</u> project and the <u>Bellgrove</u> <u>Billboard</u> project, and who have recently had control of the <u>Transmission Gallery</u> committee; the second looks at self-consciously radical and politically committed artists' initiatives; while the third looks at the feminist initiative. The questions raised here concerning their various agendas, politics and *raisons d'être* will be discussed in full below.

Environmental Artists

> "<u>Windfall</u>...I got involved in <u>Windfall</u> through someone I met in London who had a similar attitude. He organised this thing in Germany - we went over and had a great time. I thought we could do the same back here, maybe upgrade aspects of it. That's the background to it. Underlying all of this, I think what happened was that you got a certain generation of people...this probably sounds more romantic than anything...You got this generation of people who were born in the late 60's who were all coming through education at roughly the same time, who were very...not ambitious, rather, who couldn't be bothered to just wait around for things to get handed to them. Not go-getters, not Thatcher's children, but...
> *Q: Deciding to take power yourselves?*
> Yes."[2]

The years 1990 to 1991 saw the high watermark of the artists' initiative trend in Glasgow. With the <u>Windfall</u> and <u>Bellgrove</u> <u>Billboard</u> projects, the phenomenon could be said to have reached its fullest and most recent public expression to date. These two initiatives were linked in a few respects. They overlapped temporally; they were started by students who had recently

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[2]From an interview with Douglas Gordon, conducted by the author 1992.

graduated from the same department at <u>Glasgow School of Art</u>; and a few of these recent graduates exhibited in both events[3]. Although members of this group have been concerned in other artist-initiated projects, for instance, <u>Information</u>, 1989, <u>Sites/Positions</u>, 1990, <u>Women In Profile</u> and especially <u>Transmission Gallery</u>, I intend to concentrate on <u>Bellgrove</u> and <u>Windfall</u> here, because these two events represent the end point of the group's involvement with artist-initiated, non-gallery work.

The education which these young artists received in the <u>Department of Environmental Art</u>, and the contacts which they made there, seem to have been fundamental to their choice of activity upon leaving art school, and to the ethos behind that choice. The statements below, exerpted from interviews with Alan Dunn, who initiated the <u>Bellgrove Billboard Project</u>, and Nathan Coley, who participated in the setting up of the <u>Windfall Project</u>, make this clear:

> "Too often such work (*site specific, artist-initiated*) is seen as non-gallery, which is a negative description. Most of it was naiveté. At the time I saw no reason for not doing that. I was not indoctrinated with the belief that you must work in a gallery, so there was nothing to rebel against in the idea of gallery work. That has to do with just being in the Environmental Art Department - David Harding and his philosophy. He's an important figure behind everything we mentioned today. He showed us influential role models. He felt it was important that young students saw role models that weren't necessarily the Glasgow painters. That was all part of my motivation (*to work in a self determined way*). There was no rebellion involved in it; it's as traditional a way of working as anything

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[3]Douglas Gordon, Craig Richardson and Julie Roberts.

else. I can see that it might be about independence etc. for other people, but not for me."[4]

Of the group who set up Glaswegian <u>Windfall,</u> Nathan Coley made this statement:

> "Our association with each other was initially social as opposed to professional. At art college, certain people in certain departments had a great deal of confidence in comparison to the rest of the school and were thus drawn to each other. The group's way of working was tested within the institution of art school before going out into the big bad world. This sense of self confidence and capacity for self determination was brought out by specific tutors, namely David Harding and Sam Ainsley, and by certain students in the years above me."[5]

These remarks convey a sense of the spirit in which the two projects were started. Clearly, the choice to participate in self-determined activity was one which had been shown to them as a possibility when they were still students. In this sense, they understood artist-initiated, site specific work as academically sanctioned; a method of working which was already conventional. Moreover, as students in a department of Environmental art, the concept of site specific work, of work beyond the gallery, was a standard one, as much part of the canon of artistic methods in the late 20th century as any other. This is hardly surprising in a generation of students who were being taught by those who had done site specific, community, conceptual and performance art in the 1970's and 80's, and for whom artists such as David Harding, Stuart Brisley and Charlie Hooker were role

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[4]From an interview with Alan Dunn conducted by the author, 1992.
[5]From an interview with Nathan Coley conducted by the author, 1992.

models[6]. Given this context, the decisions to initiate <u>Windfall</u> and <u>Bellgrove</u> cannot be understood as anti-establishment gestures in and of themselves. The question of the political significance of these projects in other senses than in this obvious one will be addressed below.

It is clear, then, that one of the important factors behind the upsurge of self-determined, site specific work on the part of younger artists in 1990 and 1991 was the effect of David Harding's directorship of the Environmental Art Department at Glasgow School of Art. It was in the years 1990 and 1991 that the first generation of artists to emerge from Harding's tutelage were starting their professional careers.[7] Nicola White has commented on this issue:

> "...the department, in its training, focuses on the world outside rather than the degree show within. As part of the course, students make work in public contexts and are responsible for the logistical and administrative arrangements necessary for this: aproaching sponsors for backing, arranging permission from site owners, laising with the community. This approach has the effect of removing the mystique of organisation and breaking down the traditional division between 'creative' artist and 'efficient' organiser."[8]

The appointment of Harding as head of Environmental art, and the resultant course structure, partially explains why the artists'

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[6]From a comment by Douglas Gordon.

[7]Harding started teaching at Glasgow School of Art in Autumn 1985. Previously, he had made a career as community artist and educator, notably as the first artist in residence in Scotland, at Glenrothes 1968-78. See Malcolm Dickson "David Harding", <u>Variant</u> 8 (1990):41-48.

[8]Nicola White, "Doing For Themselves: Windfall 1991", <u>Alba</u> vol.1, no.4 (August/September1991): 10-11.

The appointment of Harding as head of <u>Environmental Art</u>, and the resultant course structure, partially explains why the artists' initiative phenomenon came to flourish in Glasgow at the time it did. However, one other factor might be at work, if not in <u>Bellgrove</u> then in <u>Windfall</u>. The leading figures of the <u>Windfall</u> group are two years older than the artist who initiated <u>Bellgrove</u>. They claim to have derived their drive for self determination from the confused situation prior to Harding's appointment, when the <u>Department of Environmental Art</u> had no head:

> "It was a fortuitous time to be there (*at art school*) because staffing was problematic. We didn't want to follow the course which was being set up, so they let us write our own course document. It was an atmosphere where the more responsibility you took for your own career, the more likely you were to enjoy it, and at that time, it was purely in terms of enjoyment that we saw it. So that was the beginning."[9]

The <u>Bellgrove Billboard</u> Project was the creation of Alan Dunn, a young artist who graduated from Glasgow School of Art in 1990. It took place at Bellgrove Station, Denniston, in Glasgow's East End over a twelve month period, from September 1990 to August 1991. As part of the <u>Year of Culture</u> celebrations, the Scottish Arts Council set up one grant for a Glasgow based art project which students were eligible to apply for. Dunn, who had been working on billboards for a few years as a student, and who was himself a daily traveller through Bellgrove Station, won the grant with the proposal that he would use the money to construct a billboard in this site, that he

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[9]From an interview with Douglas Gordon conducted by the author.

would own the billboard for a year, and that he would use it to present his own and other people's work.

Each month over the duration of the project, a different set of artists exhibited in the space. Dunn had chosen the Bellgrove site with a sense that it had great importance in terms of Glasgow's industrial and social history. The station stood in a working class area of Glasgow whose once famous industry was long since in decline. In fact the station was itself in a state of decline. It was in the vicinity of Parkhead, famous for its forge and as the home of Celtic Football Club. Above it stood the city meat market, while nearby was Tennants Brewery, H.D. Wills Cigarette Factory, the Necropolis and other Glaswegian landmarks. A number of the artists who exhibited on the billboard made reference to themes which were linked to the site. Thus, although Dunn himself had no specifically political ambitions in setting up the project (for him it was a way of financing his work beyond college and a continuation of the billboard work he had done there), and though his own work for the project did not have a definite political slant, he provided an opportunity to exhibit in a public space which was richly significant in terms of its history to artists who did have overt political comments to make.

> "With Bellgrove, I was giving people the opportunity to deal with party politics if they wanted to. For instance, Ross's flag (*Ross Sinclair*) was quite specific. People described that as political because it was the Union Jack plus various words. I see that work as an extension of my work by association. But I wouldn't say I was interested in politics as such. Not at all."[10]

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[10]Interview with Alan Dunn, op. cit.

Dunn did not impose any definite brief on the project, nor did he have a rigid set of criteria in the selection of the artists he invited to take part. Once the billboard was set up and running, much of what happened there was left to chance:

"Initially the idea for the project was to invite an artist along with a non-artist. So I approached people in the university to work with me, for instance, a hypnotherapist. I invited Alan Dempster who's a painter along with James Kelman the writer. The criterion was that there wasn't one, there was no age limit or any other theme. In the end it deteriorated into people who were in Glasgow or passing through, or interested people who approached me, which happened more towards the end....What happened was very much a happy accident. I set it up and running and then had to go away for three months on an exhange. A lot of unforeseen things happened. The one success of it was that it was flexible, people could adapt to it and it was adapted as it went along."[11]

The flexibility of the project, then, and its interesting location in terms of Glaswegian working class history made it an attractive exhibiting opportunity for left wing artists who wanted to make work which addressed social and political issues. In fact, at least three of the one month projects made overt reference to political issues, both local and international. These were the works by Thomas Lawson, Craig Richardson and Ross Sinclair, which are illustrated opposite.

Lawson designed a poster for month of November 1990 with the station's football connections in mind. On hearing that his tenancy of

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[11]Ibid.

the billboard would coincide with a <u>Celtic</u> versus <u>Rangers</u> match, he made a work which anticipated that event. It was an image of four police officers, represented in a non committal way.(fig.17a, fig.17b) On the day of the match, these made a comic juxtapostion with the real police officers who were supervising the crowd. Despite the dead-pan tone of the image, it was a fairly difficult piece of work. It offered itself up to a number of possible readings - as reference to wider issues of public control and the wielding of power, as comment on football violence, or as a profile-raising excercise on the part of the local constabulary.

For February 1991, Craig Richardson, created a poster which read "Slowly all around you will pass away". in red letters on a blue ground.(fig 18a, fig.18b) In making this work, Richardson was contemplating the Gulf Crisis, which was current at that time. Alan Dunn commented on the work in the <u>Bellgrove</u> catalogue thus:

> "The balance swung towards those last three words, 'will pass away' which, through repeated reading, began to hijack the pivotal 'you'. The immediacy of 'you will pass away' begged the question of who had the right to speak such truisms in a public space. The freedom to do so had obviously been condoned by some government authority somewhere down the line; it looked official and its poise and confident handling fused with a highly print-like finish.
> The word 'somebody' began cropping up in conversations, 'somebody is telling us we're all going to die' was overheard within a few hours of its installation, 'somebody is trying to speak to us', 'somebody is behind this.'"[12]

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[12]Dunn, <u>Bellgrove,</u> installation catalogue, Glasgow,1992, p.28.

Fig. 17 b Thomas Lawson, Bellgrove Billboard, November 1990.
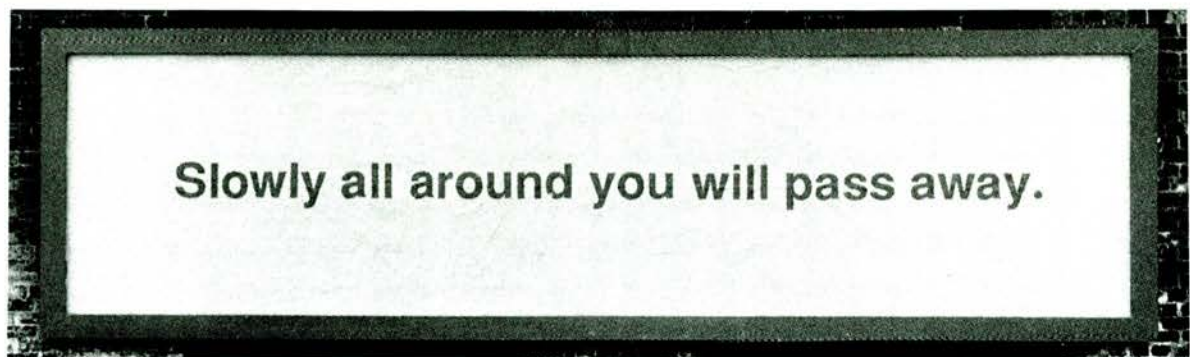*View of billboard with police and football supporters.*

Fig. 17 a Thomas Lawson, Bellgrove Billboard, November 1990.
Poster Panel

Fig. 18 b Craig Richardson, Bellgrove Billboard, February 1991.
View of billboard.

Fig. 18 a Craig Richardson, Bellgrove Billboard, February 1991.
Poster Panel.

Slowly all around you will pass away.

The work thus functions on a more general level as a *memento mori* as well as alluding to the effects of war. Additionally, it might refer to the process of urban and industrial decay going on around it in Glasgow, and to the forces of decay which are still at work there. The piece communicates powerfully on various levels, as the comments of the commuters quoted above show. Richardson was a contemporary of Dunn's in the <u>Department of Environmental Art</u>. He has been involved with <u>Windfall</u>, <u>Transmission</u>, <u>Variant</u> magazine, and in numerous other site specific events..

Ross Sinclair, who made the contribution for the month of May, is another of the younger generation of <u>Glasgow School of Art</u> graduates. His piece, <u>Four Letter Word</u>, juxtaposed the word 'hate' with the Union Jack, with the intention of offering the viewer the chance to make a range of interpretations of the combination.(fig.19a, fig.19b) However the design ran into trouble with the billboard company, <u>Mills and Allen</u>. They decided that the work as originally planned was 'too political'. As a compromise, it was decided to paste up the Union Jack without the writing until a new design was developed. Then the work was subject to further trouble. Employees of <u>Mills and Allen</u> pasted up three quarters of the original work (see illustration) where upon <u>Scotrail</u> complained. The text 'hat' was blanked out, but the poster was soon defaced with N.F. graffiti. Finally however, the new design was pasted up. This series of events points up how a relatively crude form of censorship can be levelled at artists by those in authority, even in so called 'self-determined' situations. It is interesting that it swung into operation

Fig. 19 a   Ross Sinclair, Bellgrove Billboard, May 1991.
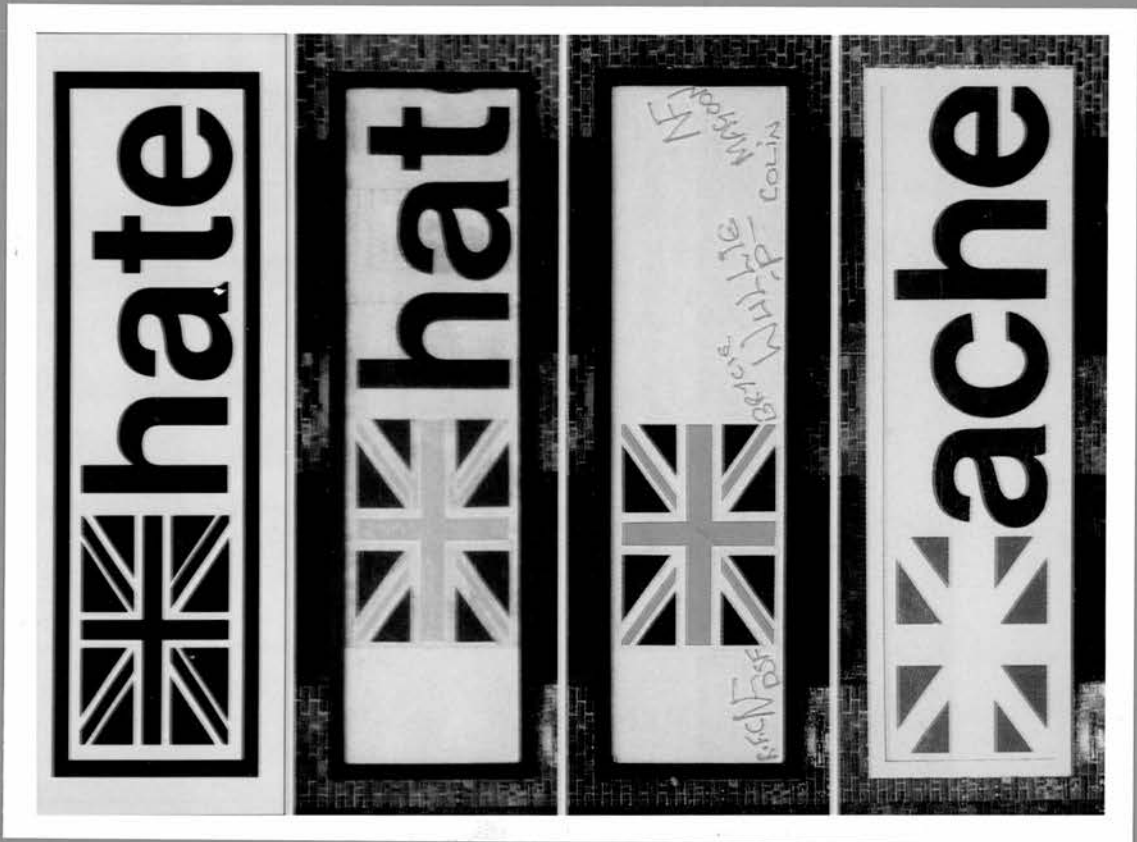*Poster   Panel*

Fig. 19 b   Ross Sinclair, Bellgrove Billboard, May 1991.
View of billboard with passer-by.

in the case of a work whose political stance was unambiguous and easily readable. One suspects that a work like this might be acceptable in an art gallery, where its status as an art work would be quite clear, whereas in a context which is normally given over to advertising, a more stringent set of constraints applies. Ross Sinclair is an artist who has made various contributions to a critical and left wing culture in the city, both in his writing for <u>Alba</u> and <u>Variant</u>, and in the art work he has created.

The <u>Bellgrove Billboard</u> project is an ambiguous one in terms of the theme of this dissertation. Alan Dunn is an artist who's own work steers clear of overtly political subject matter and social issues. In setting up <u>Bellgrove</u>, he was creating a space where he could continue to work in the way he had done at college. It was not motivated by rejection or criticism of the more usual institutions through which art is displayed. In fact for the past year, Dunn's practice has been gallery/ studio based[13]. Dunn, along with many of the young artists discussed above who have been making site specific art outside the gallery, views any context, gallery or non-gallery, as a loaded one with its own particular constraints. This viewpoint is supported by what happened with the work of Sinclair. However, having said that <u>Bellgrove</u> was not politically motivated, it nevertheless provided an excellent opportunity for politically interested artists to bring their work to a wider public. Because Dunn had selected a site which was resonant with historical and

[13]He has been the artist in residence at the Dick Institute, Kilmarnock.

socio-political associations, he was able to offer these artists rich material with which to work.

As with Bellgrove, the politics of the Windfall Project have been ambiguous, perhaps even more so. Windfall was an artist-run, self-curated exhibition of site-specific work held in the disused Seamen's Mission building on the Broomielaw. It was installed in July 1991 and open to the public during August.

The concept of Windfall came into being in London in 1988, after a great storm which swept over England, felling trees in Hyde Park. A German artist, Jens Heise, got permission to use the storm debris there to make site specific art works, and invited a group of other young artists to collaborate with him on the project. One of the artists involved, Michael Lapuks, initiated a second Windfall in Bremen in 1989, which took place in an industrial building in the dockland area. Three Glaswegian artists participated in that event: Elsie Mitchell, Douglas Gordon and David McMillan. The brief of the Bremen project was that artists should engage with the space by re-using materials found on site and through references to the nature of its geographic, social and historical context. The Glaswegian Windfall was initiated and coordinated by those local artists who had participated in Bremen, in collaboration with their network of friends and colleagues in Glasgow. This network was focussed upon the then committee of Transmission and mainly involved graduates of Environmental Art, circa 1988 - 1989.

Twenty six artists participated in <u>Windfall 1991,</u> of whom twelve were Glaswegian[14]. The rest, including Heise and Lapuks, came from seven other European countries. Nathan Coley described the selection process thus:

> "David Mc Millan went to Europe last year and met a lot of artists. I don't think any of the artits he met are actually in <u>Windfall,</u> but he spread the word. From there we set ourselves a remit that the vistors would outnumber the artists based in Glasgow. The artists were chosen not just on how much we liked their work, but on its suitability to the project and how much they would interact and network. There was an idea of how much could <u>Windfall</u> benefit from having them in the project."[15]

The organisation of the venue for the project was a collaborative effort on the part of the Glaswegian artists. They were used to collaborating with each other professionally, and, as a result, organisational structure developed naturally and informally. The choice of venue was based on very different criteria than those operating in former <u>Windfalls.</u> The Glasgow artists were very keen to find a neutral space, in order that the work produced there did not have to place too much emphasis on context:

> "DG: We were encouraged by events like <u>Building One</u> and the <u>East Country Yard Show,</u> but at the same time, attention was placed on the spaces and the events more than the work. We wanted to get away from that by choosing very bland space."

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[14]David Allen; Clare Barclay; Martin Boyce; Roderick Buchanan; Nathan Coley; Douglas Gordon; Jim Hamlyn; Iain Kettles; David McMillan; Elsie Mitchell; Julie Roberts; Craig Richardson.

[15]Nathan Coley, "Interview with Martin Boyce, Nathan Coley and Douglas Gordon", <u>Frieze</u> 1 1992, pp. 38.

"NC: We were offered an industrial shed that would have been better than the Saatchi space. We were offered a big victorian lawyers' building right in the centre of the city. But they were so loaded with a certain aesthetic."
(...)
"DG: We didn't want to replicate what happened before in <u>Windfall</u>. Last year's was in a warehouse space and we just thought it had been done."[16]

The <u>Seamen's Mission</u> was chosen because the artists considered it to be a fairly unobtrusive space. This is the first of many paradoxes at work in the thinking of the Glasgow <u>Windfall</u> group. Here was a site specific project which attempted to move away, thematically, from site specificity, contrasting with projects like <u>Bellgrove</u> and former <u>Windfalls</u>, where a resonant, non-gallery environment was crucial to the work. The idea of a blank context in which to present art connotes the white space of the contemporary art gallery, an association which was possibly very attractive to these artists. In fact, I will argue below that in many respects, <u>Windfall 1991</u> was conceptually sited in a provisional, artist-run gallery space rather than in a non-gallery environment.

This matter touches directly on the ethos, politics and *raison d'être* of Glasgwegian <u>Windfall</u>. The Glasgow-based artists who organised it make no secret of the fact that their artists' initiatives were not a rejection of the traditional gallery context. Instead, as a set of young unknowns, they were providing themselves with the opportunity to carry on working, to show their work in public spaces, to gain confidence and experience in the absence of attention and support

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16Douglas Gordon and Nathan Coley, ibid., p.38.

from the traditional art world. In fact, the hope behind Glaswegian Windfall was that it would generate national and international art world attention, and that it would provide the opportunity to show the Glaswegian artists' work in a self-created international context. The idea was also to promote international networking amongst young artists and to wipe away any taint of parochialism attaching to work from Glasgow. The comments quoted below are very revealing of these themes:

> "Windfall advertised in Flash Art like every other international art project. That was where we were siting ourselves. The fact that it was curated and organised by artists didn't alter the fact that it existed on the same level as TSWA or Lux Europa which is happening in Edinburgh next year. It was pitched at this level, but coming from a different origin."[17]

> "We perceived that there was a closure operating on artists of a certain age. You were not going to be getting shows at the Third Eye Centre or at Cyril Gerber (obviously he was a dealer and it wasn't his taste). (...)
> It was simply a case of, if you want a show in a certain place, if you want your dialogue to be aimed at a certain person then just go out and do it for yourself. The amount of confidence gained through that is going to reflect on the confidence which you need to have to be producing the things. Again, the wider your circle of contacts gets, the more confident you are to make the decision to make a piece of work."[18]

> "I don't know that there is anything to be gained by looking at Glasgow specifically because most of the 'active' artists that I know who base theselves in the city don't consider that they are working within a local scene. Instead the artists feel themselves to be located within the context of international

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[17]Interview with Nathan Coley conducted by the author, 1992.
[18]Interview with Douglas Gordon conducted by the author, 1992.

contemporary art and the artistic language that is
used (*by the Windfall clique*) reflects this."[19]

It might be said that Glaswegian Windfall was an empowering and positive activity, politically speaking. The artists concerned were taking their careers out of the hands of curators and critics, who would normally have the power to make or break them. They were setting the agenda for the art world and media, rather than the other way round. They were taking charge of the context in which their work was shown and its presentation - choosing who to show with and the type of location they wanted to show in. They were moulding their own public image, and indeed, making that image public without recourse to the patronage of the official publicity machine. The group involved in Glaswegian Windfall had already created an informal and pro-active support structure amongst themselves before the actual project, and this had given them the confidence to continue working. Without it, many of them might easily have given up art work.

All this has been liberating and empowering for the young artists concerned. However, I would like to argue that while it was undoubtedly a good thing in many respects, the politics at work in Windfall are by no means admirable. At a certain level, the ethos of the Glaswegian Windfall group is a distinctly right wing and entrepreneurial one. This is a criticism which can be levelled against Windfall, but which is not true of Bellgrove. Above all else,

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[19]David McMillan, correspondance, 20th June 1992.

Windfall was conceived as an opportunity for career advancement, networking and self promotion on the part of the Glaswegian group. The notion of using a non-gallery site to generate a creative and communicative response and to reach different audiences was not really on their agenda. In the case of Bellgrove, by contrast, it was fundamental. The ideology of the Windfall 1991 group was reflected in their choice of site and in the work they created there. This was mainly a kind of opaque neo-conceptualism which, in many cases, could just as well have been shown in a gallery (figs. 20 & 21).[20] Similarly, their politics could be read in the type of audience they were hoping to address. Bellgrove had a 'captive' non-artworld audience - anyone who used the station would have been confronted with the work, which would not have been signposted for them as art. Windfall, by virtue of its venue, would have been relying on a determined and highly motivated section of the existent audience for high brow and difficult contemporary art; those who would go off the beaten track in search of new work. Some of the European artists who participated were obviously nonplussed by the character of Windfall 1991, as these comments reveal:

> "DG: I think the artists from abroad expected people here to be making work that absolutely engaged with the fabric of the building. And that's not what happened. This has been our main topic of discussion in Glasgow for the past year or so; we feel that the term site-specific has become meaningless."
> "There was a public conversation a few weeks ago, and there were incredible differences of opinion about Windfall. Michael Lapuks was involved in the first Windfall, in London's Hyde Park, 1988. He feels

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[20]There were exceptions. Some of the Glaswegian artists and many of the Europeans made quite exciting use of the space, for example, Craig Richardson, Jim Hamlyn, Josep Dārdaña, Sylvie Renaud among others.
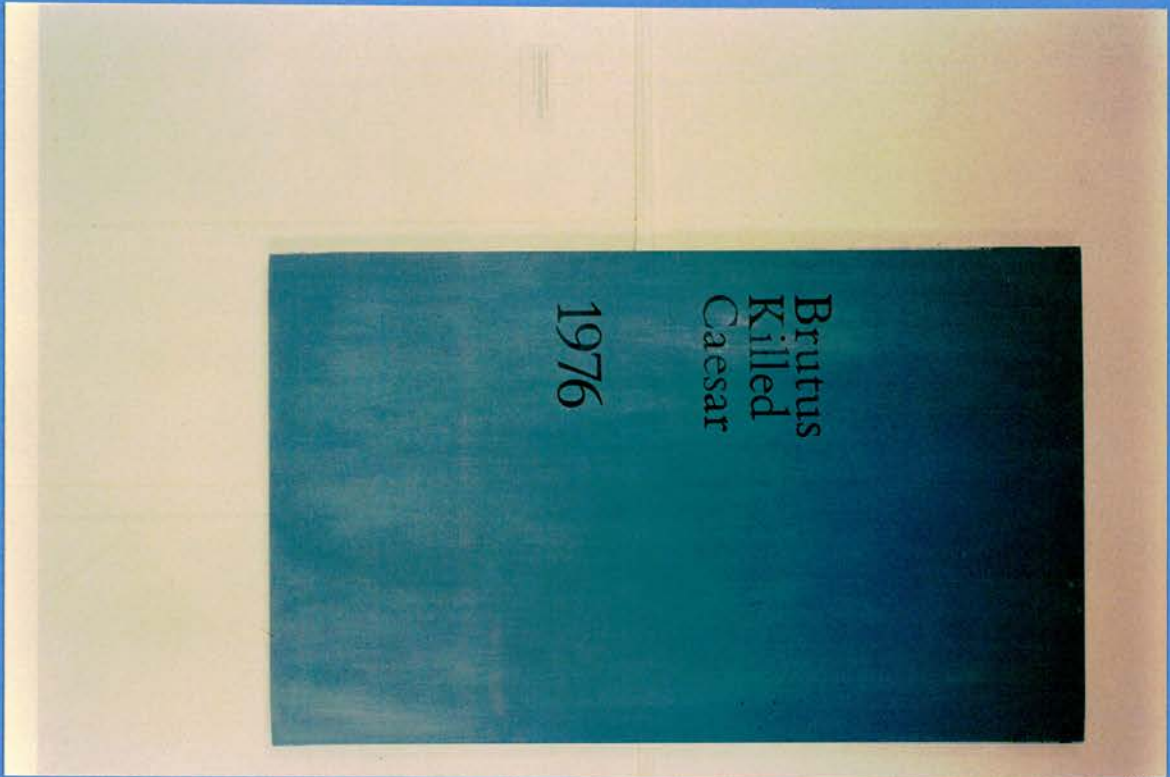
Fig.20 Douglas Gordon, <u>Brutus Killed Caesar1976</u>, 1991.
Installation, oil on canvas.

Fig.21 Martin Boyce, <u>Potential for Greatness</u>, 1991.
Installation, oil on canvas.

> very strongly about the name Windfall - his idea
> was that it should always be young artists creating a
> work that could never be shown in a gallery. And
> that's not what we're about at all."
>
> "NC: Roddy Buchanan spoke for most of us when he
> said that he had no respect for the past of <u>Windfall</u>,
> and no interest in the future. It wasn't that <u>Windfall</u>
> came to town and we joined on. It was our party and
> we played the records."[21]

The Glaswegian steering committee, then, broke with the past of <u>Windfall</u>. They discarded the social, political and environmental components of former <u>Windfalls</u>, and created an event which was about the art world's dialogue with itself, based in what was effectively a temporary gallery space. Paradoxically, <u>Windfall 1991</u> cashed in on the radical chic and cutting-edge image of artist-initiated, site-specific projects, but diverted this image to self-interested ends. In the period since <u>Windfall</u>, the Glaswegian participants have by and large jettisoned the idea of non-gallery work, although site-specificity and installation remain a part of their working method.[22] Their intention throughout, however has been to use their artists' initiatives to gain access to the contemporary art world fast track rather than for other reasons:

> "So far our group have achieved very little in
> comparison with our ambitions. It'll be interesting
> to see what happens ten years from now; whether it

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[21]Douglas Gordon and Nathan Coley, from an interview in Frieze no. 1, op. cit., p.40.
[22]As the artist in residence at the Crawford Arts Centre, St. Andrews, 1991-92, Coley created an exhibition of his work with the past and future programme of the centre in mind. In <u>Guilt by Association,</u> an exhibition of installation work by a section of the <u>Transmission Gallery</u> clique held at the Irish Museum of Modern Art, Dublin, 1992, three of the artists involved in <u>Windfall:</u> Buchanan, Gordon and Richardson, did site-specific installation work.

will be one of the Glasgow posse curating the
<u>Carnegie International</u>."[23]

In summary, I would like to argue that the politics of <u>Windfall 1991</u> are dubious indeed. There are a series of paradoxes at the heart of the project. It was a site-specific endeavour which sought to minimise its site-specificity. It was a non-gallery event which created a gallery-type context for itself. It was ostensibly about the empowerment of young artists, yet reeked of empty self-promotion. It capitalised on the seditious glamour of the non-gallery artist's initiative, yet emptied it of radical content. In the light of these, it seems clear that <u>Windfall 1991</u>, far from being a manifestation of some left wing art subculture in the city, as might be imagined from a cursory glance, was in fact permeated by the Thatcherite spirit of a do-it-yourself career launch. Some of the young Glaswegian artists who organised it had previously taken part in projects which were about social comment and critical intervention in the environment outside the gallery, notably in <u>Sites/Positions</u>. This reflected the influence and philosophy of their teacher, David Harding. In <u>Windfall</u>, they broke with the ideals of that past, and since then have sought out prestigious shows in the mainstream of the contemporary art scene.

In this section I have looked at the younger generation of artists who have set up and participated in site-specific artists initiatives. These individuals are mainly recent graduates of the <u>Environmental Art</u>

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[23]From an interview with Nathan Coley conducted by the author, 1992.

Department, where contextually orientated, non-gallery projects have been part of the curriculum of late. As a result, they emerged from their art school years with a very different set of assumptions and experiences than their immediate predecessors and graduates from other, more traditional Scottish art schools. For them, activities which would connote rebellion and radicalism for others were quite familiar and common sense ways to conduct their careers. In this respect, they are a new breed on the Scottish art scene, and they account for the sudden flowering of artists intiatives in the wider environment at the turn of the decade. Their group philosophy is not informed by any political or critical energy. Having said this, some of them do take a left wing political stance as individual artists, and some of their projects gave the opportunity for these to make critical interventions in the environment of Glasgow through public art work.

The Alternative Scene

Reading across the artistic events of recent years in Glasgow, a number of artists come to light who base themselves in Glasgow and who are committed to creating a culture of resistance: resistance in the face of oppressive political realities and the incursions of the world view of those in power. These individuals have been involved in a range of different events, organisations and activities: Transmission Gallery, Cranhill Arts, Variant Magazine, Eventspace, Workers' City, Free University Network and Central Designs, to name some of them. Unfortunately, I do not have the space here to

provide a full and comprehensive discussion of all the Glasgow-based artists who's work is informed by a committment to radical left wing politics, nor of all the activities which they have initiated. Instead, I intend to concentrate on Variant Magazine, Eventspace, Free University Network and Workers' City, and to look specifically at the work of Malcolm Dickson and Euan Sutherland, two individuals who have made a significant contribution to resistant culture in the city.

> "Variant is a magazine of cross-currents in culture: critical thinking, imaginative ideas, independent media and artistic interventions."[24] (fig. 22)

Variant magazine was started in 1984 by Malcolm Dickson and a group of fellow students in the painting department of Glasgow School of Art. At that time it was a relatively informal publication, a response on their part to the limited and deeply conservative nature of the teaching in the department. It was started up to meet intellectual needs that were not being satisfied within the course:

> "Initially, it set out to be a fanzine-type, polemical publication which was intended to incite a reaction rather than to articulate a clear line of thought regarding art criticism or culture in general."

> "The students who were involved were not just interested in painting. There was a desire to be working across mediums. I would say that the magazine helped to encourage that process."

> "In the beginning, the magazine was produced very cheaply. At that time, there were no art magazines in Scotland at all, and that was what seemed to get the magazine noticed beyond its worth. There was some very bad writing in it: there were a couple of good things, but in general it was fairly un-thought

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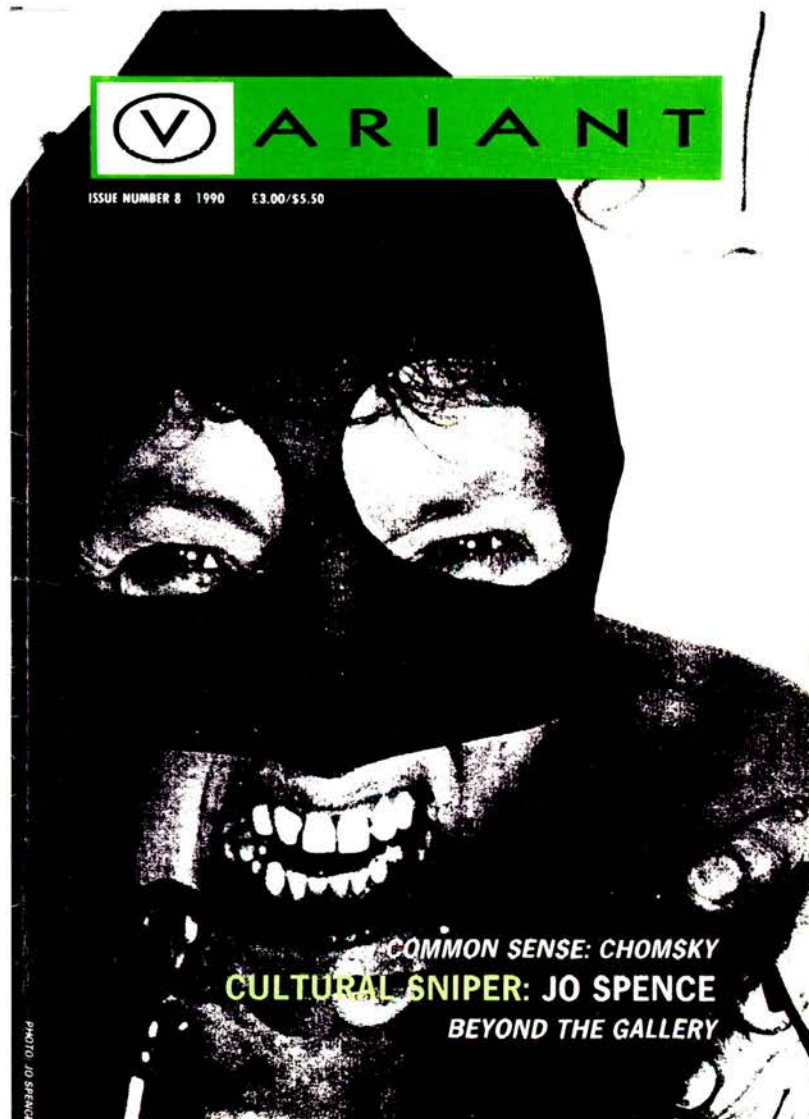[24]Editor's statement, Variant 13, Winter 1993, p. 1.

Fig.22 Cover, <u>Variant</u> 8, 1990.

out. It was more of a reflection of a bunch of tear-aways than anything else."[25]

On leaving art school, Dickson gave up on the magazine with the intention of concentrating on his own art work, but found that practical activity alone did not feed the creative process. It became clear that a theoretical and critical analysis of self and environment in relation to art work was necessary for him, and this lead him to return to <u>Variant</u> as a project:

> "Personally I felt (and I know that a lot of other people felt this way too) that it was almost impossible to divorce the practice of art from your existence in the world: to divorce it from what you were as a being, and everything which your being was composed of: your upbringing, your present economic circumstances, and so on. These have a bearing on your psychological and existential being. So I decided to start up the magazine again. Art and politics were first on the agenda and everything else followed from that. It's gradually progressed from there."[26]

In the meantime, <u>Variant</u> has run to thirteen issues and has developed into a professional and glossy-looking product which has a high profile in the contemporary art world. It covers a broad spectrum of cultural activity, to quote a recent subscription form:

> "<u>Variant</u> is a magazine of cross-current in culture: this includes subjects as diverse as video, television and film, avant-garde music, art and technology, public art, performance, cultural and media studies, philosophy, critical thinking, popular culture and social movements."

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[25]From an interview with Malcolm Dickson conducted by the author, 1992.
[26]Ibid.

Throughout the progression from rebellious school magazine to high-brow quarterly, the political stance of the magazine and its editor have remained uncompromised. Dickson has retained a committment both to radical left wing politics in relation to his work, to maintaining a critical, vigilant edge to Variant as a publication, and to covering marginalised, radical, cultural activity, in addition to more mainstream work. The magazine has given substantial international coverage to what might be termed 'cultural activism' in Lippard's sense of the phrase.[27] For instance, experimental artists working within the mainstream, media which are not commodified within the traditional gallery/dealership system such as performance, film and video, mail art, artists' initiatives, public art, or the work of artist/theorists like Jo Spence and Stuart Home, or cultural activities which are informed by a leftist political stance or by an oppressed, marginal identity. Considerable space has also been devoted to critical and theoretical discussion, to polemic and to debates between readers and contributors through the letters page. On a local level, the magazine has covered Glaswegian artists initiatives, shows at Transmission, and the organisations Workers' City, Eventspace and Free University Network.

The slick appearance of recent editions of Variant makes an interesting juxtaposition with this type of content. Of the decision to move it away from the cheap look and punk aesthetic of its early

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[27]Lucy Lippard, op. cit., p.348.

days, and to change it into the polished article it is now, Dickson has made these comments:

> "I think it's unhealthy to get stuck into a scene; to stop developing intellectually and formally. For Variant to still be the kind of publication it was in the beginning would be wrong. It would defeat the purpose of the magazine. What particularly dissatisfied me after a while was how it was being marginalised and seen as 'the cult of failure'; something done by 'the people who never made it'. It was important, then, to direct those germs of sedition to a higher level. The challenge was to break through some of the notions which were being perpetuated by the mainstream in order to prevent other ideas entering into the scene."
>
> "We wanted to convince ourselves that so-called radical ideas, ideas which I still see the magazine as identifying itself with (but not in any manifesto sense) , that these need not necessarily equate with the *Gestettner* form of communication. There is a myth that radicalism equates with bad production standards and obviously the change was, in a sense, a challenge to that."[28]

These ideas intersect with the notion of the resistant postmodernism which was outlined in chapter one. Variant, in taking on a glossy appearance and format that was reminiscent of mainstream art world publications like Flash Art and Artforum, was making a subversive appropriation of this pre-existent form. It was diverting its power as a construct, its glamour, to different ends, to giving expression to the marginal and the declassé.

Thomas Crow has described how high culture, fashion and the market under capitalism feed on marginal cultural expressions. Mainstream material culture regenerates itself by an endless process

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[28]Interview with Dickson, op. cit.

of appropriation and subversion of radical forms and ideas.[29] The question then arises of how <u>Variant</u> maintains its status as a radical magazine. How does it keep a step ahead of this process? What tactics are involved in clearing a space for truly critical expression beyond this tide of absorption? Dickson is aware of the fragility of <u>Variant</u>'s radical stance. He has said that he hopes the magazine might not just be an alternative to the mainstream, but also an alternative to the alternative.[30] In practical terms this means that the magazine tries to avoid some complacent, flattering and homogenous account of left wing culture:

> "There are a lot of problems with such endeavours (*left wing artists organisations*) - that's why the magazine has to continue to be maverick, even within the alternative scene."[31]

As part of this process, Dickson is committed to mirroring the conflicts, debates and inconsistencies of radical culture within <u>Variant</u>. The magazine presents a range of different and sometimes contradictory viewpoints which are often not those of the editor:

> "It's important to resist the kind of simplistic categorisation that would pigeonhole the magazine and therefore diffuse the significance of bringing different ideas together, ideas which might not necessarily agree with one another. It's about clashes of opinion and cross-pollenisation. A lot of things get into the magazine which I personally disagree with. I think its important for the editor of a magazine to be doing that, and it's also important for the magazine itself to take a stance which you

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[29]Thomas Crow, "Modernism and Mass Culture in the Visual Arts", <u>Pollock and After: The Critical Debate,</u> London 1985, pp.255-258.
[30]Interview with Dickson, op. cit.
[31]Ibid.

might not feel comfortable with. Too many publications will only include what they're interested in, which leads to complacency."[32]

Dickson, then, is alert to the dangers of co-optation by the mainstream. He guards against losing Variant's critical edge by an editorial policy of vigilance and self-criticism: avoiding a fixed political outlook; representing the conflicts and complexities of left-wing art practice and theory; constantly shifting forwards the arena of debate.

Variant aside, Dickson has been an organiser in Eventspace and Free University Network, as has Euan Sutherland. Eventspace is an arists' initiative whose remit is to present exhibitions and one-off projects of time-based art and related experimental media. This includes installation, video and performance art. The organisation undertakes to coordinate and negotiate venues and locations for the projects it represents, and seeks funding for its own initiatives on a project-to-project basis. Additionally, it is building up a time-based art archive of slides, videos and photographs. Although Eventspace does not have a specifically political agenda, the projects which it has presented have come from a left wing stand point and have dealt with environmental and social issues. Examples of these might include The Cenotaph Project - Class of Rulers, by Stuart Brisley and Maya Balcioglu, a travelling installation which was sited in Govan in July and August of 1988. It sought to examine the role of the public monument as embodiment of a ruling class's authority over the rest

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[32]Ibid.

of society, and to open up a discussion of issues relating to this.[33] The installation accrued meanings according to its various locations. Another Eventspace project was Sites/Positions which took place in sites around Glasgow in March 1990. The young Glaswegian artists Christine Borland, Douglas Gordon and Euan Sutherland (fig. 23) participated. The works in this project were united by the theme of concern about the damaging effects of the 'Culture City' construct.[34]

Malcolm Dickson and Euan Sutherland have also been involved in the organisation of The Free University Network. The Free University Network was started in 1987 by a group of individuals in Glasgow who were interested in the fostering of a left wing cultural scene, and who were frustrated by the lack of any designated space or organisation through which to put their ideas into practice:

> "There were no free spaces where people met to discuss things, let alone to put ideas into action. The Free University network tried to redress that."[35]
>
> "A few individuals and groups got together to promote radical thinking, radical ideas and an independent way of doing things. It held various forums, screenings and talks. It was loosely based on the German Free University Network set up by Beuys. It's linked to that to some degree, but there aren't any personal connections with people in Germany."[36]

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[33]Tim Brennan, "The Cenotaph Project - Class of Rulers", Variant 5, Summer/Autumn 1988, p.11.
[34]Craig Richardson, "Sites/Positions", Variant 8, 1990, p. 50.
[35]Interview with Dickson, op. cit.
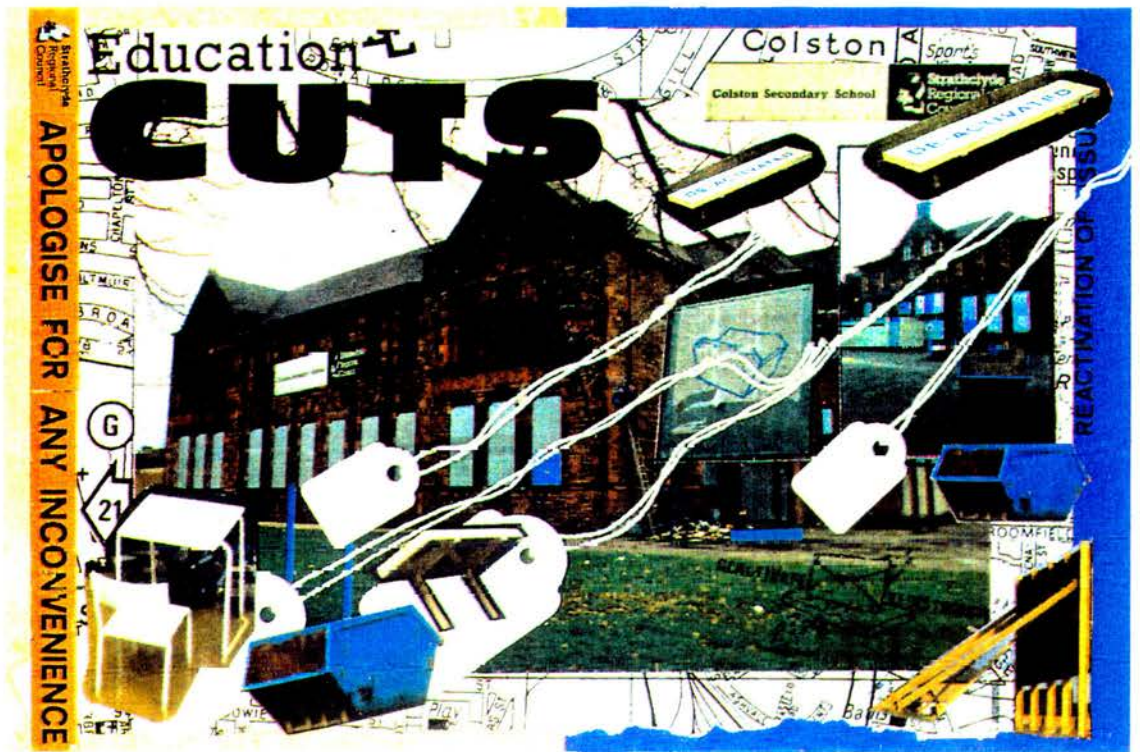[36]From an interview with Euan Sutherland conducted by the author, 1992.

Fig.23 Euan Sutherland, <u>Renovation, Reaction, Reactivation</u>, 1990.
Postcard.

Originally, the organisers of the F.U.N. had hoped to set up a resource centre for learning outwith academia, that is, informal learning outwith the ideology and aims of the education system. It was hoped that this centre would be open 24 hours and would have a café, etc. This did not come to pass, although it is an idea which is still being floated.[37] As it is, F.U.N. is an informal organisation which changes personnel from time to time and which lies dormant for periods, depending on the other committments of the people involved. During its phases of activity it has set up informal talks and discussions, produced publications, organised some very lively Glaswegian events such as the Culture and Politics Day in 1987, the Scratch Parliament Day in 1988, and the much acclaimed Self Determination and Power Event, which took place in Govan in January 1990 - a festival of screenings, talks and workshops. This event was attended by people from various grass-roots left wing groups in the city: tenants' groups, Women's Aid, the anti-poll tax campaign, anti-racist groups, among others, along with artists, writers and activists. F.U.N. managed to attract Noam Chomsky to the event, who delivered the keynote address on each day. The success of this and other F.U.N. Projects lies in the fact that they attract participants from a broad spectrum of radical groups and bring them together for debate and activity. Also, they offer the opportunity to the Glaswegian public to encounter radical ideas and artistic expression. In this way, they have made an important contribution to counter-culture in the city.

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[37]Interview with Malcolm Dickson, op. cit.

Workers' City is another Glasgow based counter-cultural organisation, but of a different type to those discussed above. It is mainly a pressure group which was set up to criticise local politics as opposed to being a promoter of cultural events. However, it has organised events on occasion. Euan Sutherland is the only artist involved - the others are writers, poets, journalists and members of the public. Unlike Eventspace and Free University Network, Workers' City will not touch public funding of any sort, but manages its activities out of its own financial resources. A news sheet: The Glasgow Keelie, is produced under its auspices. This is devoted to exposing and publicising the corrupt activities of Glasgow City Council in general and Pat Lally, the former Labour Group leader, in particular. It has also produced a book aimed at debunking the 'Glasgow Smiles Better, Culture City' mythology, eponymously titled Workers' City (The Real Glasgow Stands Up).[38] This was a collection of poetry, prose and local history, culled from sources past and present, which presented a dialectical account of Glasgow and its history.

For the month of May 1991, Workers' City broke with its usual form to organise a festival of cultural events - Civic Action Glasgow. The fact that this festival had a strong arts bias and that most events took place in the Transmission Gallery reflects the involvement of Euan Sutherland - Workers' City as a whole tend to be extremely suspicious of the arts scene in the city.[39] Sutherland and Ross

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[38]Farquar McLay, ed., Workers' City: The Real Glasgow Stands Up, Glasgow, 1988.
[39]Interview with Euan Sutherland, op. cit.

Sinclair had a joint exhibition that month at <u>Transmission</u> as part of the festival.

Sutherland has been participating in <u>Workers' City</u> over the past few years, lending his skills as an artist to their projects; designing visual material for them. He has stated that he still has to make an effort to convince those he has been working with that art can be a powerful means of communication and dissent, and that it is not just empty bourgeois indulgence.[40] For Sutherland, the process of finding artistic strategies in his work which cut through this type of prejudice is a vital and challenging one:

> "The process of breaking through these preconceptions is what I find exciting about my work. I feel that I'm on ground upon which very few people chose to work, certainly amongst my peers in Glasgow."[41]

It is also a politically significant one:

> "This (*right wing thinking*) channels right the way down to affect people's perception of those doing radical cultural work in the city - those who do forward thinking work - the type of work whch can quite easily be rubbished as over-the-top intellectualism. It's seen as decadent. That's the result of right wing propaganda filtering down through the system. Just because something's new or different or difficult, it's seen as bad."[42]

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[40]Ibid.
[41]Ibid.
[42]Ibid.

Like Workers' City itself, Sutherland's personal art work is engaged in debunking local politics. He has worked in a range of media, including performance, printmaking and mail art. The post card illustrated in fig. 23 is from a mailing campaign, part of Sutherlands work for Renovation-Reaction-Reactivation, Sites/Postions 1990, (fig. 23) which hoped to raise public awareness of the effects of local authority cuts on education. Sutherland chose a postal district in Glasgow and sent works to addresses in this district at random. Recently, he has been concentrating on print making. One example of his print work is the Stance of Defiance booklet. (fig. 24) This is a folio of nine A5 screen prints which is sold at £5.95 with the exhortation to "display, flypost, photocopy, plagiarise, redistribute."[43] Each work is an unambiguous expression of protest against different things: Glasgow City Council, the Poll Tax, the effects of the media and so on. As with Variant magazine, there is a juxtaposition here of agit-prop content and high art production methods. The booklet is a beautiful object, skillfully designed and printed on thick, grainy paper in jewel like colours. I would argue that it is this high level of aesthetic and physical quality which protects Sutherland's work from being dismissed as mere propaganda, an accusation which can so easily be made against art which communicates protest in such a clear way.

It can be seen from the left wing artists' initiatives discussed in this section that Glasgow does indeed have a lively radical art subculture. Dickson and Sutherland are one of a handful of individuals who are

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[43]Euan Sutherland, Stance of Defiance, Angry Artworks Press, Glasgow, 1991.
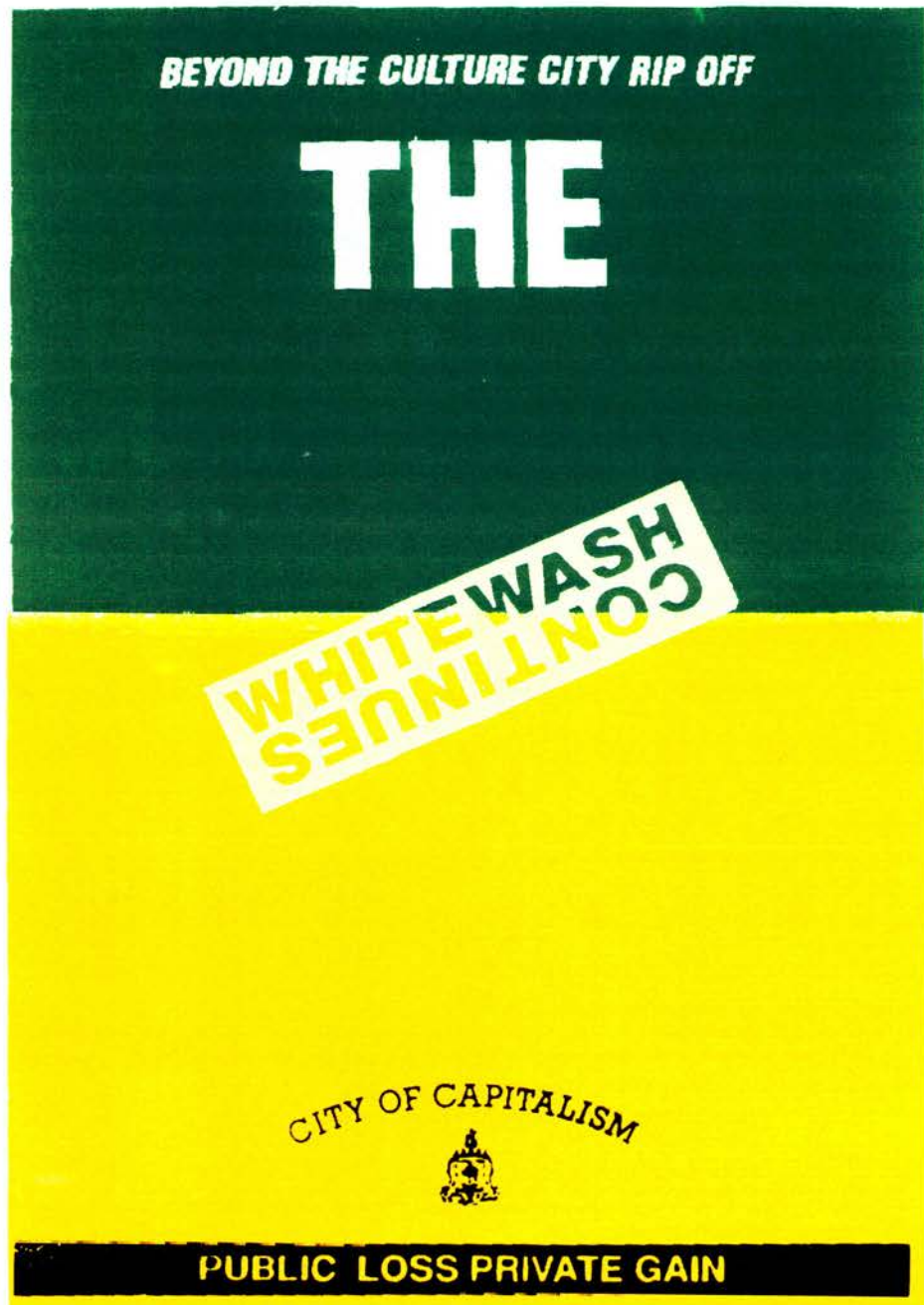
Fig.24 Euan Sutherland, <u>Stance of Defiance</u>, 1991.
Silkscreen.

committed to fostering a culture of resistance here, and who have set about the task with energy. The various projects I have described came into being in response to different individual triggers, but the common theme between them has been the need to find a forum for cultural and political criticism. Unlike the initiatives discussed in the first section, the activities of Eventspace, Variant, F.U.N., Dickson, Sutherland and others were motivated by their political committments, as opposed to the desire to provide work opportunities or to promote careers. Sutherland, for instance, has often refused the invitation to participate in projects whose political implications he disliked.[44] Their work has been addressed to the public in general, and not to the art world, in marked contrast to a project like Windfall. Much of their activity has been about the promotion of radical political ideas and about bringing art informed by those ideas to a wider public. It has been about the expression and communication of dissent, and about exposing the machinations of the powers that be.

One aspect of radical culture in Glasgow which I have yet to give an account of is the feminist art scene. The well spring of recent feminist cultural activity in the city has been the artists' initiative Women In Profile, which is discussed below.

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[44]Interview with Euan Sutherland, op. cit.

Women In Profile

Women In Profile, or WIP,[45] was started in 1987 in response to the announcement that Glasgow was to be the European Capital of Culture for 1990. It began as an informal association of women professionals from a range of different fields - artists, writers, teachers, musicians, trade unionists, arts administrators, film makers etc., who were united in the desire to promote women's cultural activity in the Year of Culture celebrations. However, in 1989, the group split into two parts as a result of fundamental disagreements which arose in the process of drafting a constitution. The split reflected ideological divisions within Women In Profile as was. The more radical faction, which was comprised of the musicians', film makers' and visual artists' sections, retained the title Women In Profile, while the remainder went off to form Women 2000.[46]

The new Women In Profile had a strong visual arts bias, given that a large majority of the group were artists, as was the main organiser, Adele Patrick. WIP's initial remit was to act as an umbrella organisation for various feminist art, music and film projects which were being planned for the Year of Culture. These included The Women's Own Annual Exhibition, an open exhibition of the work of women artists; a feminist film festival at the Glasgow Film Theatre, a

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[45]Abbreviation taken from "Women In Profile", Women Artists' Slide Library Journal 35, July/August 1990, p. 20.

[46]I was involved in Women In Profile at this time and subsequently. The information presented here and elsewhere in this section comes from my first hand experience of these events and personal acquaintance with those concerned.

festival of cabarets and concerts by women musicians, the <u>Women and Food</u> project, a multi-disciplinary art event which examined different aspects of the special relationship between women and food; <u>Womanhouse</u>, a domestic art project in Castlemilk inspired by Judy Chicago's <u>Womanhouse</u>; and an international conference, <u>Women Setting Agendas For Change in the Arts</u>.

However, it had been intended from the start that <u>WIP</u> would continue to function beyond the <u>Year of Culture</u>, as a feminist art resource. Up until the appearance of <u>WIP</u>, there had been no focal point for feminist artistic activity in Glasgow, and this dearth was strongly felt by young female artists, educated in the male dominated environment of Glasgow School of Art.[47] Adele Patrick and other participants in WIP had been students in the department of painting and drawing there. They were angry about what they saw as its macho ethos, and about their experience of the department's attitude towards its female students. For these women, the <u>Year of Culture</u> was a catalyst through which a Glasgow-based feminist art organisation could be formed. They were very critical of the <u>Year of Culture</u> concept and of the politics involved, but at the same time, they made full use of this cultural band wagon to get funding for their projects and as a focus for the energy needed to create a permanent women's art resource in Glasgow.

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[47]Even today, there is only one full time female teacher in the Fine Art departments of Glasgow School of Art - Sam Ainsley of the <u>Environmental Art Department.</u>

Initially, WIP used the Transmission Gallery as a base. But by 1990, they had managed to amass the requisite funding to open their own permanent space in Dalhousie Lane.[48] This was converted into a small gallery which was used for slide shows, talks and performances. In the run up to the Women's Own Annual exhibition, slide meetings were held there where local women artists could show and discuss examples of their work with other women artists, in a receptive and supportive atmosphere. The provision of this type of opportunity to women artists in Glasgow was a significant emancipatory development. It met a need which was not provided for elsewhere, and especially not within the art education system - the need for a support network for female artists, which took account of their specific problems as a disadvantaged group[49]. This was true of the other WIP projects which were being prepared for 1990. In working together to produce exhibitions and art work which would be presented to the public, the women of WIP were giving each other the professional recognition and encouragement which artists need to continue their careers, and which was not so readily available to women in the art world.

WIP have been successful in their plan to stay in existence in the period after 1990. They now operate as a women artists' archive

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[48]WIP received grants from Glasgow District Council and Strathclyde Regional Council. Cash was also generated through fundraising activities on the part of the women participators. See "Women In Profile", op. cit., W.A.S.L.J. 35, p.17.

[49]One of the assumptions of this dissertation is that women are a disadvantaged group within the art world. In defence of this view point, I refer the reader to the large body of literature which exists on the subject. Examples of such reading matter might include Old Mistresses: Women, Art and Ideology, R. Parker and G. Pollock, Pandora Press, London, 1985.

and library, rather than as a promoter of cultural events - a regional version of their sister organisation in London, the <u>Women Artists' Slide Library</u>. Their presence on the city art scene is more low key, with far fewer women involved than in 1990, but Adele Patrick remains its main organiser. The group have expanded their premises on Hill Street in Garnethill, where they have set up their library. This provides interested parties with a range of information on topics connected to women in the arts. It offers access to its collection of slides, documentation, catalogues, books etc., with an emphasis on Scottish women artists and arts issues. It is also a resource of bibliographic information, and information on exhibition spaces, funding sources, education, and other women's groups and campaigns both nationally and internationally. In this way it provides a unique service to the women's art community in Glasgow and Scotland - no such facility exists elsewhere in Scotland.

Conclusion

In this chapter, I have looked at various artists initiatives which have sprung up in Glasgow during the 1980's and early 1990's. As I have argued, the phenomenon seems particularly interesting in relation to the possibility of cultural dissent and resistance at the present time. I have suggested that the artists' initiative scene can be divided into three camps, each with different agendas and *raisons d'être*.

The initiatives of the ambitious, younger generation of Glaswegian artists have not had a declared political agenda. Their decision to organise art events independently of the gallery and museum circuit was based on their desire to create opportunities to show their work, given the absence of such opportunities for young artists in the mainstream. I have argued that because of the type of education they received in the Department of Environmental Art, the notion of the autonomous, non-gallery event did not connote rebellion for them. Instead, it was a reasonably familiar, academic way of working, and a method of furthering their careers. Given this, I suggested that the implicit politics of the Windfall and Bellgrove projects were fairly conservative. However, it must be added that Bellgrove provided the opportunity to make political work in an interesting public space to those who were interested in doing so. The flurry of artists' initiatives at the turn of the decade, then, was not indicative of a sudden flourishing of counter culture in the city. Rather, it was indicative of the arrival on the art scene of the first generation of David Harding's students.

In the second and third sections of this chapter, I identified those groups of artists who have been part of an active, radical subculture in the city: the Variant/ Eventspace/ F.U.N. group and the feminist artists of Women In Profile . Both of these groups maintain a relatively separatist and critical stance in relation to the mainstream art world. Both are committed to fostering critical, politically radical artistic activity in the city. They have an antagonistic relationship with the establishment, in marked contrast with the initiatives of the

first section. Some individuals who have been involved with them, however, tend to flirt with both mainstream and alternative culture.

WIP has a specifically feminist agenda. It is an organisation which was set up to promote and support women artists in the city in 1990 and beyond. In the run up to 1990, it promoted and coordinated a range of women's art events which took place that year, and fought for the necessary funding for them. In the period beyond 1990, it has managed to survive as a feminist art resource, providing information, reading material and contacts to women who are interested. I would argue that in successfully promoting and supporting the work of women artists in the city, it it a vital component of oppositional culture.

The various initiatives discussed in the middle section have arisen from a more general perspective of antagonism to dominant culture. These have taken a range of forms, were set up for different reasons and to address different issues, but they are united in their attempts to create an arena of dissent within the fold of dominant culture, to create platforms for cultural and political criticism. I would argue that they have been successful in this endeavour, in so far as they have managed to rally sympathetic individuals to their cause, to keep alive a spirit of dissent and to communicate critical ideas to their audience.

Chapter Four - Cranhill Arts.

Introduction

In this chapter, I wish to discuss Cranhill Arts, a community art scheme in a working class area on the North Eastern periphery of Glasgow. While there are a number of community art schemes in such areas in the city, for instance, Maryhill Arts and Easterhouse Arts, Cranhill is the biggest and most acclaimed of these. It is also of interest here because, unlike the other projects, it has an overwhelming visual arts bias which arises from its origins as an artist-in-residence scheme. Furthermore, much of the work produced under its aegis has been of professional quality and of considerable cultural importance.

In the introduction to this dissertation, I suggested that community arts projects might be a very powerful aspect of radical art practice at the present time. Theoretically, they could be a means of fostering a culture of dissent in that they bring skills of communication and self expression to oppressed groups in society, who are otherwise voiceless or whose voices are ignored. They can also be a vital resource for communities in decline, providing opportunities for enjoyable and productive activity in areas where their are very few other leisure facilities. Below, I hope to examine whether, and to what extent, Cranhill Arts fulfils this potential.

Cranhill Arts

> "We don't call ourselves a 'community' arts project.
> Even the word 'project' is troublesome - a seventies
> tag word. It denotes something more temporary
> than we are. As for the word 'community', it
> suggests something second rate and second best, and
> I don't thing that's true of Cranhill Arts, either with
> reference to the facilities or to the finished work."[1]

The Cranhill Arts project is based on the ground floor of a block of
council flats in the neighbourhood of Cranhill, Greater Easterhouse.
The project, which, as stated above, grew out of an artist-in-
residence scheme, has been in existence since 1981. In 1980, a
group of local people made the initiative to set up an artist-in-
residence scheme in Cranhill with the idea that it should be a skill
sharing exercise on the part of the artist who won the position.
Alastair McCallum, a contemporary of Ken Currie's at Glasgow School
of Art, was chosen to fill the post. He was very keen to set up an
interactive residence with the people of Cranhill rather than to
isolate himself to make his own work *in situ*. To this end, he liased
with the local initiative group to establish the type of activity the
project would concentrate on. It was decided that screen printing
and photography would be the disciplines to be taught. These
remain the main activities on offer at Cranhill, although others have
since been added, for instance, design, computer aided design and

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[1]From an interview between Mary Cathcart, administrator of Cranhill Arts, and the
author.

the creation of a photographic archive of the Glaswegian people. McCallum stayed with the project for ten years, leaving in 1991 to concentrate on his own design company, Central Designs. During that time, the project has expanded considerably. It now employs three full time workers - an administrator and two teachers - people who learnt their skills through participation in the project. It offers a range of different courses and activities to local people; it has opened a gallery and shop in the city centre; and it has achieved Scottish Arts Council Revenue Client status - the only Revenue Client in a working class area in Scotland.[2]

Cranhill Arts, then, has far outstripped its origins as an artist-in-residence scheme and has become a larger and more permanent community resource. To discuss it in the context of this dissertation, it must be stated from the outset that as a publicly funded venture and registered charity, it is strictly non party political in its allegiances and its activities. Unlike the artistic activities discussed in former chapters, it is not free to take an overt political stance. However, as a community resource, it has inevitably taken on the political colour of its surroundings:

> "We are very firmly non party political. That's part of our constitution as you can imagine. It is something that is also required by the funding bodies and the local authorities. Having said that, we are in Cranhill. We don't have great debates between supporters of the Conservative Party and others because there aren't any here, although the attitudes of the people might be conservative with a small 'c'. In the past, we have taken part in campaigning issues which were seen to be political.

[2]Ibid.

> Also, one of the commercial wings of our activities involves producing posters and banners for cultural and campaigning groups."[3]

Thus, the centre has commercial links with many leftist groups in the city. They have designed and produced screen prints for trade unions and others, and for political events. Many of their images are well known, for instance, the poster they made to announce the May Day 1990 celebrations. However, Cranhill Arts's most important contribution to oppositional culture in Glasgow does not lie in this type of work, but rather in its day to day work in the community of Cranhill:

> "From the very start the guiding principle of project activity has been a desire to communicate skills to local people. This has involved workshops, courses, individual tuition, special projects and a diverse range of activities centred around the creation of a skill base in the area: local people, experienced and interested, able to utilise the project's equipment to create their own cultural work."[4]

The photographic work and photographic archival work done at the centre is particularly interesting in this respect. The centre has been offering the use of photographic equipment and photography courses at all levels since its inception. Photography is a very democratic medium. Unlike painting and sculpting, it is a discipline in which, given the correct training, most people can gain a high level of skill in a short time. It allows people who have been disadvantaged in terms of education and denied the skills of self expression to depict

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[3]Ibid.
[4]Cranhill Arts Project Report 1990 (unpublished)

their lives and their surroundings in a visually compelling and immediate way.

In anticipation of the <u>Year of Culture 1990</u>, <u>Cranhill Arts</u> initiated a project which capitalised on the photographic skills of the arts centre users and whose second aim was to collect the work of Glaswegian amateur photographers from the past - the <u>Glaswegians Photo Survey and Archive</u>. Over a fifteen month period, a group of twenty two photographers with different levels of experience, drawn from classes at the centre, photographed themselves, those around them and their surroundings in the city. The goal of this activity was to amass a collection of photographs which would form an insiders' portrait of Glasgow and the Glaswegians from the 1950's to the present day. The resultant body of work was to be exhibited as part of the <u>Year of Culture 1990</u> celebrations as an intervention on the part of indigenous culture into the fairground of imported high art and hype. In the end the photographic material collated was so extensive that it was able to fuel several exhibitions, which took place during 1990 and beyond.

As part of a drive to bring the work done at <u>Cranhill</u> to as wide an audience as possible in 1990, <u>Cranhill Arts</u> sought funding to set up their own gallery space and shop in the city centre. They managed to negotiate a shop space on the Saltmarket, and this has been retained by them until the present. Of their hopes for the new space, they have made this statement:

"In preparing for the Glaswegians Project it was obvious that there would be a potential audience for our photographs far greater than the number of conventional gallery-goers. Many people feel put off by the snobby atmosphere of galleries, others would simply not consider going to exhibitions at all. In order to overcome these problems we set about the conversion of derelict premises in a busy shopping street with easy access to East-end bus routes and near to the Barras."[5]

The first exhibition to be shown there was The Crawfords of Kinning Park - a collection of photographs taken by one Glaswegian family during the 1950's and 1960's. This exhibition proved so popular that it produced a spin-off project in 1992 - Out of the Biscuit Tin, (fig. 25) which was part of the exhibition Future Memories (fig. 26) at the Tramway. Out of the Biscuit Tin was an invitation to people in the city to bring their family snap shots to the Tramway to have them photocopied, exhibited and added to the Glaswegians archive.

The main Cranhill Arts exhibition for 1990 was Glaswegians - Portrait of a Scottish City, in which the contemporary work by the twenty two Cranhill photographers was shown. This took the form of a central exhibition in the Saltmarket with eleven satellite exhibitions in outlying areas of the city. In terms of its location, then, it hoped to expose the incoming, 'Year of Culture' audience to the cultural expression of the ordinary people of the city, and to bring the work to the people of the city themselves in their own neighbourhoods. As with The Crawfords of Kinning Park, the audience and media response to Glaswegians was so positive that

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[5]Ibid.

the **BISCUIT TIN** exhibition
a family album for a whole city

Fig.25 Cranhill Arts, <u>The Biscuit Tin Exhibition</u>, 1991.
Postcard.

Fig.26 Cranhill Arts, <u>Future Memories</u>, 1990/1991.
Exhibition publicity leaflet, photomontage.

another exhibition of Cranhill photography, Future Memories, incorporating Out of the Biscuit Tin, took place during the Winter of 1991/ 1992 at the Tramway. The Tramway is a prestigious contemporary arts venue in Glasgow which hosts a small number of important international exhibitions each year. In being invited to show there, the work of Cranhill Arts had proved its mettle by crossing the iron barrier which exists between community arts and the official art world. Cranhill Arts capitalised on the high exposure afforded by the event to solicit more material for the Glaswegians Archive.

Conclusion

It is impossible to measure the full extent of the benefits of this activity to Cranhill Arts Project users. Many have had the opportunity to learn skills and gain experiences which are marketable in the workplace: screen printing, photography, photographic processing, exhibition organisation, arts administration, teaching experience, and so on. In addition there are the less tangible benefits which involvement in successful and publicly acclaimed projects provides to people who are otherwise disregarded by society: confidence in one's abilities, self worth, a sense of achievement, a sense of being valued and recognised, and a sense of having something important to communicate. However, the success of Cranhill Arts has been a double-edged sword in some respects. The project relies on the help of voluntary teachers who have learnt their skills as project users themselves. Inevitably, these individuals

find paid jobs as skilled workers in the photography and printing industries. <u>Cranhill Arts</u> does not have the funding to retain their services, and so loses valuable individuals to the marketplace.

To conclude, I would suggest that the work of Cranhill Arts has an empowering, emancipatory effect on the community of Cranhill, both in terms of passing on valuable skills and in terms of providing them with a voice to bring their world view to the attention of society at large. For these reasons, I would argue that the project makes an impressive and unique contribution to fostering a culture of resistance in Glasgow at the present time.

Conclusions

This thesis has been an attempt to examine the subject of art as a medium of political dissent in relation to the contemporary art scene in Glasgow.

The theoretical background to this study was set out in the first chapter. In that chapter, I set out to establish my usage of the terms 'avant-garde' and 'postmodernism of resistance', terms which I feel are crucial to the debate on art and politics in the twentieth century. In this way, I hoped to show my angle of approach to the topic on hand.

Following Peter Bürger, I proposed a specific usage of the term 'avant-garde' for the purposes of my argument. Rather than being a general term for modernism as a practice, I wished it to denote the impulse to social and political protest which had been a feature of modernism when it was a live movement. This impulse to protest had taken its most explicit and declared form in what Bürger has called the 'historical avant-garde movements' - that is, Dada and Surrealism. I concluded that the failure of the 'historical avant-garde project' - the failure of Dada and Surrealism to provoke social and political revolution, marked the end of modernism as a radical force in society. At the same time, this failure changed both the concept of the art work and nature of the arena in which art with a politically radical agenda has to operate. I would suggest that this was a massive art historical shift: one aspect of the break with modernism

and the move into an era of postmodernism. I then took up Hal Foster's notion of 'the postmodernism of resistance':

> "In cultural politics today, a basic opposition exists between a postmodernism which seeks to deconstruct modernism and resist the status quo and a postmodernism which repudiates the former to celebrate the latter: a postmodernism of resistance and a postmodernism of reaction."[1]

I concluded that this 'postmodernism of resistance' was the heir to the avant-garde project (the impulse in art to protest and cultural dissent) after the failure of the avant-garde and the death of modernism.

In the final section of the first chapter, I suggested that in this postmodern era, the modernist tactics of shock, newness and transgression in art no longer work as strategies of protest. We no longer have the illusion of a white space beyond the status quo in which to set up an attack upon it. I concluded that, contra Jameson, critique was still possible, but that this was highly problematic. The means of critique and the space in which it was to be voiced had to be wrested temporarily and provisionally from within the fold of dominant culture. I then offered examples of the artistic tactics which I felt had been and could be effective in this endeavour.

The empirical element of the thesis examined the Glaswegian art scene in the light of this approach. I identified three areas of artistic

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[1]Hal Foster, 'Postmodernism: A Preface', The Anti-Aesthetic, Washington, 1983, pp. xi-xii.

activity in the city which were potentially fertile ground for a postmodernism of resistance.

Chapter Two looked at Glaswegian artists who work in the traditional medium of painting and who site their practice in the art world mainstream: the network of dealers, galleries and museums. I suggested that this type of activity could be a paradigmatic form of resistant postmodernism - art which is quite conscious of its own co-optation by the establishment, but which uses the power it derives from this position to communicate criticism. I concluded that of the famous generation of Glaswegian figurative painters, only Ken Currie and Margaret Hunter were making art which could lay claims to being politically radical. After examining their respective work in some depth, I concluded that they were each contributing in their different ways to a culture of criticism of the status quo. I suggested that they were successful in this in that they had forged personal languages of artistic expression which were profoundly communicative of their experiences and viewpoints.

Chapter Three examined the latter-day phenomenon of the Glaswegian artists' initiative. This seemed a pertinent subject of enquiry, given the historical association between autonomous, non-gallery art events and radicalism, both aesthetic and political. I identified three different artists' initiative scenes in the city, each with different politics and *raisons d'être*. The group responsible for the high-profile, artist-initiated events of 1990 and 1991 were mainly recent graduates of <u>Glasgow School of Art's</u> <u>Department of</u>

Environmental Art. I argued that in choosing to work independently of the gallery system, these artists had no radical political agenda. Instead, they were making their own working opportunties in the absence of such opportunities for very young artists in the Establishment. In so doing, they were promoting themselves and their careers rather than any set of ideas, in the hope of gaining entry to the art world fast track. I concluded that the politics of their activities were fairly conservative, but that they had provided a public platform for the few young artists amongst them who were interested in making politically critical work. Next, I looked at the radical art scene - the feminist initiative Women In Profile, and the more generally leftist activities in which Malcolm Dickson and Euan Sutherland have been involved. Both of these groups have a relatively low public profile and are characterised by an antagonistic attitude towards the high art world and towards dominant culture. Both groups have been working to create platforms for artistic critique of the culture and politics of the establishment. I concluded that these have been important contributions to a culture of resistance in the city on their own terms. Women In Profile have managed to survive as a support network and information resource for feminist artists in the city, while the F.U.N./Eventspace/Variant group continue to promote cultural radicalism and the artistic expression of political dissent in a punchy, self-critical way.

The final chapter was devoted to a discussion of the outstanding work of Cranhill Arts, the biggest and most acclaimed of community arts projects in the city. I described the activities and achievements

of <u>Cranhill</u>, and concluded that the project had succeeded in empowering a community who are doubly oppressed - oppressed by poverty and by the lack of a voice to express their plight.   I suggested that it had achieved this by passing on a broad range of skills, by facilitating the self expression of the project users and by introducing the art work produced under its aegis to the public at large through exhibitions. For these reasons, I argued that Cranhill Arts was at the cutting edge of cultural activism in the city and that it was a significant contribution to oppositional culture.

It has not been my intention to make extravagant claims as to the direct political effects of the art work discussed in this dissertation. However, I would suggest that despite the limitations of the context in which art finds itself, art objects are powerful didactic tools. They have radical potential. When they are a means of articulating criticism of the context in which we live, or of articulating the life experience of society's Others, then they bring new things to our attention and offer us alternative ways of thinking. It could be that these seeds of dissent are washed away in the sea of repressive tolerance. Artists cannot guarantee the context of reception of their work; they can only set up the conditions whereby the readings they want to elicit are likely, and the audience they would like to reach are attracted to their work. One is reminded of a comment by Ken Currie :

> "There's a phrase of Gramsci's I keep returning to:
> 'The optimism of the will; the pessimism of the
> intellect.' You have a will to change things, but
> you're not going to delude yourself about the

> potential for change. You're going to keep going,
> you're not going to let depressing realities walk all
> over you. You have to constantly challenge,
> constantly seek out knowledge, constantly enquire,
> constantly maintain a sceptical critical, vigilant
> faculty about you."[2]

I would argue that the notion of the postmodernism of resistance pivots on the sentiment of this quote. In as far as projects like Cranhill Arts, Free University Network, Variant, Women In Profile, and individuals like Currie are working energetically, intelligently and self-critically to manipulate the context of reception for their work, and, in as far as they keep alive the expression of critique, without recourse to the shock of the new, then they are engaged with a postmodernism of resistance. The tactics they have used in this endeavour are akin to those identified in the first chapter. A list of these might include: the positioning of art work so that it might reach the audience beyond the art world on the part of Eventspace, F.U.N., WIP, Bellgrove, and Cranhill Arts; subversive forays into mainstream media on the part of Ken Currie and Variant; the eloquent expression of alienation and the life experience of subordinate groups in our society on the part of Margaret Hunter; the facilitating of the self expression of subordinate groups on the part of WIP and Cranhill Arts; and, above all, the creation and communication of knowledge about, and a critical understanding of, our contemporary situation. Given these efforts, the seeds of dissent might have a chance to take root.

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[2]Ken Currie, Interview with the author, 1992.

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