CHAPTER 1

Art And Politics

"*Fiat ars - pereat mundus*"
"Let art be created – let the world perish"[1]
~ The Italian Futurists

"Everything is political," observed the students of a generation past; everything, that is, but art – or so the art establishment of the day would have us believe. Real art, we were told, should not sully itself with such worldly concerns. In the years following the Second World War, painting became a resolutely *a*political pursuit. Abstract Expressionism, the first director of the Museum of Modern Art explained, was clearly not suitable for purposes of propaganda, and who could disagree? Patches of colour and tangles of dribbled paint represented nothing recognizable and could, therefore, not convey political ideas. In the tradition of Art for Art's Sake, this was high art at its finest. But the art of the fifties was propaganda such as the world had never known – in its latest and most sophisticated form – employed in a political struggle of the highest order: *Kulturkampf.*

The word translates literally as 'culture struggle' or 'culture war.' It describes the process by which competing ideologies, through the manipulation of culture, vie for the 'minds and wills of men'[2] to secure power or to facilitate the smooth transition of power. The world has seen a succession of fundamental power shifts – from church to monarch, to modern nation state – and the process is ongoing.

Kulturkampf was invoked again in the fifties to describe the ideological struggle of the Cold War: capitalism and liberal democracy vs. communism and totalitarianism. But this was also a class struggle; the proletariat vs the power elite of days gone by – the robber baron capitalists and the moneyed, aristocratic classes. That particular contest came to a close when the Berlin Wall fell in 1989, but the machinery of manufactured culture never rests. As Jean Baurillard once stated, "the system is always two revolutions ahead..."[3] The ground was being prepared – even as the communist threat was at its height – for the next great power shift: from nation state and liberal democratic government to corporate and extra-national institutions.

Communism was a serious concern, but it was also an expedient. When this threat was no more, the push for globalism – and the primacy of corporate power – shifted into high gear. Utilizing the cultural apparatus, integrated and refined in the Cold War years, a 'palace coup' has taken place before our eyes, with little resistance, and barely a word of protest; so effective has been the marketing of internationalist doctrine.

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The story of the Cold War *kulturkampf* resurfaced recently, thanks to the declassification of various official documents in the United States and the tireless work of a handful of investigative journalists. The revelation of CIA involvement in the arts was new to most, and the news circulated for a time in the manner of cocktail party banter, befitting the era. Of course, *any* story about CIA covert activity sparks at least a passing curiosity. The mainstream media, however, never picked up this particular news item and the art world had no comment. The public's attention, so far as it went, soon drifted on to other things; as one close friend put it: "But that was all ages ago." Which, in truth, it was. Intelligence agencies, it turns out, have worked with the manufacturers of American art and culture for a very long time. Film, television, theatre, literature, and even contemporary art have all been carefully orchestrated, in accordance with the 'Doctrinal Program' – The Psychological Strategy Board's directive (PSB) D-33/2. Until recently, the contents of this top secret paper, drafted in 1953, were only partially known; fragments of the plan were revealed very early on, when staff themselves expressed concern. The document was eventually declassified, and made available to the public on March 3rd, 2007; information such as this, however, has a tendency to slip through the cracks. The vast majority of the population remains completely unaware of the doctrine that shaped the 'free' culture of the West for almost five decades; and continues to do so, through many of the same channels.

The 'General Guidance' section of PSB D-33/2 – under 'primary domestic activities' – states:

> Doctrinal production is not limited to political and philosophical analysis. All fields of intellectual and cultural interests, from anthropology and artistic creations to sociology and scientific methodology, come within the gamut of the doctrinal program.

Late-modern and postmodern culture, it turns out, is not at all what it appeared to be. The 'Shaping of opinion' aside, social theorists of the day were more concerned about the way the public was being conditioned to think; for reasons that will soon become apparent, this cultural transition was described as an Anti-Enlightenment movement.[4] Not only were specific ideas planted, nurtured and reinforced, the way in which we were to see the world would be 'adjusted', such that certain facts – even if they were to become known – either would not register at all, or would be understood within the context of a carefully crafted world view. An unsettling vision of 'systematized' culture begins to reveal itself. In order to connect the dots, so that we might complete this picture, a few of the art world's more inconvenient historical details must be highlighted:

> 1. The world of art and culture, as we know it today, was spun out of the U.S. Department of Psychological Warfare at the close of the Second World War, under the auspices of the Congress for Cultural Freedom (CCF). Designed, in part, by operatives of the military government in Berlin, this organization had a mandate to regulate the 'informational' content of culture in the 'free world.' It was overseen by the Psychological Strategy Board (PSB), according to a 'doctrinal program' that even PSB staff have likened to 'totalitarianism'.[5] Although the Doctrinal Program has been declassified, we can only guess at the contents of the system that replaces it; the new 'permanent organization' for 'informational and psychological activities', as defined in the above document. [6]
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> 2. In the post-war years, every aspect of culture – everything from 'comic book to tome,' to use the language of the doctrinal program – was selected and promoted by the CCF, and covertly funded by the CIA (with money channeled from the Marshall Plan and U.S. banking interests).[7] After the CIA's association was revealed (in a series of embarrassing articles) the CCF suspended operations in 1967. Nevertheless, this project served to establish a permanent 'machinery' of culture; the 'culture industry', as it is sometimes known. The Congress for Cultural Freedom has since been virtually erased from history.
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> 3. While the system promoted selected artists – those whose work suited, or would not contradict, the 'doctrinal' message – artists who did not conform (autonomous, independent artists) were to be excluded and increasingly marginalized. The 'elimination' of independent artists was predicted by social theorists in the 30s, 40s and 50s, and even in the present day, we are warned of the consequences. “Shut down the artists,” Margaret Atwood told Allan Gregg, in a 2008 interview,[8] “and you shut down the independent voices in a democracy.” This, it would seem, has been the objective all along.

Institutions of contemporary art tell only half the story when they describe events such as the meteoric rise of Abstract Expressionism, which, supposedly, 'triumphed' over representational forms of art, by virtue of its own undeniable merit. This movement, we were told, was the embodiment of American ideals, individual expression, and freedom; nevertheless, contradictory facts keep surfacing, and the carefully crafted mythology is now being challenged. Ever so slowly, the damage control has begun. In addition to a curious interview posted on Museum of Modern Art's website, the CIA has gone to some length to clarify its role in this cultural project, with two online essays. But MoMA and the CIA, it turns out, may have had quite different reasons for installing Abstract Expressionism as heir apparent to traditional forms of art – and for all of their other cultural interventions.

The immediate consequence of the introduction of AbEx was that art institutions began to force out representational forms of art (namely, Social Realism and Regionalism), in a strategic move presented as if it were the natural evolution of things. Representational art was favoured by independent, socially conscious artists who wished to communicate their ideas to the viewer - unfiltered. The ideas they represented, however, all too often conflicted with the (now official) 'Doctrinal Program.' Censorship is a tricky business in a 'free' society; far simpler just to exclude all representational art. Although this was not *quite* as easy as it sounds; there were many who questioned, and strongly resisted, this brash, new art form.

Some felt non-objective abstraction would have a profound psychological impact on the viewer, others even went so far as to suggest that subliminal messages may have been embedded in those odd abstract forms. These ideas warrant further examination as advances in cognitive science have since revealed some surprising things. “The medium is the message,”

Marshall McLuhan observed and this cultural axiom applies nowhere more than in art. To focus on AbEx though, and to look for messages hidden within, is to miss the essential point. After all, this movement came and went, and was followed by a succession of other challenging and often contradictory forms. The real medium was the newly reinvented art delivery system – like television or the Internet – a network of international galleries of contemporary art, that would decide what the public should see – or what the public should not see. The message, put simply, was control.

ONE KEY PASSAGE HAS BEEN REMOVED HERE. Please subscribed through my mailing list to view the full text of this and other excerpts.... continue, below, with the last two pages of *Kulturkampf*, chapter 1.

The effect of this new movement, it is often suggested, has been to convert 'active citizens into passive consumers'[9] Postmodernism, as the name implies, completes the process modernism first set in motion; that is, deconstruction. The dissolution of ideas and values, critics explain, has extended into every area of life; breaking down social bonds and national borders, fragmenting the psyche, and even our sense of individual identity. The attendant post-structural theory, meanwhile, has undermined the very idea of meaning. In the obscure language of linguistic theory, which fixates on the relationships between 'signs' and 'signifiers', the 'referent' (that signified) has been diminished; in effect, the real world has been removed from the equation. In such a system, we are warned, 'a complex structure of codes, symbols and conventions precedes us and essentially determines what it is possible for us to do and even think.[10] More worrying, if this all seems just a little too abstract, is the suggestion that this system was set in place, intentionally, to influence how we think and act.

If these assessments prove correct, the *kulturkampf* may be already lost; and if the social theory of the last century is anything to go by, the future will not be anything like the technological utopia the media and the business world like to present. We may speculate endlessly on the kind of future those who shape the world have in mind, but comments such as 'the idiot public' and 'the retarded masses,' found in various academic texts, should probably not fill us with optimism; statements such as these – though often expressions of frustration at the disinterest and apathy of the public to 'real' issues – reflect a widely held elitist sentiment.

Decades of exposure to postmodern culture has had an effect on the way we see the world and the way we respond to the world. If the freedoms we have enjoyed under a liberal democratic system are to last, citizens must once again become informed and actively engaged; the business world, however, would happier with passive (and compliant) consumers. The role of postmodernism in the hands of the culture industry – as many a commentator has outlined – has been to nurture the latter. It is not a coincidence that traits conducive to the consumer culture are the ones most noticeably on the rise; among these, is a sort of collective Attention Deficit Disorder. We will look more closely at the traits amenable to consumer culture in subsequent chapters; though it is probably fair to say that anyone reading a book of this nature is not thus afflicted.

PSB D-33/2 focused special attention on books – 'permanent literature' – noting: 'In most parts of the world, the radio and television are still novelties...' In 1953, art was still very much an elitist pursuit; reading was the primary channel for mass culture at this time. '[T]he educated man wants to keep up with his confreres;' the doctrinal program states, in the language of the fifties, 'he hopes to be "in the know"; and he desires to discuss new developments intelligently...' As televisions became a fixture in every home, there was a concern in intellectual circles that people would stop reading altogether. Referring to his book, Fahrenheit *451*, which touches on this subject in a roundabout way, Ray Bradbury is quoted, saying: "There are worse crimes than burning books. One of them is not reading them."[11] Although this fear proved to be unfounded, the nature of reading would change, as would the choice of reading material; which in the end, may amount to the same. In a culture dedicated to entertainment, it goes without saying that reading too, increasingly, become more about entertainment than edification – a quaint notion from another age. More to the point – just as those non-objective paintings displaced representational images that presented inconvenient ideas – books, selected and promoted by the culture industry, would also be chosen to divert attention from inconvenient issues. The list of titles chosen for de-emphasis (or outright suppression) by the CCF's promotional machine, is staggering. Sales of existing works such as *The Grapes of Wrath* – the literary equivalents of Social Realist and Regionalist art – dropped off markedly. 'The average number of titles shipped abroad by the United States Information Agency in 1953 plunged from 119,913 to 304, and it was demanded that 30,000 books in USIA libraries abroad be removed.[12] New work, 'materials which are prepared and distributed for the American market,' as the doctrinal program suggests, could be selected appropriately. Apparent exceptions to this rule will be pointed out, no doubt, but here again we must refer to PSB D-33/2 and the recommendation that 'even contradictory ideas' should be circulated. In the tradition of misinformation – and postmodernism – confusion was, and is, the aim.

But who were the people behind all of this? Appearances are deceiving and we must always look beneath the surface. We cannot simply read the official mission statements of the various groups involved – public relations material prepared specifically for our consumption. We must look for clues. But to see the clues, we also need some background information; in short, we probably need to have read the kind of books the CCF omitted from it's list of recommended titles.

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> I RETURNED to London in the spring of 1926... [at the time of the General Strike]... We were joined by a Belgian Futurist, who lived under the, I think assumed name of Jean de Brissac la Motte, and claimed the right to bear arms in any battle anywhere against the lower classes.[13]

This short passage from Evelyn Waugh's, *Brideshead Revisited*, 1945, is revealing for various reasons. Although it is not clear whether la Motte is a Futurist artist, it illustrates that in this period (the middle-modern) art and ideology were still inextricably intertwined. Like postmodernism, the ideas underlying futurism were not limited to the arts; both are politically expedient revolutionary philosophies. They are two sides of the same coin. While the strident Futurist ideology was embraced by the ruling class, postmodernism has been tailored for consumption by those who are to be ruled over. The Futurist's militant tendencies, and celebration of war, in the case of the Italian group (as expressed in their manifesto), is well known; but the very notion of *avant-garde* itself is militaristic, being derived from Vanguard: the part of an army which goes ahead of the main body in an advance.[14] It is also implied that la Motte may be an *agent provocateur*, traveling under an assumed name to provoke conflict; not simply to preserve law and order, and defend private interests during the turmoil of the strike – which the character quoted, Charles Ryder, saw as his duty at a time when communism was winning popular support. Most alarming is the sentiment la Motte's position betrays; a feudal view of the world in which the lower classes should be kept down, by any means necessary. If the peasants revolt, 'immediate repression through armed force'[15] is justified. The underclasses should be made to understand their place in the great scheme of things. Open conflict, however, is an unpredictable business; it is far better if the peasants can be prevented from revolting.

The primary function of mass culture has been to continue the dismantling of Enlightenment values, such as reason and meaning, and usher in an age of complete subjectivity, in which everything would be a matter of opinion. In the consumer society, the customer is always right, and the world can be just as we desire it to be; countless subsidiary industries exist to provide the *accoutrements* required to look the part, at least, if the world does not entirely conform to our wishes. Objective reality, stuffy, boring and all too often upsetting, was officially retired in the fifties; a watershed moment in history (the 'end of history,' some called it)[16] symbolized by the new, sexy, and entirely 'non-objective,' Abstract Expressionism. '[N]on-objective character,' writes Theodor Adorno in *The Culture Industry*, 'does not declare war upon the world of business' – in the same way that the non-objective doesn't challenge political ideas – and he adds, '[t]he customer is not king.' Mass culture is presented as entertainment, but essays such as 'Culture and Administration' highlight the utility of culture industry products to the those who still operate according to the Futurist's vision of the world, and see their salvation in the glorification of industry and technology, and an uncompromisingly feudal, survival of the fittest attitude, toward the general public. Baudrillard suggests that culture has taken over politics. '[T]he power structure (which is made possible only by the passivity of the masses)', states the *Dialectic Of Enlightenment*, 'appears as an iron reality... any spontaneity or even a mere intimation of the true state of affairs becomes an unacceptable utopia...'[17] (original parenthesis)

Revolution – even resistance – becomes almost unthinkable, therefore; and in this condition of 'sold-off spirit,' '‘amusement’ is elevated.'[18] In the era of the Internet, we have heard it all, and seen it all; and since we are comfortable enough, at present, any such notion becomes just another entertaining diversion. The academic texts referred to above not only intimate at 'the true state of affairs', they explain exactly how the system works, and why its final objective is likely be achieved.