The Assault on Culture: Utopian Currents from Lettrisme to Class War by Stewart Home


There are by now a number of ways to tell the tale of art and culture. Art history tends to regard itself as the chronicle of a triumphant march forward. Disrupters are given short shrift, except insofar as their ideas or methods become integrated into the mainstream at some point, as was the case with Marcel Duchamp, for example. Another way of looking at the matter is to concentrate on the dissenters. This can result in the presentation of a sub-history, or, as Stewart Home would have it, the history of what's really important.

The trajectory of this short book shows more clearly than anything else what Home's opinions are. The first two-thirds of The Assault on Culture are devoted to groups such as COBRA and the Situationists. The former consists mostly of "painters, poets, architects, ethnologists and theorists." He then begins to alternate between chapters on art/anti-art and outlaws such as the Yippies and the Class War of the subtitle. And no, this isn't Home's comment on the tendencies of contemporary capitalism. Class War is the name of a smallish bunch of British politicos with decidedly anarcho-tendenc- y. Home has an initiating habit of invoking words like art, theory and idea. Towards the end of the book, anyone might have missed it in the very brief intro- duction will have become painfully aware of why he does this. The point is that Home disapproves of art. Like theory, it is a bourgeois idea, idea, seems, are not the kind of thing that an engaged insurrectionist is supposed to be much possessed of.

This is not the first place we've been told that art is a phenomenon of the bourgeois world. As such, it lives and dies with the bourgeoisie — so the argument goes. Thus, on the one side, Home's chronicle of the tradition within which he places himself reads as a bit of a burlesque of each successive utopian current. On the other, one does get the impression that he finds something important missing through the core of all these doings, impor- tant enough for him to do the research himself (which is quite considerable for such a slim volume) and the writing. Also, one would think it important enough to read about it all, to know enough of the trad- itions to keep it alive, nourish and expand it. And yet, Home is thoroughly contempt- uous of what he calls "essentialism," the notion that an intelligible core may actu- ally be discernible beneath appearances.

Art, it would appear, is the most con- temptible of these "essentialist" practices, being so bourgeois, so male-dominated and so mystifying. This is why Home is ultimately so scornful of Guy Debord and the original Situationist group — their concerns included "realizing and supered- ing" art. The break-away 2nd Situationist International earns more of Home's sympa- thy because it was less concerned with art as such.

If this story has a hero, though, the most likely candidate would be the painter Ager Jorn, who appears in the cover photo. Mentioned early in the book, he gradually emerges as perhaps the most savage and likable personality involved. Jorn became successful enough in the art world that he was able to fund much of the activity described in The Assault. This he has to do with more without discrimi- nation. Home reports that Jorn financed individuals and projects on both sides of the Situationist divide until his death, thus allowing him to be considered from either organization. Interestingly enough, none of his benefactors appear to have gained any practical assistance from such a source.

The stylistic misuse of over-reliance upon notes down from Home's concep- tion of what his engagement entails. En- gagement, he presumes, releases the water from such concepts as a theorist or per- son concerned with ideas might feel. This is helped by his own case with the material and his evident amowser with the care- lessness of others. He is particularly harsh with the Lettriists and Situationists for making grandiose claims for themselves. Home is piqued by the "International" tag, for one thing, as neither group was nearly so international as they would have liked the world to believe. This seems rea- sonable enough. Things become a little strange, though, when Home decides to specify matters by renaming the original Situationist International — in the interests of the existence of a break-away International. Thus, in his book, the Situationist Interna- tional of May '68 fame becomes the "Spectro-Situationist International" be- cause of its interest in Deleuze's ideas about the spectaculaire nature of post-war society. This peculiar usage seems to be- speak a terribly fastidious, not-to-say fac- tious, mentality for an author so impatient with these tetradielines in others.

While the Lettriists do seem to have been a very hokey bunch (the "originals" of the movement, Isidore Isou, was among the worst of megalomaniacs in a milieu full of them), Home takes an odd opportu- nity for really slamming them. At the "First World Congress of Liberated Let- tists," held in 1966, the nominated charac- ter was one Christian Dotremont, a COBRA veteran not well beloved by the Lettriists. As it happens, he seems to have been unable to attend due to illness. It is not quite clear what's happening here, but Dotremont's indiscretion, says Home, may have been "diplomatic."

Now, when the Lettriists publish their opinion that this was indeed the case, that a majority would have objected to Dotre- mont, this is the opportunity Home takes to remark upon the "fundamental dishonesty of the IL [Lettri Intemational] as an organization." What an odd little contro- versy, and what an odd way of relating it. An author less concerned with opposing scholarship to engagement might have given a better picture of just what hap- pened here. What did this nomination consist of? Who did the nominating? Was Dotremont elected as well? Did he preside in absentia? We don't know. Then again, for a book of 115 pages in length, one wonders if this is such an important his- torical detail after all when we know little about Dotremont beyond his associations with COBRA and Jorn. Home's evasiveness wants us to understand the main point he has discovered about the IL: we know what he thinks, but the unvaviness in his handling of the details lead one to ques- tion rather than confirm his judgement.

The combination of crankiness and breathlessness leads to a quckly kind of work. Home breezes across a few vast terri- tories in a way that he had formally dialed back himself from either organization. Interest- ingly enough, none of his benefactors appear to have gained any practical assistance from such a source.

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revisonism lacked the vigour found in the thought of Lukacs, Adorno, Arendt. I doubt that the Party member Georg Lukacs, who along with Karl Korsch, is usually credited with forming a renaissance of Marxist thought, would particularly agree with the epithet "revisonism." T.W. Adorno, of course, is really a later figure. It is hard to imagine either one sitting comfortably with Eduard Bernstein and others more usually regarded as revisionist.

The brevity of the book also means that certain interesting relationships are not touched upon, or barely so. The treat- ment of the German Dada group scarcely mentions Joseph Beuys, its most famous luminary. Had Beuys been given a little or two more, the interesting vocation by the Canadian Clive Robertson, Explaining Pic- tures in Dead AIR is reference to one of Beuys' most famous works, Explaining Pictures to a Dead Hawk might have been mentioned, as only one example.

The book gives occasional tantalizing glimpses of what might have been inter- esting lines of thought had they been given a chance to develop. A longish foot- note on the Trotskyist 4th International as an over-centralized bureaucracy appended to a discussion of the Stalinists intimates that we are, perhaps, intended to read the one as an allegory for the other. Perhaps Home has a bit of a theory of alleg- ory, for there is also a very long footnote quoting Walter Benjamin on Bourgeois which is hardly necessary in the context. But theories are like art, after all, and Home doesn't come out and say these kinds of things. Perhaps I should be ashamed of myself, but I can't help wish- ing he did.

To give him credit, however, perhaps one should mention Home's treatment of Neosim, which may best illustrate what he is getting at. What Home finds most inter- esting about this largely North American phenomenon, is the use of the "multiple name." One of these, Monty Cantinis, was devised by a group of mail artists in Port-land, Oregon, Irvan Kantor, who became one of the central figures of Neoism, be- gan to use this name in Montreal in 1979. Kantor and others influenced by the "punk phenomena" painted the walls of Montreal with slogans such as "Mother Is The Mother Of Beauty" and "Corruption, Subversion, Defecation." These were, says Home, "the slogans of surrealism, situa- tions and the occupations movement of May '68, with some late romanticism thrown in for good measure." Having dis- seminated the idea of Monty Cantinis as the "open pop-star," Kantor took to call- ing himself "the real Monty Cantinis." Home says, in response to a more wide- spread use of the appellation by European Neoism in the 1980s. It might have been expected. Before this, Kantor had, at vari- ous Neosim events, offered up his "chair" to anyone willing to take it. The aggressive way in which this was done, along with the violent nature of the performances, says Home, discouraged people from tak- ing up the offer.

Neosim exhibits what Home regards as the unsavoury features of an international art movement. It was thus susceptible to all the failures that this would presumably entail. Its "degeneration" in the hands of Kantor and others preoccupied with idées could be anticipated. There are many minor annoyances to be encountered in The Assault on Culture, and a few more significant flaws. Of the latter, the most important is a failure to explain the problematic relation of culture to art in the bourgeois era, but to proceed as if he had done so. Home's chapter on Neoism, while pointing toward such a discussion, does not really suffice. This is, of course, a very complex issue which can't be solved here. But I do think Home is indulging in wishful thinking when he implies that art should be aban- doned as an act of political conscience.

Although this appears to be the main thrust of the text, it can be treated as a side issue. This book can be recom- mended, with a few guides of salt cer- tainly, as a good quick reference work to the politically oriented Dadaist, anti-art tradition in the post-war period. Home's discussion of Punk is measured, showing the influence of the Situationists upon it, but not making too much of this. His his- tory of the multiple name from mail art to Neoism, though brief, is of some value. At $7.95, The Assault on Culture is hardly over-priced by current standards. It con- tains a reasonable index and useful bibli- ography. It can be read in an evening or two. While Home's book will not stand as the definitive work on the subject (I doubt this remark would dispose him), it is a useful points of an important part of recent cultural history.

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