

of contemporary capitalism. Class War is the name of a smallish bunch of British politicians with decidedly anarchistic tendencies. Home has an irritating habit of italicizing words like art, theory and idea. Towards the end of the book, anyone who might have missed it in the very brief introduction 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*. Ideas, it seems, are not the kind of thing that an engaged materialist 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 running through the core of all these doings, important enough for him to do the research (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 tradition to keep it alive, to nourish and expand it. And yet, Home is thoroughly contemptuous of what he calls "essentialism," the notion that an intelligible core may actually be discernible beneath appearances.

Art, it would appear, is the most contemptible 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 superseding" art. The break-away 2nd Situationist International earns more of Home's sympathy because it was less concerned with art as such.

If this story has a hero, though, the most likely candidate would be the painter Asger Jorn, who appears in the cover photograph. Mentioned early in the book, he gradually emerges as perhaps the most sane and likeable 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 appears to have done without discrimination: Home reports that Jorn financed individuals and projects on both sides of the Situationist divide until his death, long after he had formally disassociated himself from either organization. Interestingly enough, none of his beneficiaries appear to have had qualms accepting assistance from such a source.

The stylistic nuisance of over-reliance upon italics flows from Home's conception of what his engagement entails. Engagement, he presumes, releases the writer from such constraints as a theorist or person concerned with ideas might feel. This is belied by his own care with the material and his evident annoyance with the carelessness of others. He is particularly harsh with the Lettrists 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 reasonable enough. Things become a little strange, though, when Home decides to rectify matters by renaming the original Situationist International — in light of the existence of a break-away International. Thus, in his book, the Situationist International of May '68 fame becomes the "Specto-Situationist International" because of its interest in Debord's ideas about the spectacular nature of post-war society. This peculiar usage seems to bespeak a terribly fastidious, not to say impatient, mentality for an author so impatient with these tendencies in others.

While the Lettrists do seem to have been a very hokey bunch (the originator of the movement, Isidore Isou, was among the worst of megalomaniacs in a milieu full of them), Home takes an odd opportunity for really slamming them. At the "First World Congress of Liberated Artists," held in 1956, the nominated chairperson was one Christian Dotremont, a COBRA veteran not well beloved by the Lettrists. 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 indisposition, says Home, may have been "diplomatic."

Now, when the Lettrists publish their opinion that this was indeed the case, that a majority would have objected to Dotremont, this is the opportunity Home takes to remark upon the "fundamental dishonesty of the LI [Lettrist International] as an organization." What an odd little controversy, 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 happened 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 but 115 pages in length, one wonders if this is such an important historical detail after all when we know little about Dotremont beyond his associations with COBRA and Jorn. Home evidently wants us to understand the main point he has discovered about the LI: we know what he thinks, but the unevenness in his handling of the details leads one to question rather than confirm his judgement.

The combination of crankiness and breathlessness leads to a quirky kind of work. Home breezes across a few vast territories in a way that only a superficial knowledge could permit. For instance, along with his lightning-speed account of how we got art in the first place, we find the loaded term "revisionist" placed precariously close to the equally loaded "Marxist." Home seems not to notice that few Marxists since the turn of the century have cared to be known as revisionists. This does not stop him from informing us of the "revision" of Marxist thought in France in the '50s. This "revision," Home says, accompanied a loosening of the grip of the Communist Party. He inaccurately likens French developments of this period to the German '20s. Home then refers to "commentators" (only one — Richard Gombin — is named) who "say French

revisionism lacked the thought of Lukács, Adorno, that the Party member along with Karl Korsch, with fomenting a renaissance thought, would participate in the epithet "revisionism." course, is really a later imagine either one sitting with Eduard Bernstein usually regarded as revisionism.

The brevity of the book that certain interesting lines not touched upon, or the movement of the German Front mentions Joseph Beuys, an alumnus. Had Beuys been two more, the interest in Canadian Clive Robert *Notes to Dead Air* (a reference to Beuys' most famous work, *Notes to a Dead Hare*) was mentioned, as only one.

The book gives occasional glimpses of what might be interesting lines of thought given a chance to develop. A note on the Trotskyist tradition, an over-centralized bureaucracy to a discussion of the "revisionism" that we are, perhaps read the one as an alternative. Perhaps Home has a better category, for there is also a reference to Walter Benjamin, which is hardly necessary. But theories are like a garden. Home doesn't come out with kinds of things. Perhaps ashamed of myself, but I think he did.

To give him credit, one should mention the Neoism, which may be



**The Assault on Culture:  
Utopian Currents from Lettrisme to Class  
War**  
by Stewart Home  
London: Aporia Press & Unpopular Books,  
1988, 115 pp.

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 triumphal march forward. Dissenters are given short shift, 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 Situationist International whose members consisted mostly of "painters, poets, architects, ethnologists and theorists." He then begins to alternate between chapters on art/anti-art and outfits such as the Yippies and the Class War of the subtitle. And no, this isn't Home's comment on the tendencies

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revisionism lacked the vigour found in the thought of Lukács, Adorno, &c." I doubt that the Party member Georg Lukács, who along with Karl Korsch, is usually credited with fomenting a renaissance of Marxist thought, would particularly agree with the epithet "revisionism." 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 treatment of the German Fluxus group scarcely mentions Joseph Beuys, its most famous alumnus. Had Beuys been given a line or two more, the interesting videotape by the Canadian Clive Robertson, *Explaining Pictures to Dead Air* (a reference to one of Beuys' most famous works, *Explaining Pictures to a Dead Hare*) might have been mentioned, as only one example.

The book gives occasional tantalizing glimpses of what might have been interesting lines of thought had they been given a chance to develop. A longish footnote on the Trotskyist 4th International as an over-centralized bureaucracy appended to a discussion of the Situationists 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 allegory, for there is also a very long footnote quoting Walter Benjamin on Baudelaire 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 wishing he did.

To give him credit, however, perhaps one should mention Home's treatment of Neoism, which may best illustrate what he

is getting at. What Home finds most interesting about this largely North American phenomenon, is the use of the "multiple name." One of these, Monty Cantsin, was devised by a group of mail artists in Portland, Oregon. Istvan Kantor, who became one of the central figures of Neoism, began 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 "Hunger Is The Mother Of Beauty" and "Convulsion, Subversion, Defection." These were, says Home, "the slogans of surrealism, situationism and the occupations movement of May '68, with some late romanticism thrown in for good measure." Having disseminated the idea of Monty Cantsin as the "open pop-star," Kantor took to calling himself "the real Monty Cantsin," Home says, in response to a more widespread use of the appellation by European Neoists in the 1980s. It might have been expected. Before this, Kantor had, at various Neoist 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 taking up the offer.

Neoism exhibits what Home regards as the unsavoury features of an international art movement. It was thus susceptible to all the failings that this would presumably entail. Its "degeneration" in the hands of Kantor and others preoccupied with ideas 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 really discuss 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 abandoned 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 recommended, with a few grains of salt certainly, 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 history 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 contains a reasonable index and useful bibliography. 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 displease him), it is a useful précis of an important part of recent cultural history.

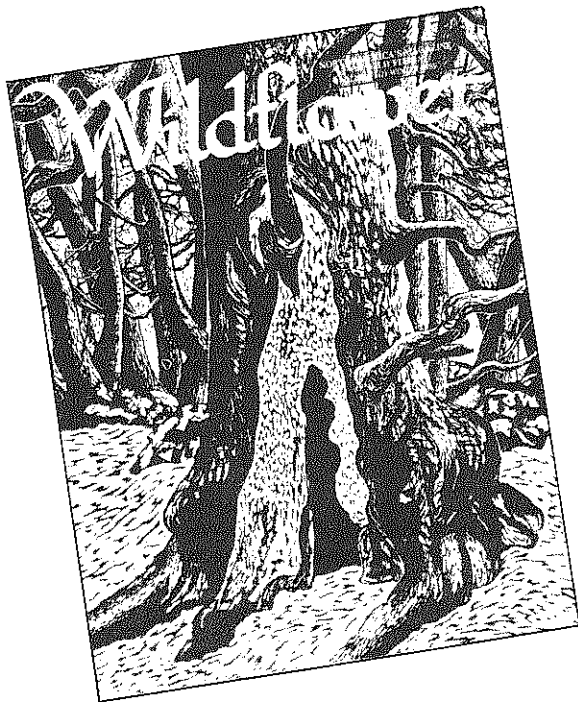
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