

## 'BETWIXT AND BETWEEN'

### **Simon Morley**

During the 'long' 1960s cultural theorists such as Herbert Marcuse, Norman O. Brown and the early post-structuralists in France (psychoanalysts such as Erich Fromm, R.D. Laing and Jacques Lacan) and critics of the arts such as Susan Sontag and Lucy Lippard, all in their different registers recognised that what was taking place during the period was a fundamental paradigm shift, a transformation that in many ways is summed up in Susan Sontag's declaration - the last sentence of her essay 'Against Interpretation' (1964) - that 'In place of a hermeneutics we need an erotics of art,'<sup>i</sup> or as Michel Foucault put it in more measured terms in the mid-1970's:

For the last ten or fifteen years the West had witnessed the immense and proliferating criticizability of things, institutions, practices, and discourses; a sort of general feeling that the ground was crumbling beneath our feet, especially in places where it seemed most familiar, most solid, and closest to us, to our bodies, to our everyday gestures. But alongside this crumbling and the astonishing efficacy of discontinuous, particular, and local critiques, the facts were also revealing something... beneath this whole thematic, through it and even within it, we have seen what might be called the insurrection of subjugated knowledges.<sup>ii</sup>

The sociologist Julie Stephens has argued that the sixties witnessed the emergence of what she calls a culture of a fundamentally 'anti-disciplinary' kind, a term she suggests allows an historical analysis that bi-passes many of the 'problematic distinctions which shape the familiar paradigms of the sixties, most notably the boundary between so-called political radicalism and cultural radicalism, between activist and the hippie.'<sup>iii</sup>

### **TYPOGRAPHY IN THE SIXTIES**

The progressive typography of the period also reflects this paradigm shift. It was developing, broadly speaking, along three interconnected routes.

Firstly, there was the modernist style inherited from the pioneering work done in the

1920's and 1930's by the Bauhaus and by designers such as Jan Tschichold and Paul Renner. The purist and universalist rhetoric lying behind their *sans serifs* embodied aspirations towards a utopia based on rational and egalitarian ideals, and was modelled on the cool and simple forms of science and technology. They communicated a sense of readability, functionality and cleanliness. But by the 1960's, the descendents of such modernist designs - now called 'International or Swiss Typography' - had been absorbed into the mainstream. Indeed, fonts like 'Helvetica', for example, appealed not only to the cultural avant-garde, but also to executives of capitalist enterprises who were increasingly employing designers and advertising companies to aggressively brand their businesses.

A similar fate awaited the second kind of radical typography characteristic of the sixties. This was more stridently futuristic in style, and also emerged out of the same anti-traditionalist principles as modernist fonts. These designs, however, were overtly visual in intention, and signalled an even more thoroughgoing embracing of technology and rejection of historical models. For example, an influential sixties font like 'Stop', created by Aldo Novarese, was obviously not intended to be supremely readable, and instead aimed to work on a more complex visual level, conveying abstract and geometric qualities that echo the imagery and forms associated with the latest developments in science and technology.

This, in fact, is the genre of typography that Dorit Margreiter discovered gracing the wall of the Brühlzentrum in Leipzig, a communist-era shopping and residential complex built in the sixties, and was subsequently exploited by her through a range of interventions, re-medialisations and re-contextualisation.<sup>iv</sup> The style had been chosen by the East German authorities to convey a sense of 'a model place for a model life in a model state', as Yvonne Volkart puts it in a review of an exhibition of Margreiter's work.<sup>v</sup> But, as Barbara Clausen notes in another review, this font actually has associations that resonate throughout the history of twentieth-century design: 'In its mode of construction as well as in appearance, it is strongly reminiscent of Josef Albers's *Kombinationsschrift* (Combination Type)', she writes, 'a stencil-based typeface he designed at the Bauhaus in Dessau, Germany, in the late '20s.'<sup>vi</sup>

The third kind of typography to emerge in the 1960's is more accurately described as a style of lettering, as it was never intended to be used as moveable type and was of a very different kind. It became known as 'psychedelic', and was especially

associated with the 1960's counter-culture. Seeking to find a visual-verbal analogy for the spiritual and anti-materialist values of disaffected and rebellious youth, the poster designs of, for example, Wes Wilson could not be more different from the paired-down styles favoured by the big corporations or the futuristic fonts intended to evoke a vision of a technological utopia. Stylistically, such designs were deliberately anti-modernist in appearance, promiscuously appropriating the apparently archaic *Art Nouveau* and Victorian styles which were consigned to the dust-bin by the modernists. Where modernism and futuristic typography favoured forms that evoke qualities of reason, structure, stasis, and geometry, the psychedelic style embraces the anti-structural forms of liquids and of the organic in order to convey a flux-like sense of restlessness, and returned to writing a powerful sense of gesture and relationship to the body.<sup>vii</sup>

But such an anti-structural impulse had in fact always been central to the avant-garde. Indeed, the common point of contact between what may at first seem radically opposing typographic styles - modernist, futurist and psychedelic - is in fact the innovations of the Italian Futurism in the second decade of the twentieth century. 'Casting aside every stupid formula and all the confused verbalism of the professors', wrote Marinetti in 1913, 'I now declare that lyricism is the exquisite faculty of intoxicating oneself with life, of filling life with the inebriation of oneself'<sup>viii</sup>. This was a style of typography that aspired to indeterminacy and immediacy, and these energies were soon embraced and pushed further to anarchic effect by the Cubo-Futurist and Dadaists.

However, by the 1920's the energies had been re-directed and controlled within the machine-aesthetic promulgated by Constructivism and the Bauhaus, in which a new purity and order, and a concomitant allegiance to left-wing politics was imposed on the avant-garde.

The counter-culture of the 'long' 1960's in this context brought to the fore once more the de-stabilising energies lying deep within Western modernity. In the arts, the various strategies that had been pioneered by the pre-World War One avant-garde, which amounted to an assault on all the established structures of society, took on new pertinence that reached beyond the confines of art. Automatism, deliberate sabotaging of signs, embracing of non-sense over sense, elasticity and migration of media and meaning, extravagant invention, the multiplication of clashing forces, the pitching of invisible order against material rigidity, varieties of methodical imitation,

relentless analysis, the pursuit of altered states of consciousness through drugs and other methods, intense spirituality often involving journeys to the East - these were some of the strategies employed to challenge established forms of social and cultural discipline and structure, to satisfy what the philosopher Alain Badiou has called modernity's 'passion for the Real'.

Translating Lacanian psychoanalytic concepts into political terms, Badiou declares: 'equality is the Imaginary (since it cannot come about as an objective figure, even though it is the ultimate reason for everything), freedom is the Symbolic (since it is the presupposed instrument, the fecund negative), and fraternity is the Real (that which is sometimes encountered, in the here and now).'<sup>ix</sup> Thus the horrors and triumphs of the twentieth century equally originate in the desire for the experience of what Badiou calls a 'togetherness of a 'we' that is not an 'I'.<sup>x</sup> They originate, in other words, in the unquenchable desire for the transformation of society through a transformation of consciousness that was to be achieved through passage over a borderline and into what can be described as a *liminal* state.

### **LIMINALITY AND THE SENSE OF 'COMMUNITAS'**

*Limen* means 'threshold' in Latin, and so when speaking of the liminal I am referring in the broadest sense to moments at which something is about to undergo a phase transition or turn into something else. These can be physiological or psychological, spanning everything from the hypnogogic states we inhabit between sleeping and waking to more extreme situations such as when we lie at the margin between life and death. Thus liminal moments are to be understood as times of tension and extremes, but also moments of great potential. Something fundamental happens within this strange and estranging state of consciousness that brings into question the structural unity of both the self and of society.

In his classic study of the rites of passage performed within tribal societies, the social anthropologist Victor Turner examined transformations in consciousness and how they play a role in shaping society. He argued that a key aspect of many tribal rituals was a phase he described as being essentially 'liminal'. In these rites, he noted, an initiate will appear to pass 'through a cultural realm that has few or none of the attributes of the past or coming state'<sup>xi</sup>, and this phase marks a vital intermediary stage within a broader ritual process.

But Turner also proposed that liminal moments are a constant of all societies in all times, including our own. For ultimately what is at stake in such rites, he declared, is the tension that always exists between hierarchical status-bound social structures and the insight into a deeper reality that arises during periods of flux and unstructured consciousness.

Indeed, to a large extent, the liminal experience Turner describes is to be understood as the antithesis of a sense of structure. As a result, within the liminal phase social norms are turned on their head. 'The attributes of liminality or liminal *personae* ('threshold people') are necessarily ambiguous', Turner writes, 'since this condition and these persons elude or slip through networks of classification that normally locate states and positions in cultural space.'<sup>xii</sup> Accordingly, liminal occasions are times when the self and society take cognisance of themselves. It constitutes a means of assessing and challenging our place in the emotional, spiritual and social world, and reinterprets the overarching pattern of social relations that define social structure. 'Liminal entities are neither here nor there', wrote Turner:

They are betwixt and between the positions assigned and arrayed by law, custom, convention, and ceremonial. As such, their ambiguous and indeterminate attributes are expressed by a rich variety of symbols.....Thus, liminality is frequently likened to death, to being in the womb, to invisibility, to darkness, to bisexuality, to the wilderness, and to the eclipse of the sun or moon.<sup>xiii</sup>

In liminal spaces a person can stand outside their normal social roles and embrace alternative social arrangements and values. It is also a dangerous place where structure loses its grip. This is evidenced by the many taboos surrounding these periods.

But it isn't simply that in the liminal state one is liberated temporarily from the normal constraints of society, but rather that as a result of being in that state we become aware of something profoundly at odds with the values of the society in which we live. For, Turner argued, within a liminal phase of consciousness we feel powerfully the 'essential and generic human bond, without which there could be *no* society.'<sup>xiv</sup> In other words, liminality grants us a deeper and potentially transformative sense of the fundamental unity of everybody and everything, and this is an experience that can only be achieved in a situation where socially-determined and status-bound structures are weak or non-existent.

Because it produces a formless and relatively undifferentiated state of being, liminal consciousness allows access to levels of being that normally must be suppressed. This new sense of oneness Turner calls 'communitas', and he distinguishes three phases. First, and most powerfully for the individual, is awareness of *existential* or *spontaneous* 'communitas' - or, as Turner writes, what 'William Blake might have called 'the winged moment as it flies' or, later, 'mutual forgiveness of each vice'. But inevitably spontaneous 'communitas' undergoes 'what most people see as a 'decline and fall' into structure and law',<sup>xv</sup> and during this process a sense of what Turner calls *normative* 'communitas' arises. Here, attempts are made to transmit the experience of existential 'communitas' into 'a perduring social system' which has a more permanent and transferable core. Finally, Turner argues, more abstract and utopian models inevitably come into existence which although based on the knowledge of an original experience of existential 'communitas' seek to contain this experience within enduring social forms. Historically, this has above all been sought within the frameworks established by religious doctrine. But more recently, at least in the West, it has also been the purpose of radical political ideologies. In such circumstances, there is, Turner writes, 'an attempt to describe the external and visible effects – the outward form, it might be said – of an inward experience of existential communitas.'<sup>xvi</sup> This he calls *ideological* 'communitas'

It is no coincidence that Turner was developing his theory of liminality in the late 1950's and 1960's, for the radical challenges posed to conventional conceptions of social organisation and traditional cultural values launched during this period had alerted Turner to the forces of anti-structure within society. But as we have seen such forces had long been at work within Western culture. Marinetti's writings on what he called 'parole-in-liberta' – words-in-freedom - like those of the Dadaist such as Tristan Tzara, for example, read almost like text-book accounts of the kinds of qualities and experiences Victor Turner associated with the liminal stage. But we can say that the vision of 'existential communitas' evoked by the flux-like ambiance of the pre-War and wartime avant-garde became transformed into a more structured vision of liminality - of 'ideological communitas' - which by the 1950's had lapsed back into 'law and order', leading to another attempt to re-liminalise consciousness at an existential level. In this context psychedelic typography can be seen as an attempt to re-ignite the writing space with the kind of dynamic qualities celebrated by Marinetti and the Dadaists. In other words, the psychedelic designers of the counter-culture were hell-bent on restoring to writing a more unmediated and direct experience of liminality, one that had been lost by the more technologically inclined

modernist. They were looking for forms that were commensurate with the new anti-disciplinary social revolution under way.

## THE 'THEN' AND THE 'NOW'

In conclusion I want to bring together some of these thoughts about the relationship between the sixties, typography, and liminality by analysing how contemporary artists like Margreiter in works such as those involving the Leipzig typography, manage to create a dynamic relationship with the recent past.

As Nicholas Boudreaux puts it in the catalogue to the recent Tate Triennial, *Altermodern*, which he also curated, such an engagement 'is only possible from the issues of the present, and assuredly not by an obsessive return to the past, whatever its attributes.'<sup>xvii</sup> But how might such genuine engagement with the past actually be enacted?

In two much cited essays written in the late 1970's and early 1980's, the American critic Craig Owens drew on the writings of Walter Benjamin and suggested that the most challenging art of that period was informed by what he called an 'allegorical impulse'. This, in other words, was an art that directly critiqued the modernist preferences for essentialism, the immediate, the pure and the Real. Historically, the importance of allegory was that it aimed to 'rescue from historical oblivion that which threatens to disappear', wrote Owens, and had emerged as a powerful artistic preference in the seventeenth century during a period in which artists had a profound sense of estrangement from tradition. 'Throughout its [allegory's] history', he noted, 'it has functioned in the gap between a present and a past which, without allegorical reinterpretation, might have remained foreclosed'.<sup>xviii</sup> As a result:

In allegorical structure...one text is *read through* another, however fragmentary, intermittent, or chaotic their relationship may be.....Conceived in this way, allegory becomes the model of all commentary, all critique, insofar as these are involved in rewriting a primary text in terms of its figural meaning.<sup>xix</sup>

The dominant form of the new allegorical postmodernist work was thus the palimpsest, argued Owens, and contemporary artists drawn to this mode were likely to indulge in a general confusion of traditional categories, using fragmentary and appropriated imagery, preferring strategies of impermanence, repetition,

accumulation, the sequential and the discursive.

Much of what Owens identified as important for the understanding of this neo-avant-garde of the late seventies and eighties still seems important today, especially in relation to the kind of art Nicholas Bourriaud has dubbed 'altermodern'. But while pinpointing the need for a renewed engagement with history, Owens' version of an allegorical impulse in contemporary art continued to be premised on a vision of the past as something 'petrified'. He quoted Benjamin: 'In allegory the observer is confronted with the *facies hippocratica* [a face as it appears near to death] of history as a petrified, primordial landscape.'<sup>xx</sup>

Indeed, the central weakness with Owens proposition is that it still ultimately remains premised on a modernist paradigm that could see only two possible relationships to the past. The first - the modernist preference - required that the past be put to death in order to embrace the future, while the second - preferred by the reactionaries - engaged in nostalgic re-creation or returns. The allegorical postmodernist, according to Owens, rejecting both these options as no longer valid, was left only with the melancholy task of shifting through ruins and fragments, of which the original meanings and values had been lost. As Bourriaud puts it, in the postmodernist world-view:

forms are no longer indexed to a narrative defining them as belonging to precise historical moments, but rather embedded in the 'text' of culture, with no reference save to themselves. Palimpsests, pastiches, textuality....Signs have lost all contact with human history and are self-generating in an infinite Brownian motion, a labyrinth of signs.....Postmodernism is the philosophy of mourning a long melancholic episode in our cultural life. History having lost its direction and ability to be read, nothing remained but to come face to face with an immobilised space-time in which, like reminiscences, arose mutilated fragments of the past.'<sup>xxi</sup>

But can another relationship to the past – in particular the *recent* past – now be envisaged - a relationship that while manifesting an allegorical impulse bent on pursuing a complex and critical engagement with the past can nevertheless succeed in bringing the past back as something alive and even subversive of the present?

For Bourriaud, the new art he dubs 'altermodern' addresses this new possibility head on, for it is characterised, or so he declares, by a sensibility that is fundamentally

'heterochronic', denying any clear linear conception of the relationship between the Now and the Then, present and the past. The altermodernist, Bourriaud writes, thus produces work 'with the aim of revealing our present, in which temporalities and levels of reality are intertwined.'<sup>xxii</sup>

Such a new engagement also entails re-thinking our relationship to time, argues the French theorist Georges Didi-Huberman, and he goes on to ask: 'If we.....refute peremptory death sentences as well as nostalgic rebirths, *what time must we suppose from now on?*'<sup>xxiii</sup> This would be a vision in which the past 'is neither to be rejected nor to be reborn, but quite simply to be brought back as an *anachronism*.'<sup>xxiv</sup> Just how this task could be realised, Didi-Huberman suggests, is addressed by Walter Benjamin in his meditations on history, and in relation to the visual form that might arise from such an engagement, Didi-Huberman points to Benjamin's formulation of the concept of the 'dialectical image'. Thereby, Benjamin hoped to evoke the possibility of a return, as Didi-Huberman puts it, 'to the fragile moment of awakening', which was necessarily 'a dialectical moment in his eyes because it lies at the evanescent, ambiguous borderline between unconscious images and necessary critical lucidity.'<sup>xxv</sup> As Benjamin writes:

It isn't that the past casts its light on the present or the present casts its light on the past: rather, an image is that in which the Then and the Now come into constellation like a flash of lightning. In other words: image is dialectics at a standstill. For while the relation of the present to the past is a purely temporal, continuous one, the relation of the Then to the Now is dialectical – not development but image, leaping forth. Only dialectical images are authentic...images.<sup>xxvi</sup>

The confusing status of the 'dialectical image' suggests that it is neither quite here nor there. It is transitory and indeterminate, contradictory and evanescent, sited on an ambiguous borderline. The 'dialectical image' is unfixed and in continuous process, conveying a sense of the fluid and unfolding. It implies a preference for the subjunctive mood, insofar as it produces transitional effects rather than steady states. The 'dialectical image' exists, we can say, in an ambiguous zone, and expresses condition, hypothesis, contingency, possibility and process rather than stating anything definitive. It may imply the existence of a deeper totality and homogeneity lying beyond the 'definite' structures of traditional vision, but this is something that can never be declared or fixed. We can say in short, that the 'dialectical image' is a decidedly liminal entity.

## CONCLUSION

Contemporary artists who consciously look back to the 1960's may thus be exploring liminality both in their chosen sources and also in their methodology. For they address a period in which anti-structural and anti-disciplinary energies irrupt into society. But, as I have argued, they are more likely to succeed in evoking a living and dynamic relationship between the Then and the Now of the early twenty-first century when they implement strategies for keeping liminal energies in circulation in their own work. This is what Benjamin's notion of the dialectical image describes – an attempt, as Didi-Huberman puts it, to engineer the 'productive collision between the Now and an unexpected, reinvented Then'.

In this context Margreiter's co-opting of the East German communist's typography is an allegorical meditation on how this moment of collision can be actively incited in the Now through the exploration of typographical forms. The contradictions and ambiguity that are evident in Margreiter's medial nomadism involve shifts in character from image to text to sculpture to moving image. As Barbara Clausen writes, 'after the initial utopian impulse and the revival of its forms in the fashions of mainstream culture several decades later', Margreiter's hopes that 'there is still the possibility of a new lease on life, for a critical-reflexive relationship to the Then'. Specifically, as Clausen writes, 'Margreiter documents and redeploys the remnants of modernism before they disappear and, subsequently, keeps them "alive"..... 'Since', as she goes on, the typeface regains presence because 'the *zentrum* font is neither an homage to the original nor an imitation of its '60s copy, but rather a graphic set of modules existing between the two- and three-dimensional'.<sup>xxvii</sup> As a consequence, the use by the East German state of this style of font succinctly embodies the uneasy relationship that exists between modernism, nationalism and totalitarianism, as well exposing the shared roots of these impulses in a modernist rhetoric of liminality.

Margreiter's works in general are emblematic of the possibility of a shifting borderline between the Now and the Then. Because of their inherent ambiguity, lack of clear synthesis, and absence of teleological reconciliation, they qualify as constellations of 'dialectical images'. But in this sense, Magritte's works aim both to be in themselves luminal-charged 'dialectical images', while at the same time also invoking through subject-matter an historical moment during which the nature and role of the liminal experience was especially contested within western society. They are definitely 'betwixt and between'.

## NOTES

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<sup>i</sup> Susan Sontag, 'Against Interpretation', *A Susan Sontag Reader*, (Harmondsworth: Penguin Books, 1983), p.104

<sup>ii</sup> Michel Foucault, *Society Must be Defended*, (7th January 1976), tr. David Mace, Mauro Bertani & Alessandro Fontana eds., (London: Picador, 2003), p/ 6.

<sup>iii</sup> Julie Stephens, *Anti-disciplinary Protest: Sixties Radicalism and Postmodernism* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1998) , p. 4

<sup>iv</sup> This included having the signage cleaned and the neon re-wired so it briefly functioned again, an event recorded by Margreiter in a short black and white film. Subsequently she also designed her own alphabet based on the original typography and animated it for the Dia Foundation website. See: [www.diaart.org/margreiter/alphabeth.html](http://www.diaart.org/margreiter/alphabeth.html)

<sup>v</sup> Review of exhibition at Galeria STAMPA, Basel, Switzerland. *Frieze*, Issue 121 March 2009.

<sup>vi</sup> Openings, *Artforum International*, Sept. 2006, p. 2

<sup>vii</sup> In passing, it's worth noting a series of paintings made during this period by Ed Ruscha, in which the artist formed words out of what look like spilt liquids. In retrospect, such paintings can be seen to capture in amusing but succinct fashion the anti-structural dynamics of the period. Also relevant are the various antics of Neo-Dadaism, the Fluxus group, and later in Italy, artists such as Mario Merz and Allegiero Boetti of *Arte Povera*.

<sup>viii</sup> F T Marintetti, 'Destruction of Syntax – Imagination without Strings – Words-in-Freedom' (1913) in Umberto Appollonio, *Futurist Manifestoes*, trans. R W Flint (London: Thames & Hudson, 1975) p.98

<sup>ix</sup> *ibid.* p.102

<sup>x</sup> Alain Badiou, *The Century*, trans. Alberto Toscano, (London: Polity Press, 2007), p.96

<sup>xi</sup> Victor Turner, *The Ritual Process: Structure and Anti-Structure*, (Cornell University Press, Ithaca, New York, 1970), p.94-95

<sup>xii</sup> *ibid.* p.95

<sup>xiii</sup> *ibid.*

<sup>xiv</sup> *ibid.* p.132

<sup>xv</sup> *ibid.*

<sup>xvi</sup> *ibid.*

<sup>xvii</sup> Nicholas Bourriaud, 'Altermodern', *Altermodern: Tate Triennial*, ex. cat. (London: Tate Publishing, 2009), unpaginated

<sup>xviii</sup> Craig Owens, 'The Allegorical Impulse: Towards a Theory of Postmodernism' *Beyond Recognition: Representation. Power and Culture*, Barbara Kruger and Jane Weinstock, editors (San Francisco: University of California Press, 1994) p.52-53

<sup>xix</sup> *ibid.* p.54

<sup>xx</sup> *ibid.* p.55

<sup>xxi</sup> Bourriaud, op.cit.

<sup>xxii</sup> *ibid.*

<sup>xxiii</sup> Georges Didi-Huberman, 'The Supposition of the Aura: The Now, the Then, and Modernity' in *Negotiating Rapture: The Power of Art to Transform Lives*, ex. cat.

Richard Francis, editor, (Chicago: Museum of Contemporary Art, Chicago, 1996), p.52

<sup>xxiv</sup> *ibid.*

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<sup>xxv</sup> *ibid.* p.53

<sup>xxvi</sup> Walter Benjamin, 'N [Re The Theory of Knowledge, Theory of Progress]', in *Benjamin: Philosophy, History, Aesthetics*. G. Smith, editor, (Chicago: Chicago University Press, 1983) p.49. Quoted in Didi-Huberman p.52-53

<sup>xxvii</sup> Clausen, p.2