

## Secret Publicity

### *The Avant-Garde Repeated*

The last fifteen years have seen a renewed use of strategies and forms associated with various neo-avant-gardes, such as Fluxus, Conceptual art, Performance art. Theory has not found it easy to come to terms with this phenomenon, in part because we still find it difficult to think about history in terms of survivals and repetitions – as what Hal Foster called a ‘*continual process of protension and retension, a complex relay of anticipated futures and reconstructed pasts*’.<sup>1</sup> Foster has criticized the tendency to treat recent repetitions and revivals of avant-garde strategies and motifs as a betrayal of an earlier, more heroic avant-garde. If the neo-avant-gardes of the 1960s and 1970s now often play this ‘heroic’ part, these neo-avant-gardes were themselves presented as dubious and conformist repetitions in Peter Bürger’s *Theory of the Avant-Garde* (1974). Although purporting to be a theory of the neo-avant-garde, Bürger’s approach suffered from his insistence on the exemplary character of Dada, Surrealism and the historical avant-garde in general, which had seriously attempted to integrate art into the *Lebenswelt*, into society and everyday life, and to revolutionize society through art.

At the service of progress

Bürger’s analysis of this project remained rather abstract, and paid little attention to the series of complex and frustrating rapprochements between avant-garde movements and political movements, leading for instance to the replacement of the journal *La Révolution surréaliste* by *Le Surréalisme au service de la Révolution* (1930–1933) – the concept of a Surrealist revolution making way for the ideal of a Communist revolution, to which the Surrealists would act as handmaidens. Also typical of Bürger’s reduction of historical complexity is his dismissal of the neo-

## Matière à réflexion pour les jongleurs couronnés.



qu'un sang impur abreuve nos sillons.

Lundi 21 Janvier 1793 à 10 heures un quart du matin sur la place de la révolution, et devant appelé Louis XV. Le Tyran est tombé sous le glaive des Loix. Ce grand acte de justice a consterné l'Aristocratie ancienne la superstition Royale, et créé la république. Il imprime un grand caractère à la convention nationale et la rend digne de la confiance des Français. Ce fut en vain qu'une faction audacieuse et des charlatans, de la charlatanerie et de la chicane, le de la convention demoura inébranlable dans ses de la Liberté et à l'Éclatant de la vertu.

Extrait de la 3<sup>e</sup> Lettre de Maximilien Robespierre

Orateurs insidieux épuisèrent toutes les ressources de courage des républicains triompha: la majorité principes, et le génie de l'intrigue resta au génie à ses commettans.

A Paris chez Villeneuve graveur rue Bacharie St-Jean de la Maison du passage N<sup>o</sup> 74.

Villeneuve, Matière à réflexion pour les jongleurs couronnés (Food for thought for crowned buffoons), 1793, engraving, Musée Cranavalet, Paris

avant-garde, which reused avant-garde strategies within the art context in an institutionalized form, and could thus only be seen as a simulation, a market-driven fake avant-garde.<sup>2</sup> Hal Foster and others have rightly pointed out that Bürger neglected the fact that some neo-avant-garde artists cogently reflected on the changed conditions of artistic production, on the integration of art in spectacle. Then as now, the most interesting repetitions are reactivations that rewrite the past even as they use it. The avant-garde has always been *anachronistic*, in the non-pejorative sense in which the term is used by Georges Didi-Huberman: it was always at odds with the present, or at least with the dominant interpretations of what constitutes the present.<sup>3</sup>

Of course, this is the traditional image of the avant-garde too: a vanguard marching ahead of the troops, ahead of its time. This ahistorical and subtheoretical cliché of the avant-garde as an uninterrupted line of progress, can easily lead to pronouncements of the death of the avant-garde: if the avant-garde is part and parcel of the modern ideology of progress, it is surely history by now. However, the temporality of the avant-garde is more complex than such models allow for. No doubt many uses of avant-garde strategies and forms – now as in the 1960s and 1970s – are facile and scarcely distinguishable from the recycling of retro signs in the mass media, but this is not all there is. What I want to argue is that the avant-garde has always harked back to pasts that were real and imaginary in varying degrees; that it often *saw the future itself in terms of the past*. A perpetually anachronistic avant-garde may yet be endowed with a future of sorts, and I will argue that part of this future may lie in the practical and theoretical reflection on different forms of publicness that characterize various moments in the histories of the avant-garde. Certain structural tendencies and paradoxes return throughout modern art from the years around 1800 onwards, in sometimes unexpected guises; if this text hops through the decades and centuries, it is to focus on such traits.<sup>4</sup> What is at issue is the outline of an approach that acknowledges the complexity and the contractions of avant-garde temporality – of the avant-garde's conceptions of as well as interventions in history.

When the French military term *avant-garde* (vanguard) was first adapted for artistic use in the Saint-Simonian dialogue 'L'Artiste, le savant et l'industriel' of 1825, it seemed there could be little doubt as to its linear and progressive character. 'It is us artists who will serve as

your avant-garde: the power of the arts is the most immediate and rapid one', the artist says to the industrialist and the scientist.<sup>5</sup> The text was written by Olinde Rodrigues, who had been a close collaborator of Saint-Simon, one of the leading utopian socialists. Saint-Simon himself had used the term *avant-garde* to denote progressive forces, noting in 1808 that for a certain time in world history, the English had been 'le poste d'avant-garde de l'humanité', the people who were humanity's vanguard.<sup>6</sup> The later text by Rodrigues introduced a tension that was to recur at various moments of the *avant-garde's* history: the artist (representing the various arts, such as literature, visual arts and music) says that he and his fellow artists will be 'your *avant-garde*'. In other words, there is the distinct suggestion that artists will work in the service of the scientists and industrialists who rule society; their task is to create enthusiasm among the masses for the course they set for society. This is not so much *La Révolution surréaliste* as it is *Le Surréalisme au service de la Révolution* – or rather *évolution*, as Saint-Simon favoured evolution over revolution.

In fact, art at the service of the revolution had become a reality even before the term *avant-garde* was adopted for art, when Jacques-Louis David became the artist of the French Revolution, not only painting revolutionary martyrs such as Marat but also, and perhaps more importantly, staging festivals such as funerary rites for these martyrs. The Revolution needed ceremonies, ritualistic events. In Walter Benjamin's words, the Revolution considered itself to be 'Rome returned', reviving Antiquity in a revolutionary now-time (*Jetztzeit*), and this could not be a matter of mere art. David and countless other artists and craftsmen used classical forms, but however antiquarian the visual culture of the Revolution may have been, antique virtues were to leap from the canvas and from architecture into public life, making a difference in the eighteenth century, effecting a break with the old order: an anachronistic explosion of now-time.<sup>7</sup> The greatest and most horrific quasi-ritual of the Revolution was in many ways unprecedented: the executions on the guillotine, which spawned a new graphic genre of prints that depict the severed heads of Enemies of the People being held in front of a white void. One such print shows the bleeding head of former head of state Louis XVI. Formerly, the entire edifice of French official art was crowned by the king, whose portraits visualized his power and position as head of state; now his head hangs in a white nothingness. The neo-classical reenactment of Antiquity has created an unprecedented image.<sup>8</sup>

Back to the future, forward into the past

The Revolution and its traumatic break with the monarchic and Christian past spawned various revivals of both the social and religious order of the Ancien Régime: the old order haunted post-revolutionary modernity. A case in point is provided by the early German Romantics, who at first conceived of their project as an artistic and philosophical revolution to complement and complete the political revolution, but who quickly made a reactionary turn towards the Middle Ages. The *Frühromantiker* in the circle of the Schlegels and Novalis wanted to create a mythology that would be an artistic religion, a living, poetic cult that would 'romanticize', re-enchant, re-mythologize the world. Idealist philosophers such as Schelling and Romantic poet-theorists like Friedrich Schlegel, wanted to remedy the lack of a living myths in the dismal modern world by creating a 'new mythology'. Since this task would mainly fall to poets, their role could very well be described as that of an *avant-garde*; the concept is no stranger to German Romanticism, even if the term was not yet used.<sup>9</sup> However, the German Romantics quickly realized that individual modern poets could not create a collective mythology amidst the upheavals of modernity. Schelling argued that a complete mythology such as that of the ancients could not come into being in the Christian world, Christianity being a historical religion rather than one based on nature.

Increasingly, the Romantics looked back to the Middle Ages, supposedly the era when the mythological potential of Christianity had been realized to the maximum in the cult of the saints and in legends and romances full of miracles – the miracle being, according to Schelling, the proper manifestation of a Christian and historical mythology.<sup>10</sup> Friedrich Schegel became both the theorist of a medievalizing form of Romantic art and an apologist for Metternich and the post-Napoleonic Restoration in Europe, that macabre reenactment of the Ancien Régime, with rulers who stressed their link to the Medieval past. But the *avant-garde* rhetoric deployed by utopian socialists – who can also be termed Romantic socialists – and by 'progressive' Romantic artists in the 1820s and 1830s harked back to the past as well, if in a different manner and with different intensions. Saint-Simon famously claimed that 'The golden age which a blind tradition has hitherto laid in the past is not behind us but before us. It lies in the perfecting of the social order.'<sup>11</sup> On the one hand, this remark is directed against trad-

ition and the 'progressive'; on the other hand, the future goal *is the past* in a double sense: it is the historical (classical) image of a past golden age.

Late in life Saint-Simon also presented his system in a deliberately historical, archaic form, calling it the 'New Christianity'. Earlier in his career, he had argued that progressive thought had to be kept away from the prying eyes of the populace – distinguishing between a post-Christian intellectual and scientific elite and the general population, who were still Christians. Outwardly, the elite would respect the dominant religion and morals, but among themselves they would work to strengthen the scientific worldview: 'My conduct is in keeping with my convictions. I work at perfecting Physicism, but I do not publish my ideas; I only share them with people who are sufficiently enlightened.'<sup>12</sup> Saint-Simon thus advocated operating in a quasi-sect, in an anti-public conspiracy; later on he tried to appropriate Christianity for his purposes, rather than merely conforming outwardly to its beliefs and rules. However, this 'Christian turn' appears to be just as tactically motivated as the earlier approach. On the one hand, the New Christianity was to be a return to the primitive church, when it was still a moral religion and lived up to the claim that all men are brothers; on the other hand, this was clearly something of a pseudo-religion to provide the populace with a reassuring moral framework.

The followers of Saint-Simon founded an actual church, with Prosper Enfantin as Father (*Père*), who then embarked on an unsuccessful quest to find a matching *Mère* or Female Messiah. *Père* Enfantin and his followers, who wore special primitivist outfits, made an attempt at communal living, which ended in prison; later 'a mission left for the East in quest of the *Femme Messie*. They were known as the "Compagnons de la Femme" and considered themselves as modern crusaders.'<sup>13</sup> One can argue that such quaint, romantic shenanigans are meaningless, ill-advised attempts to clad the modern in historical form, and to conjure up a revolution by playing primitive Christians. The 'real' importance of Saint-Simonism would then lie in the Saint-Simonists' later, thoroughly practical involvement with modernization, especially in railroads – not in its archaisms.<sup>14</sup> But historical 'disguises' of the modern have their own reality, even if it is a phantasmagoric reality. They may be in the service of revolution, evolution or reaction; not infrequently a chaotic blend of two or more of these, as in Saint-



*Liturgical vest of Père Enfantin, ca. 1831*  
collection BNF, Fonds Enfantin

Simon's autocratic vision of human progress towards a golden age.

In 1835 Heinrich Heine, who developed a critical form of Romanticism and lambasted the reactionary and medievalizing turn his colleagues had taken, dedicated his *De l'Allemagne* to Enfantin – one example of repeated attempts in the nineteenth and twentieth centuries to establish connections between political and artistic avant-gardes.<sup>15</sup> Later, Heine would collaborate with Marx on the *Deutsch-Französische Jahrbücher* (1844), but such rapprochements between artists and political radicals were frail. In the anachronistic history of the avant-garde, the fate of Heine's dedication to Enfantin would be repeated with



something close to neurotic compulsion; exasperated by the primitivist messiah, Heine scrapped the dedication from later editions. But not only the disappointments recurred. Surrealism at various points included German Romanticism and utopian socialism among its precursors, in its attempt to re-enchant and transform the world. Like Benjamin, whose *Arcades Project* received a crucial impulse from Aragon's neo-romantic *Le Paysan de Paris*, the Surrealists looked for a possible future in the past.<sup>16</sup>

#### Art and life, and publicity

However, the question needs to be addressed if the institutionalization of the avant-garde in the 1960s, its integration into an art world that is in turn thoroughly integrated in spectacle, does not indeed constitute an 'end' of sorts, after which the reuse of avant-gardist strategies can only be a marketing strategy. Advanced spectacle has penetrated and changed society to an unprecedented degree, resulting in the perverse fulfilment of the avant-garde's dream of the poetic transformation of life. The avant-garde failed in realizing its project, only to see it travestied by spectacular commodities; spectacle actually *did* change people's lives, if only by drawing them into different patterns of consumption.<sup>17</sup> Jürgen Habermas has argued that the attempt to 'reconcile art and life', as analysed by Peter Bürger, was doomed to failure because it operated from only one of the autonomous spheres of which modern society consists.<sup>18</sup> According to Max Weber, modern society saw the disintegration of unified 'worldviews' into the separate fields of science, art and morals or law; each one largely the domain of specialists. The avant-gardes may have tried to leave the art world behind in order to reform life, but they had not succeeded in penetrating any of the other spheres – especially since rapprochements to political movements consistently seemed to founder or lead to the political disenfranchisement of art. Habermas was not particularly sad about this failure of the avant-garde project: in his view, the destruction of the different spheres would mean a regression, a break with the 'project of modernity' that emerged with the Enlightenment.

The Weberian spheres of art, science and law are not, of course, completely isolated from one another, even if their internal discourses are largely autonomous. They also coexist within the public sphere, whose origins Habermas has traced to the 'reasoning citizens' of eight-

eenth-century Britain.<sup>19</sup> While each of the specialized domains has its own, internal form of publicness or semi-publicness – constituted by art journals or scientific conferences, for instance – they also require a general public sphere to mediate between themselves and the rest of society. It is through this *Öffentlichkeit* that the specialist spheres have effect on the 'outside world'. In modern bourgeois societies, this public sphere is also the sphere of political argument, since politics must not be some kind of absolutist, dictatorial or technocratic administration; as politics derives its mandate from 'the people', it must be held accountable in public. While Habermas' idealization of the early public sphere as a space for rational debate neglects the exclusive and exclusionary character of this bourgeois sphere, the rise of competitive mass media in the course of the nineteenth century was not so much a step towards democratization as a move towards a complete commodification of the public. It is telling that the word *publicity*, which was used in the eighteenth century to denote the *Öffentlichkeit* or public sphere, came to stand primarily for the seeking of media attention with a view to some kind of commercial gain; theorists who have theoretical issues with the term 'public sphere' now use the less than elegant 'publicness' as a replacement for the 'old' meaning of publicity.<sup>20</sup>

Habermas sums up the historical development he traces by stating that 'critical publicity' is replaced by a manipulative one.<sup>21</sup> In a non-Habermasian idiom, one could call this the publicity of the spectacle. While Habermas' analysis of the origins of this spectacular publicness is in many ways illuminating, his nostalgia for the early bourgeois public sphere as a realm of rational debate seems unhelpful, and obscures the fact that it had narrow margins and excluded many from participating. With regard to the current publicness of the spectacle, groups which to some extent have a subordinated social status and consider themselves neither represented nor misrepresented by the mainstream media, have been termed counter-publics. Nancy Fraser, who introduced the term 'subaltern counter-publics', focused on subordinated social groups such as women, black people and gays. Michael Warner, while putting special emphasis on queer experience, has argued that participants in a counter-public can be 'subalterns' for no other reason than their identification with this group – be it a fundamentalist tendency, a youth-culture tribe or 'artistic bohemianism'.<sup>22</sup>

In fact, the avant-garde worked with counter-media and the creation

of counter-publics long before theory posited such notions. Art media as counter-media would be not simply semi-public specialist forums, distinct from publicness at large, but avant-garde attempts to forge a *different* publicness, a counter-publicness. This is the point of the small-circulation journals and reviews that became crucial media, counter-media, for twentieth-century avant-gardes such as Dada, Surrealism and the Lettrist and Situationist Internationals. Avant-gardes can thus be seen as attempting to establish a counter-public not through some *a priori* social stigma – its participants were often white males with a middle-class background – but on the grounds of a radical dissent from the dominant form of publicness, and the society it represented. Avant-garde reviews differed from both the mass media and the more traditional art and literary publications which existed in the margin of the culture industry. They were thus potentially addressed not to a limited group with some special interest (such as art), but to a much more diverse layer that wanted to develop a critical understanding of society. And in a situation in which the avant-garde's 'maximum' project of social transformation seems to be foreclosed, the creation of a counter-publicness as a 'minimum' project becomes more important than ever. After all, the minimum project can keep some awareness of the maximum project alive, and counter-media can investigate the possibilities – remote as they are – for change that goes beyond the introduction of new commodities.

#### Bataille's secret society

One of the most ambitious attempts to create a counter-public can be found in Georges Bataille's activities during the late 1930s. Although intimately involved with reviews such as *Documents* and *La Critique sociale*, Bataille was simultaneously impatient with such counter-media, which were incapable of bringing about the social and cultural change he felt was urgently needed. Reviewing some volumes of Surrealist poetry for *La Critique sociale* in 1933, Bataille was scathing about the gap between Surrealism's ambitions and its concrete results. He reminded his readers that Surrealism had wanted to be 'a mode of existence that exceeded limits' – especially the limits of the literary and art worlds. The aim had been not merely artistic renewal but 'surrealizing' life – and thus creating a social revolution. In practice, as Bataille acidly underscored, it just resulted in collections of poetry, some of it good

(Tzara), some of it bad (Breton, obviously), but in any case, no more than verse.<sup>23</sup> Surrealism had failed in its attempt to revolutionize life.

Like Habermas, Bataille realized that the problem was not just one of art. In his essay 'L'Apprenti sorcier' ('The Sorcerer's Apprentice') he noted that science, art and politics – which to Bataille had become just another specialist sphere – operated in isolation from one another, and that 'existence thus shattered into three pieces has ceased to be existence: it is nothing but art, science or politics.'<sup>24</sup> What distinguishes Bataille from Habermas and Bürger is, of course, his deep aversion to the inheritance of the Enlightenment. The Collège de Sociologie, a group led by Bataille and Roger Caillois which organized lectures by various speakers in a room behind a bookshop, was dedicated to *la sociologie sacrée*, and the study of the sacred was to be an instrument to bring about a resacalization. But sociology, as a scientific discipline, was structurally similar to modern art – an autonomous sphere of modern society. There was no reason why a sociological avant-garde should succeed where an artistic one had failed: surely such an undertaking would be just as doomed as Surrealism? From Bataille's point of view, artistic and scientific avant-gardes alike were to be no more than stepping stones on the way to the *true* avant-garde: the *sacred* avant-garde.

Appropriating and detouring the sociological investigations of Durkheim and Mauss, Bataille's criticism was that the realm of the sacred had been all but closed off to modern man, whose world was ruled by rational thought which reduces the surrounding world to a set of objects. What is thus destroyed is the original *intimacy*, in which there was no distinction between subject and object. Of course, this intimacy was shattered long before the rise of modernity, at the dawn of civilization, but in traditional societies there are temporary escapes from the profane world to the sacred: myths and rituals which momentarily negate the world of reason and utility by transgressing its laws.<sup>25</sup> In his theory of religion, expounded in a series of books in the forties and fifties, Bataille examined the interplay between prohibition and transgression. 'A prohibition is meant to be violated', he noted in *L'Érotisme*, and the violation of the law was intimately connected to the sacred – transgression of profane rules and laws opening the way to the world of gods, feasts and sacrifice that lay beyond law, beyond prohibitions.<sup>26</sup> Hence, a sacred avant-garde would have to be transgressive – not merely to break out of the art world and into 'life', but also in order to

forge complete human beings and a reintegrated society. This would not be possible, in Bataille's view, without the creation of new myths and rituals, capable of momentarily suspending man-made institutions and laws and providing a *collective* access to the sacred, thus forging a community. The project is clearly a romantic one, which uses the jargon of Durkheimian sociology for its own purposes: for the early romantics, myth is supposed to be a unifying power that can shatter the Weberian divisions that beset modern society.

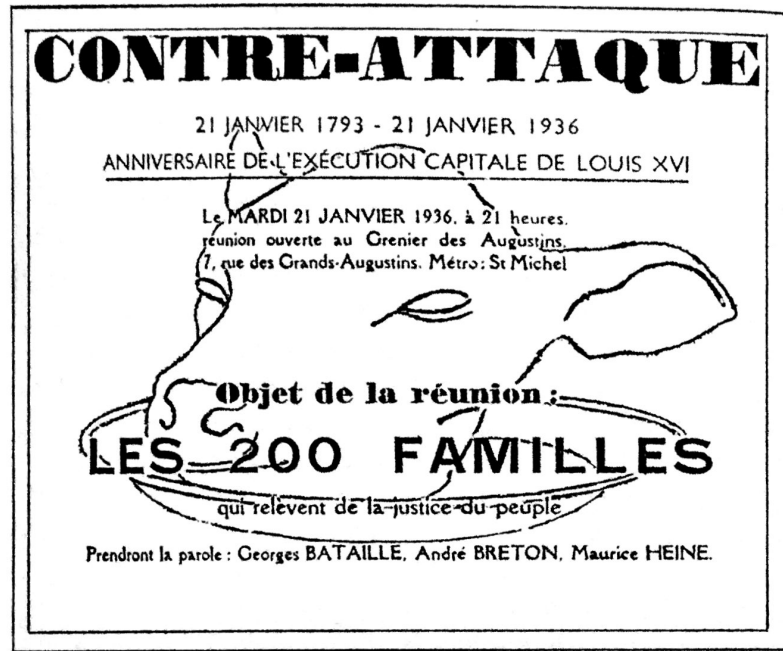
But how to create new myths? To answer this question, Bataille looked towards *secret societies* as tools for radical change, arguing that the idea of the secret society was already implicit in the artistic avant-garde, at least since Dada.<sup>27</sup> In fact, the link between the notion of a secret society or sect and the avant-garde could be said to go back to Saint-Simon's notion of a secret doctrine which enlightened 'avant-gardists' should keep to themselves. And this notion is only one manifestation of a widespread culture of secrecy in the late eighteenth and early nineteenth centuries, when Enlightenment ideas were often dangerous goods, and best expressed within the secret publicness of Freemasons' lodges and similar groups. In such groups, esoteric symbolism and enlightened thought mingled freely, one of the models being the mystery cults of the ancient world. According to both Enlightenment thinkers and early Romantics, the mysteries contained the esoteric pendant of exoteric, popular mythology; those initiated have a more profound, symbolic understanding of mythology, one that went beyond polytheism and was in fact a kind of enlightened pantheism.<sup>28</sup> Could such an esoteric group not be used to create something that might also function as an esoteric, popular mythology? Secrecy would then be a necessary preparation for going public in the future. In contrast to Symbolists like Sâr Péladan, for whom secrecy had become a fetish, the occult forming a haven from the banal modern world, Bataille wanted to use secrecy as a weapon rather than as a retreat.

In a lecture given before the Collège on March 19, 1938, Bataille used the primitive Christian sect as an example of what he proposed to attempt. Christianity, which vied for dominance with other late-Antique cults, was at times forced to resort to secrecy, yet in the end revolutionized the world – its central mystery being not so much an esoteric explanation of pagan mythology as a radical break with it. In a fit of realism, Bataille admitted that there were counter-examples, such as

Freemasonry – in his view '*un monde mort*', a sect that had never become a church.<sup>29</sup> On the other hand, as the German historian Hans Mayer showed in his lecture to the Collège on April 18, 1939, there were more successful models closer to home. In the domain of rites and symbols, Mayer argued, Hitler had not really created anything new: instead, he had transformed the ideological dreams of a wide variety of reactionary sects into a political reality.<sup>30</sup> Mayer traced this heritage back to the Romantic era and the German resistance to Napoleon, when secretive political and paramilitary groups had created a cult of Germanic traditions that was fiercely opposed to French rationalism. There is no doubt that Bataille, who prided himself on the title of 'sorcerer's apprentice' which Kojève had bestowed on him, was at some level impressed by this achievement. Bataille's quixotic project with the Collège was to 'appropriate the weapons forged by one's enemies' – the fascists.<sup>31</sup> The sorcerer's apprentice wanted to fight fire with fire.

#### Myth on the guillotine

Analysing the rise of Fascism in the early 1930s, Bataille concluded that with the French Revolution and the fall of monarchies, society, which had once been an organism with a chef-dieu as its head, had now become headless. For a short while, Bataille considered the 'archaic' return of chief-gods such as Mussolini and Hitler to be a necessary phase, a necessary reaction to crisis.<sup>32</sup> To him these dictators seemed like modern Pharaohs: Bataille regarded the Egyptian state cult, in which the Pharaoh is the son of the sun god Ra, as a precursor of Christianity and the Christian king's role as representative of God on earth. From this perspective, Christianity is not so much a break with polytheism as a monotheist continuation of the Egyptian solar cult, a 'vertical', hierarchic religion which puts god in an inaccessible transcendent realm from which he blesses the powers that be. Bataille always considered this to be a perversion of the true nature of the sacred, which is an overwhelming experience, an experience of the dissolution of ego and of symbolic death. As the costs of Fascism became ever more apparent, Bataille realized that the revival of god-like chiefs should not be regarded as a necessary phase, but as a dangerous form of archaism that had to be fought. He swiftly founded the left-wing group Contre-Attaque with his arch-enemy André Breton, which disintegrated just as swiftly, and moved on to found both the



*Contre-Attaque*, invitation to the commemoration of Louis XVI's execution on January 21, 1936

Collège de Sociologie and a Nietzsche-studded review called *Acéphale*.

For Bataille, the headless man or *acéphale* stood for the death of God and of the king as son or human equivalent of God. With the decapitation of the French king, society became as it were 'acéphale', headless, and power was no longer sanctioned by Divine authority. Nietzsche's proclamation of the death of God was the delayed aftershock of this event.<sup>33</sup> While this was both a symptom and a cause of social crisis, it was also a chance: the chance to create a non-authoritarian access to the sacred, to experience the sacred once again as a transgression of laws, rather than as the divinely ordained imposition of laws, as has happened in societies since at least the ancient Egyptians. Bataille sought to reinstate the 'horizontal sacred' of extreme, transgressive rituals that restore man symbolically to the lost intimacy.<sup>34</sup> There is, however, a different type of sun god that fascinated Bataille: the violent, sacrificing and sacrifice-demanding sun god, which Bataille traced from the Aztecs to Van Gogh. This is not the planetary deity which imposes a cyclical order on life on earth, but a sun into which one has

stared for too long, a blinding and maddening, mutilating sun. Bataille also noted that this 'alternative', transgressive sun could make its mythological appearance in the guise of a headless man – another meaning of this overdetermined figure.<sup>35</sup>

Parallel to the Collège and the magazine *Acéphale*, for which André Masson drew a stunning vignette, Bataille founded a secret society that he also named *Acéphale*, which was to create the new myths and rituals of the future.<sup>36</sup> Although little is known about the activities of this society – it was, after all, secret – it is clear from texts related to it that Bataille honed in on the Place de la Concorde as a site of great mythological potential: prominent on this square is an Egyptian obelisk, which for Bataille was 'l'image le plus pure du chef et du ciel', an expression of the Pharaoh's godlike status; however, what was special about the Place de la Concorde was that the obelisk formed a constellation with *l'échafaud de Louis XVI*, the spot where once the guillotine stood that decapitated the 'chef' of France, who had been ordained by God.<sup>37</sup> Already in the context of *Contre-Attaque*, in January 1936, Bataille had been involved in a commemoration – celebration – of the Death of Louis XVI, something which to him was clearly more than a mere political event, but it was only in the context of *Acéphale* that Bataille could try to use this event as a model for a cult to come; a cult in which the sacred was not to be repressed by the creation of a transcendent solar god or chief and of a monarchist or fascist society, where it would periodically release man from the constraints of social rules and from his own rational mind. But if the ritual transgressions of Bataille's sacred avant-garde were ever to become a church, this would be no church in the Christian sense, with a pope at the top: it would be a church after the death of god and after the death of the king, more of a widely shared set of beliefs and rituals than a hierarchic organization.

All in all, Bataille's activities amount to the most ambitious, most carefully thought-through, most desperate and most bizarre undertaking of the historical avant-garde. He was dissatisfied with the avant-garde's reliance on counter-media – journals like *La Révolution surréaliste* and *Documents* were severely limited in their effects. His attempted solution to this problem was to go underground – to create a secret society that was to be the true secret counter-public behind Bataille's counter-media, the journal *Acéphale* and the Collège. It might seem strange to call an obscure secret society a counter-public, but for Bataille secrecy



was a prerequisite to establishing a radical publicness that could develop transgressions that would chance society in the future. Bataille emphasized the Place de la Concorde's status as *place publique*; by reading a mythological and ritual significance into it, Bataille as it were gave this public square an esoteric, semi-secret surplus meaning that would one day perhaps become common knowledge and the foundation for a new collective approach to the sacred. But time was running out quickly. Soon the Collège would be disbanded and Walter Benjamin – an occasional visitor who acerbically noted that Bataille and Caillois used the Collège to enlist young people for a secret society whose main mystery was what actually united its two founding fathers – would be dead.<sup>38</sup> Bataille's sect, whose coherence had always been doubtful, would not become a church.

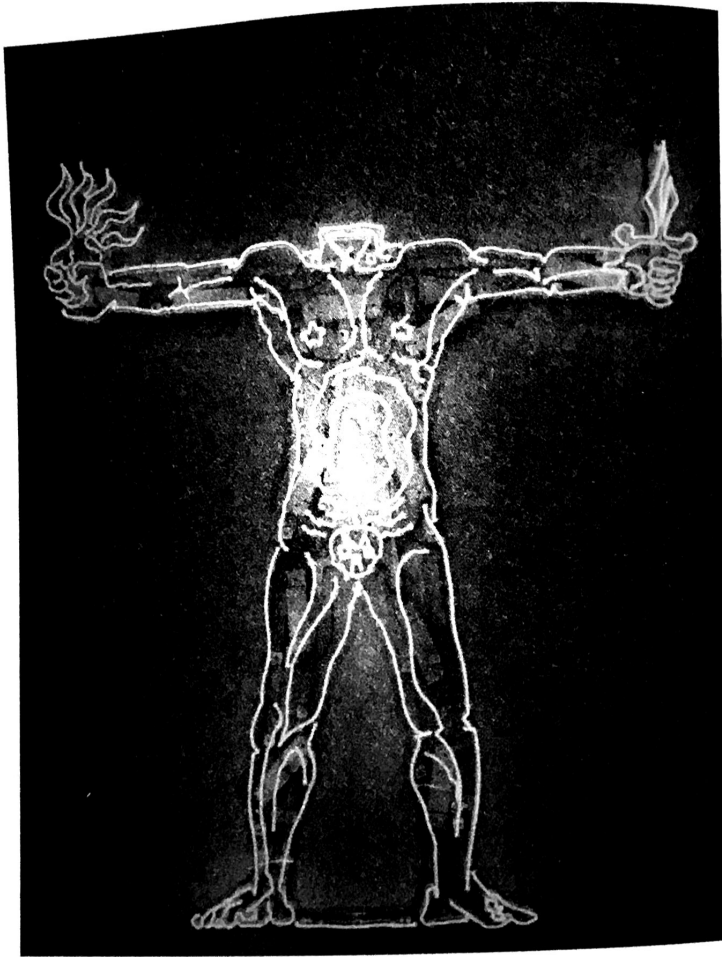
#### Books, magazines, exhibition spaces

For Benjamin as for Adorno and Horkheimer, Bataille's project was a reactionary, neo-romantic delusion. For these thinkers, myth is not something which is absent and has to be created anew in order to re-enchante the world; it is the dismal reality of capitalist modernity, its irrational logic. In the fully developed culture industry, the Enlightenment has reversed into myth; publicness itself has become a mythic totality.<sup>39</sup> But the quixotic nature of Bataille's romantic quest for archaic forms of myth and ritual is offset by his attempts to establish a discourse and practice radically at odds with dominant publicity, yet not with the aim of retreating into a parallel world: the intent was, after all, to effect real change. By attempting to forge counter-media, Bataille pioneered a tactical use of media in opposition to mass media myths. This tactical use of secrecy differs from that of an artist of the historical avant-garde who was – ironically – much more visible in the 1960s: Marcel Duchamp, who had a late-symbolist distrust of 'the public'. In Duchamp's view, art is by nature esoteric, intended for a small group of initiates rather than for a large public, which can only profane art.<sup>40</sup> But Duchamp held the belief that a work of art only lives for a few decades – after that it becomes art history. When Duchamp publicized his old, 'historical' works in the 1960s, he kept working in secret on *Étant donnés*, which was to be unveiled only after his death – the door with peepholes through which the viewer has to look emphasizing Duchamp's doubts about an age in which art was increasingly put in

the spotlight. What is lacking in Duchamp is the Bataillean conviction that secrecy should be in the service of attack rather than retreat, that it should be part of a *politics of publicity*.

Without subscribing to some of Bataille's problematical suppositions, certain segments of the neo-avant-garde affirmed the need for such a politics of publicity. The creation of small publications, such as *Art-Rite*, *Interfunktionen* and General Idea's *FILE* magazine, and the publication of artists' books emphasized the need to create a form of publicness that went beyond that the mainstream media *and* beyond that of classic gallery shows and mainstream art criticism. However, there was also a continuing need to exhibit in art spaces – not just in the new alternative spaces, but also in commercial galleries and museums. The imperative for this was in part economical: something – photographs, objects, drawings – had to be exhibited and sold in order to make the artists' work possible. But at least as crucial as selling was *being seen*. The white cube of the gallery was the medium that made the artist's work visible to an audience. Robert Smithson noted that artists who wanted to escape from art were usually forced to come back to the gallery to present their work, in some form or another: 'It seems that no matter how far out you go, you are always thrown back on your point of origin.'<sup>41</sup>

The last decade has witnessed a growing sense of the need for a counter-publicness based in the art world: the renewed interest in publications such as Bataille's *Documents*, various Surrealist magazines, Situationist publications and journals like *Interfunktionen* demonstrates the anachronistic potential of the various avant-gardes, as do some current artistic practices. However, since the 1960s the avant-garde has indeed become institutionalized, and by now Bataille's desperate hope that counter-media can shatter the status quo and create a new culture has largely evaporated. Even though the critical, reflexive and tactical use of art-world media has kept the memory of the avant-garde's maximum project alive, do the current conditions of art production and reception not condemn references to the avant-garde's history to be exercises in commodified nostalgia, similar to the pop recycling of retro signs in the mass media? This culture of nostalgia could be seen as the contemporary version of a historicist nineteenth-century century – a culture whose *éternel retour* of old forms Benjamin opposed to his notion of now-time. Whereas now-time is a liberating activation of a potential



Cerith Wyn Evans, *Acéphale*, 2001  
 Courtesy Jay Jopling/White Cube, London

inherent in the past, such repetitions of historical forms lead to a dismal rule of sameness, the theorists of which Benjamin identified as Blanqui and Nietzsche.<sup>42</sup>

Even if many of the repetitions in today's art can be seen in those terms, the more interesting ones are a rehearsal for a *Jetztzeit* that is blocked at the moment, attempts at sketching the possibilities for a productive now-time, for an anachronistic eruption in an impoverished present. Dismal times call for a reassessment of the means at hand, and

their tactical use. The work of Cerith Wyn Evans is highly significant in this respect. On the one hand, Evans' works often have a glamorous surface, while on the other hand they contain arcane references to, for instance, Bataille, the Situationists and William Burroughs. When one of Wyn Evans' crystal chandeliers flashes a text by Bataille in Morse code, the Bataillean text infiltrates a gallery in a way that is, if not unreadable, at least not the most practical one. The text becomes a code that is as it were stored in the artwork – stored for future consumption in a flashy and hermetic commodity. Another work by Wyn Evans, André Masson's mythic *Acéphale* logotype executed as a neon sign and displayed alongside Warhol's floating *Silver Pillows* (2001), suggests that the secret publicness or publicity of contemporary art entails both the spectacularization of the avant-garde and the spectacle's infiltration with counter-public secrets that might point to a possible future.

- 1 Hal Foster, *The Return of the Real. The Avant-Garde at the Turn of the Century*, Cambridge (MA)/London, MIT Press, 1996, p. 29.
- 2 Peter Bürger, *Theorie der Avantgarde*, Frankfurt am Main, Suhrkamp, 1974.
- 3 Georges Didi-Huberman, *Devant le temps*, Paris, Minuit, 2000.
- 4 See also Jacques Rancière, 'The Aesthetic Revolution and Its Outcomes', in: *New Left Review*, no. 14 (March–April 2002), pp. 133–151.
- 5 'C'est nous, artistes, qui vous servirons d'avant-garde: la puissance des arts est en effet la plus immédiate et la plus rapide...' 'L'artiste, le savant et l'industriel', in: [Saint-Simon et al.], *Opinions littéraires, philosophiques et industrielles*, Paris, Bossange Père, 1825, p. 341.
- 6 Claude Henri Comte de Saint-Simon, 'Introduction aux Travaux Scientifiques du dix-neuvième siècle, tome second' (1808), in: *Oeuvres Choies de C.-H. de Saint-Simon*, vol. 1, Brussel, Van Meenen et Cie., 1859, p. 204.
- 7 Walter Benjamin, 'Über den Begriff der Geschichte' (1940), in: *Gesammelte Schriften*, vol. I.2: *Abhandlungen* (eds. Rolf Tiedemann and Hermann Schweppenhäuser), Frankfurt/Main, Suhrkamp, 1991, p. 701. On David during the Revolution, see in particular the brilliant account by T.J. Clark in *Farewell to an Idea: Episodes from a History of Modernism*, New Haven/London, Yale University Press, 1999.
- 8 Daniel Arasse, *De Machine van de Revolutie. Een geschiedenis van de guillotine*, translated from the French by Karin van Dorsselaer and Tess Visser, Nijmegen, Sun, 1989, pp. 193–196.
- 9 See Sven Lütticken, 'After the Gods', in: *New Left Review*, no. 30 (November–December 2004), pp. 83–103.
- 10 See for instance F. W. J. Schelling, 'Philosophie der Kunst' (1802–03), in: *Sämmtliche Werke* (ed. K.F.A. Schelling), vol. 5, Stuttgart/Augsburg, J.G. Cotta, 1859, pp. 431–449.
- 11 'L'Âge d'or, qu'une aveugle tradition a placé jusq'ici dans le passé, est devant nous.' This sentence served as motto of the journal *Le Producteur* and of the *Opinions littéraires, philosophiques et industrielles*.
- 12 'Ma conduite est conforme à mon opinion; je travaille à perfectionner le Physicisme; mais je ne publie point mes idées; je ne les communiqué qu'aux personnes suffisamment éclairées...' Saint-Simon, 'Introduction aux Travaux Scientifiques du dix-neuvième siècle, tome second', p. 215.

- See also Claude Henri Comte de Saint-Simon, 'Le Nouveau Christianisme' (1825), in: *Oeuvres Choies* de C.-H. de Saint-Simon, vol. 3, Brussel, Van Meenen et Cie., 1859, pp. 315-382.
- 13 David Owen Evans, *Social Romanticism in France, 1830-1848*, London/Oxford, Oxford University Press, 1951, p. 25.
- 14 Writing to Benjamin about the Arcades Project in the 1930s, Adorno warned Benjamin not to repeat Saint-Simon's 'Überbewertung des Archaischen'. Adorno, letter to Benjamin, 2-4 August 1935, in: Theodor W. Adorno and Walter Benjamin, *Briefwechsel 1928-1940* (ed. Henri Lonitz), Frankfurt am Main, Suhrkamp, 1994, p. 146.
- 15 Heinrich Heine, 'A Prosper Enfantin' (1835), in: *De l'Allemagne I. Säkulärausgabe*, vol. 16, Berlin/Paris, Akademie-Verlag, Édition du CNRS, 1978, p. 211.
- 16 Louis Aragon, *Le Paysan de Paris*, Paris, Gallimard, 1926.
- 17 Bürger, *Theorie der Avantgarde*, p. 68. I have here recast Bürger's remarks about the culture industry as the perverted realization of the avant-garde in Situationist terms as relating to spectacle in general.
- 18 Jürgen Habermas, *Die Moderne - ein unvollendetes Projekt*, Leipzig, Reclam, 1992, pp. 32-54.
- 19 Jürgen Habermas, *Strukturwandel der Öffentlichkeit. Untersuchungen zu einer Kategorie der bürgerlichen Gesellschaft* (1962), Frankfurt am Main, Suhrkamp, 1990, pp. 54-160.
- 20 Ibid. p. 55, 299.
- 21 Ibid. p. 270.
- 22 Michael Warner, *Publics and Counterpublics*, New York, Zone Books, 2002, pp. 118-21.
- 23 Georges Bataille, 'Breton (André). Le revolver à cheveux blancs. Tzara (Tristan). Où boivent les loups. Éluard (Paul). La vie immédiate' (1933), in: *Oeuvres complètes*, vol. I: *Premiers écrits, 1922-1940*, Paris, Gallimard, 1970, pp. 323-25.
- 24 Georges Bataille, 'L'Apprenti sorcier' (1938), in: *Le Collège de Sociologie (1937-1939)* (ed. Denis Hollier), Paris,
- Gallimard, 1979, pp. 46-47.
- 25 Bataille elaborated on this theory in some later works, especially *Théorie de la religion* (1948) and *La Part maudite dépense* (1949); see also 'The Utility of Expenditure', pp. 139-153
- 26 Georges Bataille, *L'Érotisme*, Paris, Minuit, 1957, pp. 72, 76.
- 27 'Roger Callois' (lecture in fact given by Bataille), 'Confréries, ordres, sociétés secrètes, églises' (1938), in: *Le Collège de Sociologie*, pp. 283-286.
- 28 See for instance Jan Assmann, *Moses der Ägypter. Entzifferung einer Gedächtnisspur*, Frankfurt am Main, Fischer, 2000, pp. 186-210.
- 29 'Caillois', 'Confréries, ordres, sociétés secrètes, églises', p. 286.
- 30 Hans Mayer, 'Les rites des associations politiques dans l'Allemagne romantique' (1939), in: *ibid.*, p. 452.
- 31 The phrase is used by Bataille in the context of Contre-Attaque, but it applies to his strategy with the Collège and Acéphale as well. Georges Bataille, 'Vers la révolution réelle' (1936), in: *Oeuvres Complètes*, vol. I, p. 421.
- 32 Georges Bataille, '[Le fascisme en France]' (1934), in: *Oeuvres complètes*, vol. II: *écrits posthumes 1922-1940*, Paris, Gallimard, 1970, pp. 204-213.
- 33 See a.o. Georges Bataille, 'Propositions' (1937), in: *Oeuvres Complètes*, vol. I, pp. 470-473.
- 34 See a.o. Georges Bataille, 'Chronique nietzschéene' (1937), in: *ibid.*, pp. 477-490.
- 35 Idem.
- 36 See a.o. Marc De Kesel, 'Woord vooraf', in: *De sfinx van de sociologie. Georges Bataille. Een politieke filosofie van het geweld* (ed. Marc De Kesel), Leuven/Amersfoort, Acco, 1994, pp. 9-13; Marina Galetti, 'Communautés morales, communautés politiques', in: *Les Temps Modernes* 54, no. 602 (January-February 1999), pp. 153-167; Francis Marmande, *Georges Bataille politique*, Lyon, Presses Universitaires de Lyon, 1985, pp. 59-69.

- 37 Georges Bataille, 'L'obélisque' (1938), in: *Oeuvres Complètes*, vol. I, pp. 501-513 (503, 501). The obelisk is a nineteenth-century addition to the square; Bataille's constellation of guillotine and obelisk is an imaginary, not a historical one.
- 38 Walter Benjamin, letter to Max Horkheimer, 28 May 1938, quoted in: Adorno and Benjamin, *Briefwechsel*, p. 358.
- 39 Max Horkheimer and Theodor W. Adorno, *Dialektik der Aufklärung* (1944-1947), Frankfurt am Main, Fischer, 1988.
- 40 For Duchamp's use of the terms esoteric and exoteric, see for instance the 1960 interview with Georges Charbonnier, in: Marcel Duchamp, *Interviews und Statements* (ed. Serge Stauffer), Stuttgart/Ostfildern-Ruit, Staatsgalerie Stuttgart/Cantz, 1992, pp. 88-89.
- 41 Robert Smithson, 'Fragments of an Interview with P. A. [Patsy] Norvell' [1969], *The Collected Writings* (ed. Jack Flam), Berkeley/Los Angeles/London, University of California Press, 1996, p. 192.
- 42 See for example Walter Benjamin, *Das Passagen-Werk. Gesammelte Schriften*, vol. V.1 (ed. Rolf Tiedemann), Frankfurt am Main, Suhrkamp, 1991, pp. 169-178.