

# Fashion- ionably

Steve Lyons



# Late

Over a span of six minutes in the summer of 2009, Fox News pundit Glenn Beck occupied the airwaves, waving a small blue book and imploring his audience to read it. He declared that this was an important book, a dangerous book, a call to arms for the radical left, a revolutionary tract for the twenty-first century.<sup>1</sup> The book was The Invisible Committee's *The Coming Insurrection*, newly translated from the French by an anonymous group of artists and intellectuals in New York and published by Semiotext(e), the press most notable for turning New York's art scene on to the likes of Jean Baudrillard, Gilles Deleuze and Félix Guattari, Franco "Bifo" Berardi, and Antonio Negri in the early 1980s. Beck's unlikely endorsement of *The Coming Insurrection* dramatizes a collision between opposing ideological camps, calling us to consider how some of Europe's most radical thinkers have hit American shores—sometimes out of context and occasionally decades late. Semiotext(e)'s latest *succès de scandale* also calls upon us to take stock of the strange and shifting contours of an intellectual market that has sprung up in the margins of the mainstream.




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**Group Material**

*Resistance: Anti Baudrillard*, 1987,  
White Columns, New York.

Photo : Ken Schles,  
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The delivery system for radical theory from the French and Italian left has certainly been transformed in recent years, and with the growing market for English translations of so-called post-'68 theory, numerous political theorists emerging from the student movements of 1968 have found themselves travelling the global circuit of art fairs, biennales, and art magazines. We have seen Jacques Rancière speaking about art and politics at the Frieze Art Fair, Bifo surfing the global biennale circuit from Kiev to Kassel to Montréal, Semiotext(e) appearing as an *artist* at the 2014 Whitney Biennial, and *Artforum* dedicating entire issues to the legacy of '68. In this essay, I want to untangle one knot in this art-theory love affair. Focusing on the proliferation of the Semiotext(e) brand of radical

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<sup>1</sup> — See Glenn Beck, "The One Thing: The Coming Insurrection," Fox News video, 6:55, July 1, 2009, accessed March 3, 2015, <http://youtube/ZKyI2qNskJc>.

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theory in *Artforum* in the past decade, I explore why a magazine best known for its girth and glossy ads for blue-chip commercial galleries and high-fashion labels may have been bitten by the Semiotext(e) bug, and what this coupling may tell us about the present conditions under which theorists must work.

### INFATUATED

This much we know: in the past decade, the art world has seen a surge of interest in the anti-capitalist protest culture of the 1960s and 1970s and in the European political theorists influential to that generation; *Artforum*—along with magazines like *Texte zur Kunst* and, more recently, *May Revue*—has done much to educate its readers about this intellectual fashion. But when did this begin? As British artist Merlin Carpenter tells it, it all started in 2003, when Tim Griffin, an emerging art critic with a background in comparative literature, was handed the job of editor-in-chief of *Artforum*, a magazine that was then moving in the direction of “lite theory.”<sup>2</sup> Under Griffin’s watch, *Artforum* was transformed into a platform in which new works by radical thinkers from the French and Italian left could be discussed and debated both on their own terms and in relation to contemporary art discourse. Between 2006 and 2009, *Artforum* dedicated feature sections to the work of Guy Debord, Jacques Rancière, Paolo Virno, and Antonio Negri, most often by pairing articles by artists and critics about these theorists’ continued relevance with excerpts from their major or recent books. By publishing in quick succession a string of thematic issues on revolution, protest, and the commons, the magazine staged a dialogue between contemporary art and radical politics at a time when speculation in the art market appeared nearly inseparable from the risk-taking promoted in the increasingly volatile financial market. But why did *Artforum*’s writers and editors begin to imagine the radical subversion of the ruling order at this particular historical juncture? Might the promotion of Tim Griffin to the position of editor-in-chief and the subsequent popularization of post-'68 theory in *Artforum* have signified an urgent need for art world insiders to realign their political agendas after a decade of global expansion and intense economic growth? Or were the writings of Debord, Negri, Rancière, and Virno simply used to package and market the latest art trends?

One could argue that the theorists promoted by *Artforum* during Griffin’s editorial tenure shared a common project—or at least an intellectual affinity—in their diagnosis of the limitations of critique under conditions of post-industrial capitalism. But it is perhaps more striking that, with the exception of Rancière, they also shared an editor. In fact, the theorists taking centre stage in *Artforum* were precisely the ones first introduced to America two decades earlier by Sylvère Lotringer, who, as founding editor of Semiotext(e), worked with a close-knit network of artists, filmmakers, club

owners, and punks to peddle new translations from the French and Italian left to their peers in the SoHo art scene. In fact, even the numerous writers and translators from Semiotext(e)’s extended family—including John Kelsey, Chris Kraus, Liz Kotz, Eileen Myles, Gerald Raunig, Mark von Schlegell, Jason E. Smith, and Lynne Tillman, not to mention Lotringer himself—began writing features, book reviews, art reviews, and Top 10 lists in *Artforum* during Griffin’s editorial tenure. It wouldn’t be much of a stretch to call this a kind of coup d’état at *Artforum* by Semiotext(e). It is perhaps unsurprising to discover that Griffin studied under Lotringer at Columbia in the late 1980s and worked as a Semiotext(e) intern into the early 1990s.

### TWICE INFATUATED

This was not the first time that *Artforum* had fallen for Semiotext(e). Two decades earlier, during a not dissimilar period of extreme economic growth, Semiotext(e) caught the eye of the New York art world with one of the first books in its *Foreign Agents* series: Jean Baudrillard’s *Simulations*, published in 1983. The timing could not have been better. By the turn of the 1980s, artists, critics, curators, and dealers had discovered that French poststructuralist theory, with all its linguistic opacity, could be twisted into an effective marketing tool for contemporary art. In an art world that was, as Lotringer remembers, “always on the lookout for ideas,” Baudrillard’s *Simulations* became a must-read because it gave “an aura of theory to what was, for the most part, a shrewd move by art in the direction of the media and advertising industry.”<sup>3</sup> This “shrewd move” went by the name of *appropriation art*, and its basic premise—that an artist could critique commercial advertising and mass culture by simulating aesthetic strategies developed in the commercial realm—took *Simulations* at face value. Distorted references to *Simulations* appeared almost immediately in art reviews, exhibition press releases, and catalogue texts; it was as if the name Baudrillard was enough to secure contemporary relevance for a work of art. By the fall of 1984, Baudrillard was listed as a contributing editor at *Artforum*, and he held this position until 1986. The only trouble was that the theorist had never even heard of *Artforum*.<sup>4</sup>

The Baudrillard affair was like a bad case of teenage lust—one-directional and evidently unsustainable. In 1987, when Baudrillard was invited to give a lecture to a sold-out crowd at the Whitney Museum of American Art, he was forced to face his disciples in person. When asked what he thought about the artists and critics whose work he inspired, he replied, “There can’t be any Simulationist school... because the simulacrum cannot be represented. This is a complete misunderstanding of what I wrote.”<sup>5</sup> Scheduled to coincide with the theorist’s trip to New York, Group Material—a New York-based art collective known for staging

# Lessons of '68

TIM GRIFFIN

**WHY MAY 1968?** The risks attending any real attempt to consider anew the significance of the events that took place worldwide during that month—or even merely to honor their anniversary now, forty years later—would seem prohibitive. Certainly, to address that historical moment's ideas and actions in all their complexity and specificity would require far more than a single issue of an art magazine: Whole compendiums of studies from a wide variety of disciplinary vantages, sociological and economic, anthropological and artistic, would be needed. Yet therein rests, perhaps, an even greater obstacle: So much has already been said about May '68—indeed, so much *will* be said—pro and con, in both scholarly and popular discourse, that its fundamental realities and true legacies are, paradoxically enough, somewhat obscure to most. And so, in approaching these events today, one is inevitably in jeopardy of addressing not the events of 1968 so much as the stories already spun about them; and, given the dominant language of reductive narratives, one is also in jeopardy of idealizing (or belittling) the events' very image and form, of either succumbing to vapid nostalgia or dismissing the time as the stuff of myth.

*Artforum's* goals in reinvestigating the dynamics of May '68 are, therefore, purposefully reflexive, intending less to pin down, in any definitive way, the episodes of decades past than to discern their lingering, albeit altered, inscription within circumstances now. Nearly every text in the current issue looks at May 1968 specifically in historical counterpoint, operating in a comparative and genealogical mode that brings the questions of '68 to bear on today. To give an example that speaks to the contemporary art context: When independent scholar Sally Shafto writes of the Zanzibar group's intermingling of leftist politics and cinematic dandyism—and attributes a “destabilizing potential” to their contradictory mix—one is bound to think as well of similar film- and video-making collectives working now and to wonder whether the potential of such seeming contradiction in culture remains the same. Or, to speak in terms of society more generally: Architecture and urbanism theorist Tom McDonough looks again at Henri Lefebvre's account of May '68—in the sociologist's recently republished book *The Explosion*—in order to better grasp the metropolitan conditions that set the stage for the 2005 riots in the Parisian *banlieues*.

Yet the matters examined here are, perhaps, most pregnant in their implications when pertaining to society and the figuring of art within it. For throughout these pages, essayists repeatedly underline the ways in which the very creative models and concepts that propelled '68—from the flexible, structuralist thought underlying institutional critique (Buchloh) to the

pedagogical endeavors presenting viable alternatives to social bureaucratization (Holert); from principles of individual autonomy steeped in aestheticism (Atkinson) to applied ideas of difference (Gillick)—are now threads in the vast fabric of commerce and industry. Regardless of whether these observations provide a measure of the success of May's *enragés* or of their appeasement, they underline art's increased role within the economies of culture more generally—such that our definition of what art *is* should likely be revisited. The potential significance is clear enough. As political philosopher Antonio Negri says in conversation with Sylvère Lotringer, speaking about the aftermath of '68: “It was clear that the relation between work and daily activity had become more intimate.” It is with such refrains in mind that the current issue suggests itself to be a sequel, or coda, to *Artforum's* consideration last month of “Art and Its Markets,” and that lessons for today become apparent even as one reads the stories of May '68 in the spirit of their own time. □

Jean-Luc Godard, *La Chinoise*, 1967, still from a color film in 35 mm, 96 minutes. Guillaume (Jean-Pierre Léaud), © 2008 Koch Lorber Films. Image scan courtesy of the University of California, Berkeley Art Museum and Pacific Film Archive. Special thanks to Hedi El Kholti.



MAY 2008 71

politically charged group shows—opened an exhibition titled *Anti-Baudrillard (Resistance)* at White Columns, an alternative space in the West Village. Less irritated by Baudrillard's writing than by the ways that it was *put to use* in the art world, Group Material confronted the art world's dominant interpretation of *Simulations*, which seemed intent on “disarming the idea of culture as a site of contestation/resistance.”<sup>6</sup> In a pamphlet accompanying the show, the group elaborated, “A theoretical jungle surrounds us. Overgrown from inactivity, this jungle harbours real dangers—the dissolution of history, the disfiguration of any alternative actuality, and the attempt to disown practice. Activism is perceived as illusory in an illusory culture. In this self-imposed confinement art becomes comfortable, criticality becomes style, politics becomes idealism, and ultimately information becomes an impossibility.”<sup>7</sup>

2 — Merlin Carpenter, “The Tail that Wagged the Dog,” in *Canvases and Careers Today: Criticism and its Markets*, ed. Daniel Birnbaum and Isabelle Graw (Berlin: Sternberg Press, 2008), 79–80.

3 — Sylvère Lotringer, “Better Than Life,” *Artforum* (April 2003): 252.

4 — *Ibid.*

5 — *Ibid.*, 253. Jean Baudrillard quoted.

6 — Group Material, “Resistance (Anti-Baudrillard)” Artists' Statement, February 6–28, 1987, in White Columns Digital Archive, [www.whitecolumns.org/archive/index.php/Detail/Object/Show/object\\_id/93](http://www.whitecolumns.org/archive/index.php/Detail/Object/Show/object_id/93).

7 — *Ibid.*

Group Material provoked its audience with images of racism, war, genocide, and organized political protest, restaging in the art world a debate that had long been at play in activist circles over the possibilities for direct political resistance in the context of post-industrial capitalism. The organized left in the United States was notoriously suspicious of the forms of indirect resistance promoted by Semiotext(e), those crafty interventionist practices offered up by the Autonomist Marxists or the Situationist International, which insisted that contestation could be established only within and against existing conditions of domination. Resonating with this broader struggle over the merits of direct action, *Anti-Baudrillard* sketched out a fraught territory upon which definitions of politics and resistance were being worked and reworked and, in the process, exposed two gulfs separating intellectual, art, and activist circles in New York: the first dividing the organized left from the intellectual milieu represented by Semiotext(e), and the second dividing Semiotext(e) from the increasingly market-savvy New York art world.

### ORGANIZED SCHIZOPHRENIA

Group Material's *Anti-Baudrillard* show provoked a well-timed debate about the New York art world's blind infatuation with French theory, asking what Baudrillard's *Simulations* might have had to do with a perceived withdrawal from organized politics at a peak moment in the AIDS epidemic. Two decades later, Tim Griffin shuttled the basic structure of this debate from the outer edges of the New York art world to its symbolic centre by featuring confrontations among artists, theorists, and critics over the role of contemporary art in the project of social emancipation in the city's highest-profile art magazine. When, in November 2009, Griffin used his editorial to foreground cultural geographer David Harvey's frustration with Michael Hardt and Antonio Negri's appeal to abstract concepts over concrete material observations—"Enough of relationalities and immaterialities! How about concrete proposals, actual political organization, and real actions?"<sup>8</sup>—he staged an ideological conflict not unlike *Anti-Baudrillard*, only updated for the art world's "Year of Negri." Yet if we recognize a trace of Group Material's 1987 call to action in Harvey's 2009 quip, we can also sense a contextual mutation; the minor conflict staged between Harvey and Negri is set against a glossy backdrop of commerce and high fashion—a backdrop that was repeatedly cast into relief during Griffin's eight years as editor-in-chief of *Artforum*.

In his "Editor's Letter," Griffin frequently engaged radical theory as it appeared in the magazine. "Where else might a reader find, say, Jacques Rancière alongside an advertisement for Yves Saint Laurent?" he wondered in March 2008, making public what one disgruntled complainant called *Artforum*'s "strangely schizophrenic capitalist Marxism."<sup>9</sup> Griffin

consistently identified, but never resolved, the conflicts that might arise when leftist discourse was published in a forum ostensibly financed, as artist Andrea Fraser reminds us, by the same club of multi-millionaires who most strongly lobby against the redistribution of wealth in the United States.<sup>10</sup> In the pages of Griffin's *Artforum*, theory was made equivalent to art, fashion, and commerce; it appeared not as prophecy, but as yet another sullied document of the strange world we live in.

If, during its first encounter with the French and Italian left, the New York art world latched onto theoretical buzzwords to sell its wares, during its second encounter twenty years later, key terms were clearly not enough. It was as if the art world had learned from the botched Baudrillard affair and discovered that it would need not only the theorist's words but also his compliant body; thinkers such as Bifo, Negri, and Rancière are routinely launched into foreign contexts surrounded by art, fashion, and celebrity, where they are asked to speak on behalf of art and artists. The interesting thing is that rarely—or so it seems—does a theorist today spectacularly forsake his followers as Baudrillard did at the Whitney Museum in 1987. But what might this mean? On a pragmatic level, we have to accept that biennales, art fairs, and art magazines open theory up to new worlds, new audiences who use or misuse it in all sorts of ways, and that this can be good, even helpful, in building a broad public discourse on contemporary capitalism—especially when faced with the irreversible metamorphosis of our universities into factories of knowledge. But on another level, if we view the collision of radical theory and contemporary art as a symptom of our social reality, it may reveal a broader crisis that affects the world of theory as it does the world of art: the encroachment of the market on all aspects of our lives and work. Capitalism's colonization of everyday life was predicted by many of the thinkers translated by Semiotext(e) in its earliest years. But what was seen as so much science fiction upon its first release—as Lotringer reminds us at every turn—has turned out to be very real indeed, and the call to write within and against now applies to the theorists and their interlocutors in our own conditions of dependency. Faced with the changing shape of our knowledge economy, perhaps we need to think about radical theory not only on its own terms but also in view of the insatiable demand for novelty and repackaged thought that has led to the current juncture. ●

8 — David Harvey, quoted in Tim Griffin, "Action and Abstraction," *Artforum* (November 2009): 47.

9 — Tim Griffin, "Social Realities," *Artforum* (March 2008), 73.

10 — Andrea Fraser, "L'1% C'est Moi," *Texte zur Kunst* 83 (September 2011): 122.



Pendant plus de six minutes, à l'été 2009, Glenn Beck a occupé les ondes en agitant un petit livre bleu, implorant son auditoire de le lire sans tarder. Pour le gourou de *Fox News*, il s'agissait d'un livre important, dangereux, un appel aux armes pour la gauche radicale, un manifeste révolutionnaire pour le 21<sup>e</sup> siècle<sup>1</sup>. Le livre en question, version anglaise de *L'Insurrection qui vient* du Comité invisible, venait à peine d'être traduit anonymement par un groupe d'artistes et d'intellectuels de New York ; il était publié par Semiotext(e), la maison d'édition connue pour avoir branché la scène artistique new-yorkaise, au début des années 1980, sur des penseurs comme Jean Baudrillard, Gilles Deleuze et Félix Guattari, Franco « Bifo » Berardi et Antonio Negri. L'exhortation improbable de G. Beck à lire *L'Insurrection qui vient* dramatise une opposition entre deux camps idéologiques et, ce faisant, nous force à réfléchir à la façon dont quelques-uns des penseurs européens parmi les plus radicaux ont débarqué en Amérique, dans certains cas hors contexte, dans d'autres, avec des dizaines d'années de retard. Le plus récent succès de scandale de Semiotext(e) commande également un bilan de ce marché intellectuel à la fois étrange et instable qui a jailli en marge du courant dominant.

## Prestigieux décalage

Steve Lyons

Nul doute que le mode de diffusion de la théorie radicale issue de la gauche française et italienne a évolué au cours des dernières années. Avec le marché en expansion des traductions anglaises de ce qu'on appelle « les théories de l'après-68 », bon nombre de théoriciens du politique issus des mouvements étudiants de Mai 1968 se sont retrouvés dans la ronde planétaire des foires, biennales et revues qui façonnent le monde de l'art. C'est ainsi que Jacques Rancière a parlé d'art et de politique à la foire Frieze, que Bifo roule sa bosse sur le circuit des biennales de Kiev à Kassel et à Montréal, que Semiotext(e) figurait *comme artiste invité* à la Biennale du musée Whitney en 2014, et qu'*Artforum* a consacré des numéros entiers à l'héritage de Mai 68. Dans cet article, j'entends démêler l'un des nœuds de cette histoire d'amour entre l'art et la théorie. En observant la propagation de la théorie radicale façon Semiotext(e) dans les pages d'*Artforum* depuis dix ans, je m'interroge sur les raisons qui pourraient expliquer qu'une revue connue surtout pour son épaisseur et le luxe de ses publicités pour grands couturiers et galeries d'art commerciales bien cotées ait eu la pique Semiotext(e), et ce que cette association nous dit des conditions actuelles dans lesquelles travaillent les théoriciens.

### ENGOUEMENT

Partons d'un simple constat : depuis dix ans, le monde de l'art connaît un vif intérêt pour la culture protestataire anticapitaliste des années 60 et 70, et pour les philosophes européens qui l'ont influencée. *Artforum*, à l'instar de magazines comme *Texte zur Kunst* et, plus récemment, *May Revue*, a bien instruit son lectorat sur cette vogue intellectuelle. Mais quand le mouvement s'est-il amorcé ? Selon l'artiste britannique Merlin Carpenter, tout a commencé en 2003, quand Tim Griffin, jeune critique d'art formé en littérature comparée, a été nommé rédacteur en chef d'*Artforum*, une revue qui prenait à l'époque le tournant de la théorie *soft*<sup>2</sup>. Sous la garde de Griffin, *Artforum* s'est métamorphosée en carrefour où les nouveaux opus des philosophes français et italiens de la gauche radicale faisaient l'objet de discussions, voire de débats, tant pour leur intérêt intrinsèque que pour leur relation avec le discours sur l'art contemporain.

Entre 2006 et 2009, *Artforum* a consacré des dossiers au travail de Guy Debord, de Jacques Rancière, de Paolo Virno et d'Antonio Negri, le plus souvent en formant des binômes entre artistes et critiques qui signaient des articles sur la pertinence toujours actuelle de ces philosophes, dont ils citaient les ouvrages les plus récents ou les plus importants. En publiant coup sur coup des numéros thématiques sur la révolution, la protestation et le patrimoine commun, la revue a orchestré un dialogue entre l'art contemporain et le discours radical, à un moment où la spéculation dans le marché de l'art semblait quasi inséparable du gout du risque qui était mis en avant dans un marché financier de plus en plus instable. Mais qu'est-ce qui a poussé les collaborateurs et les éditeurs d'*Artforum* à entrevoir une subversion radicale du pouvoir politique à ce moment précis de l'histoire ? La promotion de Tim Griffin au poste de rédacteur en chef et la popularisation subséquente des théories de l'après-68 dans *Artforum* signifient-elles que les initiés du monde de l'art avaient un urgent besoin de rajuster leurs programmes politiques, après dix années de mondialisation et de croissance économique soutenue ? Les écrits de Debord, Negri, Rancière et Virno n'auraient-ils pas plutôt servi d'emballage et d'arguments de vente aux tendances artistiques les plus récentes ?

On pourrait soutenir que les théoriciens mis en valeur dans *Artforum* pendant le mandat de rédacteur de Griffin avaient un projet en commun – une affinité intellectuelle, à tout le moins – puisqu'ils s'efforçaient de définir les limites de la critique en contexte de capitalisme post-industriel. Mais ce qui frappe sans doute davantage est que, à l'exception de Rancière, ils aient tous été édités à la même enseigne. En effet, les théoriciens qui occupaient le devant de la

1 — Voir Glenn Beck, « The One Thing: The Coming Insurrection », vidéo de la chaîne Fox News, 6 min 55 s, 1<sup>er</sup> juillet 2009, <http://youtube/ZKyI2qNskJc> [consulté le 3 mars 2015].

2 — Merlin Carpenter, « The Tail that Wagged the Dog », dans Daniel Birnbaum et Isabelle Graw (dir.), *Canvases and Careers Today: Criticism and its Markets*, Berlin, Sternberg Press, 2008, p. 79-80.

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## Theoretical Physic

TIM GRIFFIN

**LAST MONTH**, I was invited to participate in a roundtable celebrating the legacy of Semiotext(e)—that small press begun in 1974 and responsible for introducing so many European theorists to American readers—on the occasion of its archives' donation to Yale Library at New York University. My prescribed task was straightforward enough: to discuss the imprint's influence on art during the past three decades. As luck would have it, however, I fell victim to a fit, and so instead of conveying my thoughts to an assembled audience, I found myself rambling on the subject at home in bed, the gentle delirium of my fever searingly echoed and amplified by the swirling gusts of winter's last storm outside.

Perhaps there was something fitting about this psychological correspondence, though. Over the years, I've been struck by the claim—made repeatedly by the press's founding editor, Sylvère Lotringer—that the intellectual models proposed by the theorists (Semiotext(e) first brought notice to us—Baudrillard, Deleuze and Guattari, Foucault) came off as so much science fiction in Europe but were the stuff of everyday life in the United States. As Lotringer wrote in these pages in 2003, Deleuze may have theorized schizo-culture and the flows of capital at the University of Paris VIII, but such postulations were validated only by the dynamics of real estate and the cultural economies of New York decades ago, bearing out my window last month, then, I thought that any stocktaking of Semiotext(e)'s influence on art must account for the ways in which its philosophers have rendered ideas experiential—or even theatrical. How else should one consider the example of Baudrillard, whose *Simulations* (1983) had the effect of reflecting the art-world system back on itself? Through his very choice of and topics, he demonstrated how art—by virtue of its unique matrix of symbolic and economic capital—constantly demands and then pivots even newer forms and fashions of philosophical authority. “The art world was looking for a prophet,” Lotringer observed, “and [Baudrillard] gave them one.”

Yet the question of “influence” as it was formulated by the NYU panel's organizers suggests that the answer here is a historical one and, by extension, implies that the time for theoretical discourse has passed—out, at the very least, that critical theory as an active force is on the wane. Is this the case? Certainly, there are formidable observations to that effect in the current issue. In a group of texts devoted to Claude Lévi-Strauss, for instance, art historian Thomas Crow

conventional wisdom apart, suggesting that things are not necessarily what they seem. (And it is only through the rigorous application of such an overarching structure, as Crow concludes, that we can glimpse in the objects of art a “higher and wider plane of existence.”)

It was this point toward larger questions about the everyday contours of art—in elemental, living structures—that likely made Baudrillard's spittle in art most worthwhile. By making art share its own critical



Ben Baudrillard giving a Whitney Museum of American Art Disrupted Lecture on Simulation and Culture, April 1987, New York, 1987. Photo: Warren Friedman

notes that the late anthropologist's writing “brings home the core importance that structuralist thinking still bears for any systematic understanding of the visual arts that would go beyond the fragmented cases and anecdotes that have become the art-historical norm.” Taking note of this somewhat daunting assessment of the contemporary field, an editor cannot help but think warily of canoned references to philosophers in any number of art-critical texts either seeking the shreds of involvement or performing tactical maneuvers on the page. While situating theories of previous eras were themselves problematic in their monolithic character, at least they were theories, propositions pring

visible ways in which art seizes—and then sometimes craves, or is too willing to believe—in its own answers. But his was only a part of a far larger project, and in considering what critical theory's role was decades ago, it is essential to read such provocative gestures (and the underlying impulse toward inducing instability) in tandem with other journals converging at roughly the same time as Semiotext(e), such as *October* and *Screen*. They took a quite different approach—how could it have been otherwise, given Lotringer's theory-in-life predilection for extended interviews with philosophers in pocket-size bookshacking rooms for footnotes—but from our vantage now they seem co-conspirators of a sort, even odd bedfellows: potential adversaries that nevertheless shared the same analytic concerns. (To borrow a formulation from Lévi-Strauss, the traits are reversed, perhaps, but the meaning is conserved.)

And their collective project demands, even in these inopportune times, renewed consideration of theory's place in contemporary art. For the fecundity of the mass of ideas they produced ensures that they cannot long lie dormant, and so those earlier constructs occupy, again, a recent place in our culture. Indeed, sifting through or simply considering the decades-old artifacts of these publications—such as the archives recently deposited at NYU—is tempted to cite another author in these pages, Mark von Schlegel: “Hunted in the decay of the public square in brilliant covers once plumed, the paperback revolution rests comfortably inside deteriorating human habitations.” □

APRIL 2010 88

scène dans *Artforum* étaient précisément ceux qui avaient été introduits en Amérique vingt ans plus tôt par Sylvère Lotringer, lequel, à titre de premier rédacteur en chef de Semiotext(e), avait fait circuler, aidé d'un réseau étroitement lié d'artistes, de réalisateurs, de propriétaires de clubs et de groupies, les nouvelles traductions de la gauche française et italienne dans les cercles artistiques de SoHo. Et de fait, les nombreux écrivains et traducteurs formant le clan élargi de Semiotext(e) – les John Kelsey, Chris Kraus, Liz Kotz, Eileen Myles, Gerald Raunig, Mark von Schlegel, Jason E. Smith et Lynn Tillman, sans oublier Lotringer lui-même – se sont aussi mis à publier des articles de fond, des comptes rendus, des appréciations artistiques et des palmarès dans *Artforum* pendant l'ère Griffin. De là à y voir une sorte de mainmise de Semiotext(e) sur *Artforum*, il n'y a qu'un pas. Et sans grande surprise, on apprendra aussi que Griffin avait été étudiant de Lotringer à l'Université Columbia à la fin des années 80, et stagiaire chez Semiotext(e) au tournant des années 90.

SECOND  
ENGOUEMENT

Ce n'était pas la première fois qu'*Artforum* s'entichait de Semiotext(e). Vingt ans auparavant, dans une période assez semblable d'extrême croissance économique, Semiotext(e) était tombée dans l'œil du milieu de l'art new-yorkais grâce à l'un des premiers ouvrages qu'elle publiait dans sa collection « Foreign Agents » : *Simulations*, de Jean Baudrillard, paru en 1983 (traduction de *Simulacres et simulation*, 1981).

La conjoncture était parfaite. Au début des années 1980, les artistes, critiques, commissaires d'exposition et marchands d'art savaient déjà que, moyennant quelques torsions, le poststructuralisme français dans son opacité linguistique devenait un outil de mise en marché efficace pour l'art contemporain. Dans un milieu qui « était toujours à l'affut d'idées », selon Lotringer, le livre de Baudrillard est devenu incontournable parce qu'il conférait « une aura théorique à ce qui était, pour l'essentiel, une ouverture astucieuse de l'art vers l'industrie des médias et de la publicité<sup>3</sup> ». Cette « astucieuse ouverture » avait pour nom *art d'appropriation*, et son principe fondateur, selon lequel un artiste peut critiquer la publicité commerciale et la culture de masse en simulant des stratégies mises au point dans le domaine du commerce, reposait sur une compréhension au premier degré de *Simulacres et simulation*. Des références trompeuses à cet ouvrage sont apparues presque aussitôt dans les revues d'art, les communiqués de presse et les textes des catalogues; tout se passait comme si le seul nom de Baudrillard procurait à l'œuvre d'art sa pertinence contemporaine. À l'automne 1984, Baudrillard figurait sur la liste des collaborateurs à la rédaction d'*Artforum*, un titre qu'il a conservé jusqu'en 1986. Le seul problème, c'est que le philosophe n'avait jamais entendu parler d'*Artforum*<sup>4</sup>.

3 — Sylvère Lotringer, « Better Than Life », *Artforum* (avril 2003), p. 252. [Trad. libre]

4 — Ibid.

† *Artforum*, Avril | April 2010, p. 38-39.

Photo : © Artforum

## Group Material

→ *Resistance: Anti Baudrillard*, 1987, White Columns, New York.

Photo : Ken Schles, permission de | courtesy of Group Material





## « Ailleurs qu'ici, où le lecteur a-t-il des chances, disons, de voir côte à côte Jacques Rancière et une pub pour Yves Saint Laurent ? »

Tim Griffin

L'affaire Baudrillard avait l'allure d'un fantasme adolescent : unilatéral et, de toute évidence, sans avenir. En 1987, quand Baudrillard a été invité à prononcer une conférence devant une salle comble au Whitney Museum of American Art, il a bien dû faire face à ses disciples. Quand on lui a demandé ce qu'il pensait des artistes et des critiques qu'il inspirait, il a répondu : « Il ne peut pas y avoir d'école simulationniste... parce que le simulacre ne peut pas être représenté. Il s'agit d'une incompréhension totale de ce que j'ai écrit<sup>5</sup>. » En conjonction avec la présence du philosophe à New York, Group Material, un collectif d'artistes new-yorkais connu pour mettre en scène des expositions de groupe à forte connotation politique, inaugurerait *Anti-Baudrillard (Resistance)* à White Columns, une salle parallèle de West Village. Moins irrité par les écrits de Baudrillard que par les différentes façons dont ils étaient *mis en application* dans le monde de l'art, Group Material défait l'interprétation de *Simulacres et simulation* qui avait cours dans ce milieu et qui semblait vouloir délibérément « neutraliser l'idée que la culture est un lieu de contestation et de résistance<sup>6</sup> ». Dans la brochure accompagnant le spectacle, le groupe précisait son point de vue : « Nous sommes cernés par une jungle théorique. L'inactivité en a fait une forêt inextricable qui couve de réels dangers : la dissolution de l'histoire, la défiguration de toute réalité divergente, le désaveu intentionnel de la pratique. L'activisme est considéré comme illusoire dans une culture illusoire. Dans ce confinement auto-imposé, l'art se fait confortable, la critique est un style, la politique, un idéalisme et, ultimement, l'information devient une impossibilité<sup>7</sup>. »

Group Material provoquait son public avec des images de racisme, de guerre et de génocide, et organisait des manifestations à caractère politique. Le groupe déplaçait dans le monde de l'art un débat en cours depuis longtemps dans les cercles activistes, au sujet du potentiel de la résistance politique directe dans le contexte du capitalisme postindustriel. Aux États-Unis, la gauche organisée était notamment suspicieuse des formes de résistance *indirecte* promues par Semiotext(e) – ces interventions ingénieuses conçues par les marxistes du mouvement automatiste ou l'Internationale situationniste, qui insistaient sur le fait que la contestation ne pouvait s'implanter qu'à l'intérieur des conditions de domination existantes, et *contre* elles. En phase avec le débat plus large quant aux mérites de l'action directe, *Anti-Baudrillard* traçait les contours d'un territoire périlleux sur lequel les définitions du politique et de la résistance étaient constamment modelées et remodelées et, ce faisant, mettait au jour deux gouffres séparant les cercles intellectuels, artistiques et activistes de New York : le premier entre la gauche organisée et le milieu intellectuel représenté par Semiotext(e), le second entre Semiotext(e) et la scène artistique new-yorkaise de plus en plus rompue à la logique du marché.

## SCHIZOPHRÉNIE ORGANISÉE

L'exposition *Anti-Baudrillard* de Group Material lançait à point nommé un débat sur l'engouement aveugle du milieu artistique new-yorkais pour la *French Theory*, en demandant si *Simulations* avait pu influencer ce qui était perçu comme un retrait de la politique organisée au moment où l'épidémie de sida atteignait un point culminant. Vingt ans plus tard, Tim Griffin déplaçait l'ossature du débat des marges du milieu artistique de New York vers son centre symbolique, en consacrant les pages de sa plus prestigieuse revue d'art à des confrontations entre artistes, théoriciens et critiques au sujet du rôle de l'art contemporain dans le projet d'émancipation sociale. Quand, en novembre 2009, Griffin s'est servi de son éditorial pour mettre en avant la frustration du géographe culturel David Harvey à l'égard de Michael Hardt et d'Antonio Negri, qui prônaient l'usage de concepts abstraits plutôt que d'observations matérielles concrètes (« Assez de relationnalités et d'immatérialités ! À quand les propositions concrètes, la véritable organisation politique et les actions réelles<sup>8</sup> ? »), il n'a fait qu'actualiser un conflit idéologique similaire à *Anti-Baudrillard* en lui donnant la saveur du jour – dans le monde de l'art new-yorkais, c'était « l'année Negri ». Cependant, si l'on reconnaît dans la pique lancée par Harvey en 2009 une trace de l'appel à l'action formulé en 1987 par Group Material, on perçoit aussi une mutation contextuelle ; le conflit plutôt mineur mis en scène entre Harvey et Negri se déploie sur l'arrière-plan somptueux du commerce et de la haute couture, un arrière-plan omniprésent pendant les huit années où Griffin a tenu les rênes d'*Artforum*.

Dans son éditorial, Griffin se colletait régulièrement avec la question de la théorie radicale exposée dans la revue. « Ailleurs qu'ici, où le lecteur a-t-il des chances, disons, de voir côte à côte Jacques Rancière et une pub pour Yves Saint Laurent ? », demandait-il en mars 2008, dévoilant publiquement ce qu'un mécontent avait surnommé « le marxisme capitaliste étrangement schizophrène<sup>9</sup> » d'*Artforum*. Griffin a montré de façon récurrente, sans jamais le résoudre, le conflit susceptible de s'élever quand un discours gauchiste est publié dans un lieu soi-disant financé, comme nous le rappelle l'artiste Andrea Fraser, par le même club de multimillionnaires qui militent le plus ardemment contre la redistribution de la richesse aux États-Unis<sup>10</sup>. Dans les pages d'*Artforum*, sous la houlette de Griffin, la théorie était placée sur le même pied que l'art, la mode et le commerce ; elle y figurait non pas comme une prophétie, mais comme un témoignage souillé – encore un – de l'étrangeté du monde dans lequel nous vivons.

Si, lors de sa première rencontre avec la gauche française et italienne, la scène artistique new-yorkaise avait compté sur tout un jargon néologique pour vendre sa marchandise, vingt ans plus tard, les mots-clés ne suffisaient plus. Un peu comme si le monde de l'art avait tiré une leçon de l'affaire Baudrillard et découvert que



read aloud by a friend in English. When the lecture was over, members of Lyndee LaRoche's Labor Committee instantly created havoc by denouncing Foucault (and Laing) as undercover CIA agents. In this climate, *Semiotext(e)* came into being as a cultural venture, and not just a semiotic outfit. With "Schizo-Culture," I became estranged from the university, but it drew me closer to SoHo and downtown circles. I started interviewing artists like Jack Smith, Philip Glass, Steve Reich, Robert Wilson, Lee Breuer, and Douglas Dunn in *Semiotext(e)*—which served the double purpose of creating material for the magazine and making artists talk theory without their knowing it, giving me a new territory in which to work. The original editors began departing for various campuses throughout the country, and the new committee replacing them was made up of non-academics. *Semiotext(e)*'s publication of "Georges Bataille" (1976), "Anti-Oedipus" (1977), and especially "Nietzsche's Return" (1976)—which featured texts by Derrida, Cagde, Deleuze, Foucault, and Kenneth Surin—attracted artists, a number of whom showed up one day at my office at Columbia offering their services to design the magazine. Pat Steir, Michael Olowu, Kathryn Bigelow, Denise Green, Diego Cortez, and Martin De Avillez signed on, with the idea that a different editor would conceive each issue and, with the designers, execute every single element, from typefaces to visuals, column size to commissioning. Everything would contribute to the topic at hand. In 1978, we



released the issue on art and madness, "Schizo-Culture #1," a modified version of the conference. It sold out in three weeks. But that immediate embrace was a warning that caused me to set a different course for *Semiotext(e)* during the "Sex Success" as a sign that the group was becoming closed and too dependent on the opinion of art institutions. (Guattari had written extensively on art and subverted groups, and I had thought a great deal about the concept.) A magazine like *Semiotext(e)* couldn't afford to be in the position of fulfilling an audience's expectations; it could only create new ones. So I cancelled a second "Schizo-Culture" issue, which had already been in the making, and subsequent issues were committed to shifting ground, to keeping everybody on their toes, deliberately losing some of the audience while gaining new readers. The first issue to follow, "Italy: Autonomist Post-Political Politics" (1980), investigated the Italian mass movement that had been extending the project of 1968 by reinventing the thizome politically across ideological divides, extending from the postmodernist wing in Bologna to the "Volk" collective—Marxist troglodytes with whom I squatted for a while in Rome, researching for the magazine. (The latter occasionally expressed their political frustrations by bombing at night.) Bologna was Autonomist like Franco Berardi, aka "Bifo," who created the famous neo-Dada free radio "Radio Alice," were fascinated by techno-intelligence and its potential for popular



resistance. They advocated, for instance, replacing street barricades with the old-fashioned confrontations with the police) with more abstract obstacles, like tinkering with traffic signals throughout the city to create a new traffic jam. At the time, Autonomia had been almost crushed by the unlikely conjunction of the Communist Party, the Christian-Democratic government, and the Red Brigades; most of its original leaders were in jail. *Semiotext(e)* mirrored the attention of the American Left to their plight, but the response was disappointing. No one dated their movement. So, wondering whether Foucault's "Schizo-Culture" assertions about the anarchic politics of academic radicals had been right after all, we immediately shifted focus to another topic that would make academics uncomfortable: sex. The "Polysexual" issue (1981), instead of exploring gender, exploded every classification, creating ad hoc categories that defied any kind of exclusion—soft sex, corporate sex, liquid sex. Magazines dealing with sexuality typically include erotic pictures, so we deliberately featured none, offering only grainy photos of death-wish and death-drive catastrophes lifted from the press. The two cover images—a leather biker driving his bike, bare-assed, on the front, and a member of a riot of an already decomposing mass that impaled on a huge dildo, on the back—were just such pictures. The at-once too public and too private aspects of madman sex appeared together.

IN *SEMIOTEXT(E)*, WE BOUNDED THEORY against other primary material—pictures, interviews, and all kinds of "documents"—lifted straight from American culture. We wanted to avoid secondhand commentaries and so stimulate thinking in a different way, eliciting perceptual or pragmatic connections, something the previous decade's arties had simply called "getting the information." In other words, the publication operated on the model of "percepts," uninflected blocks of sense and sensations that don't have to be quoted or worn on one's sleeve, but rather act directly on one's sensibility and generate other projects. When I traveled to Berlin in

1984 to collaborate with Peter Gente and Heidi Paris, publishers of Merve Verlag, on "The German Issue"—which looked at the American "colonization" of the country after World War II—I discovered a different approach to that end. Gente and Paris were editing small books by the same authors as *Semiotext(e)*, and, knowing that the major American publishers weren't interested in Continental philosophy, I adopted this format in creating the Foreign Agents series of books. The explicit purpose was to finally present theory *first* to America, just like champagne. Why have sparkling wine when you can get the real bubbly? The first agents were unleashed in 1985—Deleuze and Guattari, Paul Virilio, and Jean Baudrillard—and the product was as American as a foreign project could be. The books were small, black, and thin; footnotes or other academic commentary were conspicuously absent. They could be read on the subway, a few pages at a time, like the newspaper: their place was in the pockets of spined leather jackets as much as on the shelves. Indeed, critics would often go out of their way to avoid quoting from them, returning to the original French texts or to more authoritative

sources, as if there were something truly wrong with the volumes. They had a sleek, covert look and feel that happened to mesh with that moment of New York City perfectly, seeming to reflect the New World Order's aesthetic: hard and portable, compact and cost effective. They were light, but moving at light-speed, never giving the sense that one had time to slow down and scratch one's head—they were already headed somewhere else. The books were also like cumulative time bombs gradually released over the course of a decade, often absorbed at different moments and for different reasons than I would have expected. Deleuze and Guattari's *On the Line*, which included their essay "Rhizome," wasn't read widely until the end of the 1980s—by which time French theory, from Derrida's deconstruction to Lacanian psychoanalysis, had run its course in the art world and the academy. And so the pair's ultimate reception in the United States had less to do with leftism

positions than with the early days of the Internet, which their theories of the thizome, a decentered, reversible model, uncannily anticipated. (The misreading was somewhat ironic, given that the Internet originally derived from a military technology intended to offset the effects of nuclear explosions.) A similar depolitization occurred with Paul Virilio, whose name I had first heard mentioned among the Autonomists. It wasn't primarily his obsession with war that first caught on in America but his stunning extrapolations of the disappearance of space and the effects of "real-time" communication on contemporary reality. Americans reading Virilio's *War War* overlooked his dire predic-

tion and instead saw his work positively and programmatically, as an exciting blueprint for the coming "post-human" age. Oddly enough, the first "bubbly" was Baudrillard, whose own politics were incredibly erratic. Like every French intellectual in good standing from Roland Barthes on, he started on the Left. In fact, Baudrillard's two books that had already appeared in America, *The Mirror of Production* and *A Critique of the Political Economy of the Sign*, were published by the Telos Press, a Frankfurt School-minded house in New York. Eventually, however, his attacks on the "Divine Left" (mostly the French Communist Party) won him support on the Right—which he lost quickly by embracing America, a country that fascinated him because, unlike France, it had no history or intellectual hang-ups. America was Utopia realized: hyperreality on a cosmic scale. (Indeed, although Baudrillard and Virilio were on opposite poles "ideologically"—Virilio wanted more reality and Baudrillard wanted none—their work overlapped in America, where a vision of the "team-political" began to take form.) Still, Baudrillard was an extrapolator, not the nihilist that most people in France believed him to be. At worst, he was an agent provocateur, poking his adversaries and then stepping aside to let them hang themselves on their own guitar strings (power was a black hole that one should always let others occupy). At best, he was a poet and metaphysician, straining his

**THE FOREIGN AGENTS BOOKS WERE SMALL, BLACK, AND THIN. THEY COULD BE READ ON THE SUBWAY LIKE THE NEWSPAPER; THEIR PLACE WAS IN THE POCKETS OF SPINED LEATHER JACKETS AS MUCH AS ON THE SHELVES.**



Left to right: Cover of "Italy: Autonomist Post-Political Politics" (Semiotext(e), 1980); Cover of "Sex Success" (Semiotext(e), 1978); Cover of "Semiotext(e) Special: Large Type Series: Limited Run" (Semiotext(e), Summer 1981).

Artforum, Avril | April 2003, p. 196-197. Photo : © Artforum

les mots ne suffisaient pas, que le philosophe devait en plus être consentant; et des penseurs comme Bifo, Negri et Rancière sont régulièrement lancés sur les routes étrangères de l'art, de la mode et de la célébrité, où on leur demande de prendre la parole au nom de l'art et des artistes. La chose intéressante, c'est que rarement – en apparence, du moins – un théoricien rejette-t-il ses adeptes aussi spectaculairement que l'a fait Baudrillard au musée Whitney, en 1987. Qu'est-ce que cela peut bien vouloir dire? Sur le plan pragmatique, on ne peut nier que les biennales, les foires et les revues d'art ouvrent à la théorie des cercles et des publics nouveaux, qui *en usent ou en abusent* de toutes sortes de façons, et que cela peut être bon, voire utile à la construction d'un discours grand public sur le capitalisme contemporain – eu égard, notamment, à la métamorphose irréversible de nos universités en usines à connaissances. Mais sur un autre plan, si l'on considère le conflit entre la théorie radicale et l'art contemporain comme un symptôme de notre réalité sociale, il révèle peut-être une crise plus vaste affectant le monde des idées comme elle affecte le monde de l'art : l'empiètement du marché sur tous les aspects de nos vies et de notre travail. Nombre des philosophes traduits par Semiotext(e) à ses débuts avaient prédit la colonisation de la vie quotidienne par le capitalisme. Mais ce qui passait pour de la science-fiction quand on en a parlé la première fois – Lotringer nous le rappelle à la moindre occasion – est devenu finalement très réel, et l'injonction d'écrire à l'intérieur des conditions de dépendance et *contre* elles concerne aujourd'hui les théoriciens de notre propre milieu et leurs interlocuteurs. Devant

les mutations qui affectent notre économie du savoir, le temps est venu de réfléchir à la théorie radicale non seulement pour elle-même, mais également à la lumière du désir insatiable de renouveler et de relouer la pensée qui nous a conduits à la conjoncture actuelle.

Traduit de l'anglais par **Sophie Chisogne**

- 5 — Jean Baudrillard, cité dans *ibid.*, p. 253. [Trad. libre]
- 6 — Group Material, «Resistance (Anti-Baudrillard)» Artists' Statement», du 6 au 28 février 1987, dans les archives numériques de White Columns, [www.whitecolumns.org/archive/index.php/Detail/Object/Show/object\\_id/93](http://www.whitecolumns.org/archive/index.php/Detail/Object/Show/object_id/93). [Trad. libre]
- 7 — *Ibid.* [Trad. libre]
- 8 — David Harvey, cité par Tim Griffin, «Action and Abstraction», *Artforum* (novembre 2009), p. 47. [Trad. libre]
- 9 — Tim Griffin, «Social Realities», *Artforum* (mars 2008), p. 73. [Trad. libre]
- 10 — Andrea Fraser, «L'1 % C'est Moi», *Texte zur Kunst*, n° 83 (septembre 2011), p. 122.