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Does Neoism Exist?

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"Each decade has Neoists and their situation is always different. We formed a network to revolt against oppression, and we hope that our efforts will end with big retrospective exhibitions in the world's most established museums, because we know that each revolution ends with the imprisonment and execution of its leaders and participants." [1] (Monty Cantsin)

The Contact Man

The Copper Grill, close to the London Liverpool Street Station, is a cheap steak restaurant in the style of the fifties and has presumably not been renovated since that time. The establishment derives its charm from the red plastic upholstery and chrome. It was here that I had agreed to meet with Stewart Home. The restaurant slowly began filling up with managers from the surrounding offices. It was lunch time.

Stewart Home is not only the successful author of Redskin pulp novels, which are largely composed of sampled scenes of violence and porno. He is, most of all, the speaker and sole member of the Neoist Alliance, a Neoist fraction that separated from the main strand of Neoism in 1986. In his most recent novel, Slow Death,

he conjoins both. In Slow Death, the trendy artist Karen Eliot founds a secret lodge called the Semiotic Liberation Front with the aim of smuggling Neoism into art history. She employs the skinhead Johnny Aggro as contact man. He instructs the members of the lodge: "Your Lodge must study Neoism and do everything to promote the movement. Also, my masters want you to begin a campaign of vandalising statues and sculptures." [2] I wait.

Fifteen minutes late, the Neoist Alliance enters the Copper Grill, embodied by Stewart Home, who appears in Slow Death himself as Bob Jones. The Neoist Alliance alias Stewart Home alias Bob Jones alias Karen Eliot sits down, orders tea, and shoves a plastic bag with unidentifiable contents across the table. In addition to Slow Death and Red London, I pull the "Neoism, Plagiarism & Praxis" reader out of it, the Neoist Manifestos and Art Strike papers, Home's history of the post-war avant-garde "The Assault on Culture", the collection of Black Mask material that he edited, and a series of copied and stapled paraphernalia with titles like "Analecta" or "Disputations. On Art, Anarchism and Assholism". I was already familiar with most of it.

The conversation soon turns to not yet published or at least not yet edited material. Stewart Home sips his tea. Should I want more material, he tells me, I would probably be best off in the Tate Gallery Library or in the National Art Gallery of the Victoria & Albert Museum. There I should contact one of the curators, Simon Ford. He has allegedly been of great service in archiving Neoist material that has been passed to the museums through the Neoists. Sometimes something has even been purchased. Pete Horobin, the earliest English Neoist, is also reputed to possess an extensive collection and is additionally capable of counterfeiting required material at any time.

After an hour, Home indicates that he must take his leave. He says he has a sound studio for a few days, where he is working on sound experiments for his readings, and he has to take advantage of the time he has there. We pay and leave the Copper Grill. Chrome flashes behind us. From the Copper Grill, I go to the Victoria & Albert Museum to check on Home's suggestions. In the tube, I begin to have doubts -- and vague memories. Premonitions. Had I not been through all that before? Or read it? I pull out Slow Death and browse through it.

Slow Death

On page 31, Karen Eliot meets with the Marxist art critic Jock Graham in a pub in Camden. She explains to him that in addition to money and fame, her main interest is in historification processes. At Eliot's suggestion, Jock Graham makes his way to the National Art Library and begins researching Neoism.

On page 47, Karen Eliot meets with the head of the "Progressive Arts Project", Sir Charles Brewster, at Monmouth Coffee Shop in Covent Garden. She arrives late. Together they think about how Neoism could be publicized using money from the project. Brewster notes that Neoism is custom-made for historification because of its avant-garde link: "Neoism is an art critic's wet dream!"

On page 52, Eliot gives a talk at the CIA (Home's anagram for the ICA) on "Neoism and the Avant-Garde of the 1980s". In response to a question from the audience about where the best archive sources on Neoism are to be found, she says: "You'll find basic materials are lodged with the Tate Gallery Library and the National Art Library. Between them, these two institutions hold most of

the books and magazines you'll need to consult. To do really detailed research, you'll need to get in touch with individual members of the movement. As far as British Neoists are concerned, Pete Horobin and Bob Jones have the most extensive collections of material."

On page 91, the Semiotic Liberation Front swarms out to track down Neoist material. Not unsurprisingly: British Library, Tate Gallery, National Art Library. In the latter, a member of the SLF meets Jock Graham again, who has meanwhile decided to write a history of Neoism, which will rank him alongside such giants as Winckelmann and Ruskin, who changed the course of art history. And so forth.

Fiction or Fucking Up

In an interview with the V & A curator Simon Ford in 1994, Home already announced a novel about the historicization of Neoism: he considered that it would be appropriate for the Neoist historicization process to be published first as fiction, before too many art historians seize on Neoism by themselves. Home thus maintained that fiction must precede science in time (Slow Death is therefore a kind of pulp version of the Lacanian thesis that truth is structured like a fiction. And it is consequently stated in Slow Death: "`Truth is a fiction!' Karen barked. `People who want hard facts will have to make do with fabrications!'" [3]) It is an assertion, with which Home risks repelling the "serious" historians, on whom he is in fact dependent with his historification process. And he even defends himself against accusations of selling out from the ranks of fundamentalist Neoists with the argument that they simply did not recognize that it was precisely by playing with

open cards, and precisely with his sledgehammer self-historification that he repelled "real" historians.

So should we read Home's endeavors to heave Neoism into the canon of art history as a practical reflection, as the cognitive counterpart, so to speak, of a practical joke - a joke on the "art-historicization" of the avant-garde, and less as a serious attempt at self-historification? As cheerful fiction and less as science? Or is Home in fact carrying out a variation on the fact that the so-called serious art canon actually constructs and fictionalizes its subjects to the same extent, but far less openly and playfully? The fact, however, that history is not written once and for all time according to positivist criteria of alleged evidence is proven by the case of Fluxus and its sudden overwhelming presence since the retrospective at the 1990 Biennale, or the case of Situationism and the flood of publications, translations and new editions.

From the beginning, Neoism was not exactly the logical candidate for a box seat in the art history of the 80s. Its (mostly male) followers stem from so-called marginal milieus, only in rare cases from art colleges. Its greatest historification success so far has been an entry in the Glossary of Art, Architecture and Design Since 1945. Home himself had to lend a hand in smuggling Neoism into his own history of the post-war avant-garde, The Assault on Culture, and place it in a venerable succession from Lettrism to MailArt.

Research and Fake

Regardless of the question of whether art history can ever be written "neutrally", the starting point for an even halfway objective description of Neoism is strikingly unfavorable, if not even

practically impossible. This makes Neoism an interesting extreme case and thus a test case. Neoism itself practically leaps into the face of a "correct" representation. In preparing this book, I received a number of offers from Neoists that they could fake and predate Neoist works and materials as needed. This uninhibited way of dealing with their own history is not at all kept secret, nor does it have anything to do with plagiarism or appropriationism (what they fake are their own works), but rather is located within the manifest Neoist philosophy: if every history is a manipulation, as Neoists maintain, then there are as many histories of Neoism as there are manipulations. Fakes, plagiarism, self-subversion and self-manipulation consequently become central Neoist strategies.

The theoretical basis of assertions of this kind appear obvious: that historiography constructs its subjects to the same extent that this construction is disrupted by these same subjects, so that it can never entirely comprehend or construct. As relevant as this may be, its consequence is nevertheless not an arbitrariness of historical "facts", because although the essence of these facts is contingent, it is not arbitrary. Here I refer to the distinction between contingency and arbitrariness as proposed by Ernesto Laclau and Chantal Mouffe. Contingency means that a historical political position cannot necessarily be determined by a different register (the laws of history, economy, etc.). A hegemonial situation is contingent to exactly the same extent that it is not determined by nature, but rather is the result of struggles and practices of negotiation, which could have been resolved this way or in a different way and are therefore principally capable of rearticulation. On the other hand, this certainly does not mean that the situation is arbitrary, i.e. that "no reasons" are to be found for why a certain hegemony predominates, that the current situation is the result of a game of chance. [...]

Neoism itself stands in a window of time -- the pre-future. If Hal Foster made it the central definition of the neo-avant-garde that it subsequently fixes the meaning of the avant-garde, then Neoism intends to show how one can subsequently fix one's own meaning. The Neoist self-historification mania thus has the effect of a trivial illustration of the post-structuralist standard insight, namely that the meaning of a subject is always subsequently attributed to it. In the case of Neoism, through self-historification. Does Neoism exist? It will have done.

[Preface to Oliver Marchart's book "Neoismus. Avantgarde und Selbsthistorisierung", published 1997 by Selene-Verlag, Klagenfurt/ Vienna]

[1] Monty Cantsin§: Neoism, in Dyer, Simon (Ed.) Rapid Eye§: art, occult, cinema, music. Brighton§: Rapid Eye 1989, p. 48.
[2] Stewart Home, Slow Death, New York / London, High Risk Books, 1996, p. 82
[3] op.cit., p. 146