

ART PRESS REVIEW

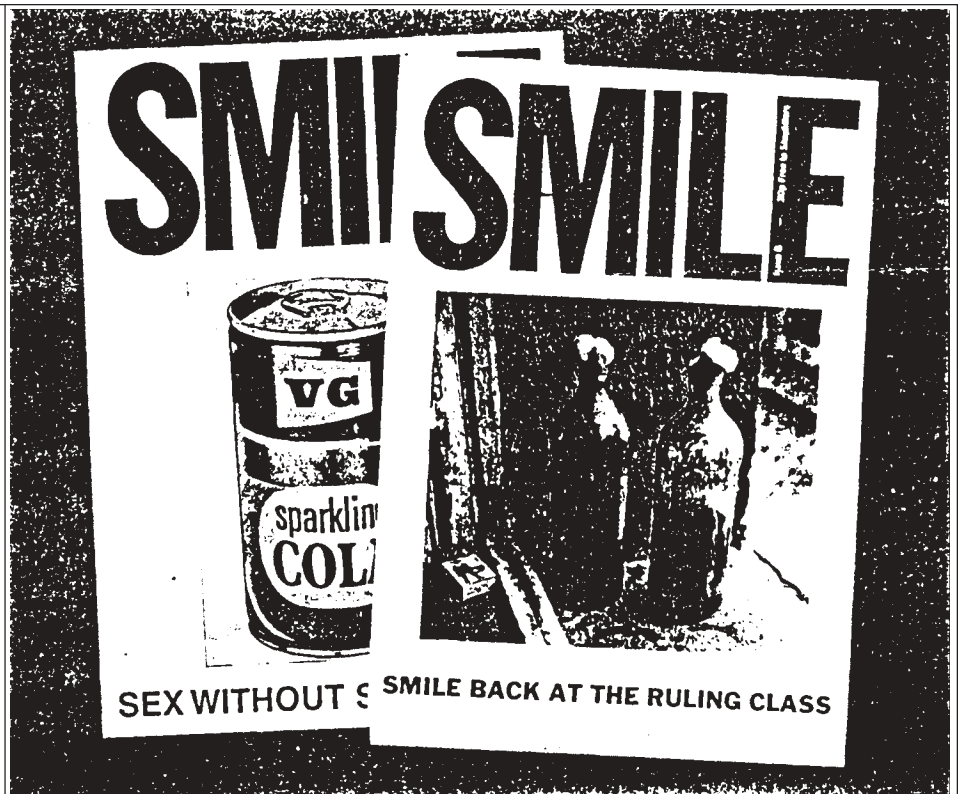
by GRANT KESTER

Typically the art press review concerns itself with those publications that represent the institutionalized art world. *SMILE* magazine might be said to represent the de-institutionalized art world.

SMILE emerged out of the Neoist "Cultural Conspiracy," an obscure pseudo-movement that was initiated in Canada in 1977 by a Hungarian correspondence and performance artist named Istvan Kantor. Kantor, at the suggestion of fellow mail artist David Zack, assumed the name Monty Cantsin and for the next five years produced work under this name. Zack retrieved the concept of the "multiple name" as a critique of bourgeois notions of individuality from the Berlin Dada movement. In theory anyone who wanted to could produce work (publications, music, performances, etc.) using the Cantsin identity. In fact, for several years only Kantor used the name and it became associated primarily with his activities. This led to the creation in 1984 of a second "multiple identity," Karen Eliot. Around the same time Stewart Home, an English Neoist, suggested the creation of a multiple identity magazine to be called *SMILE*. There are now a number of different versions of *SMILE* magazine being published, throughout Europe, England, and the U.S. The Eliot and Cantsin names, as well as *SMILE* magazine, are available and open for any and all to use.

Neoism is of particular importance because it engages many of the same issues treated by recent Postmodern work. The critique of "originality" or commodification taken up by artists like Sherrie Levine and Jeff Koons, however, is waged from within the art world itself, through the production of art objects. Neoism, coming out of Fluxus and Situationist roots which privilege non-object activities, offers a valuable alternative model. Neoism manages to advance a convincing critique of commodified art production, while at the same time sustaining a support system that allows for an ongoing process of theoretical and practical dialogue.

Neoist practice is characterized by an often deliberate confusion of meaning, intention, and identity. For them, to be artists in a society in which "culture" in all its forms (fine art, television, advertising) is a primary agent of political domination is an inherently contradictory act. Art privileges the very values of "individuality" and "creativity" that are constantly de-



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nied by the economic reality of capitalism. Thus, their relationship to their own "creativity" can only be equivocal: "Today we are no longer stupid enough to imagine that what we do is new, or even that such an assertion does not imply a progression and hence a certain 'newness.' We will continue to repeat the same old gestures with increasing unoriginality."

Neoism elaborates its cultural critique through three interrelated projects developed specifically in *SMILE* magazine: multiple identities, plagiarism, and the "art strike." The multiple identity concept is aimed at undermining the false individualism of capitalist society: "...capitalism controls by naming and describing ... by rendering names meaningless we make control impossible." *SMILE* also engages in a process of rampant plagiarism. They steal material not only from outside

sources (Henry Flynt's *Blueprint for a Higher Civilization*, for example) but from other issues and version of *SMILE* as well. Plagiarism is linked with the "art strike." This is a concept developed by "Praxis," a faction of Neoism. According to Praxis, all previous attempts at "revolutionary" art were inevitably subject to bourgeois recuperation. The solution, then, is a "refusal of creativity": "from 1990 to 1993 ... artists will not produce work, sell work, permit work to go on exhibition ... This total withdrawal of labour is the most extreme collective challenge that artists can make to the state."

Neoism and *SMILE* draw on both Fluxus and Situationist art, sources of aesthetic practice which have been largely ignored or suppressed in most conventional histories of modern art. Situationism emerged in 1957 as an offshoot of "Lettrism," a relatively unknown move-

ment that revolved primarily around the activities of Isidore Isou, a Roumanian living in Paris. The "Situationist International" survived, in various forms, until 1971. During its 14-year history it functioned as an art movement as well as a semi-underground political body. Its major project involved the production of the journal *Internationale Situationniste* and the publication of numerous manifestos, pamphlets, and posters. Situationist publications often made use of "detournement," a process of manipulating existing cultural forms that prefigures Postmodern appropriation.

Situationist involvement in French cultural life reached a high point during the events of May 1968, in which students and workers led a general strike that briefly paralysed the country. Situationists participated by organizing strike committees, spreading graffiti, and releasing lists of "approved" slogans ("Humanity won't be happy till the last bureaucrat is hung with the guts of the last capitalist"). The Situationists' major critical contribution was their theorization of "alienated consumption." The basic idea was that in contemporary society we have become passive consumers of life rather than active participants. Consumption has become as alienating as work in the traditional Marxist scenario.

Issues of *SMILE* frequently use Situationist-inspired slogans and fragments of their texts. The cultural and political analysis developed by certain Neoists also borrows heavily from Situationism, although they usually claim to have superseded it. The Situationists were also an important resource for the Neoists because of the way they were able to maintain a self-critical relationship to their own authority as a "movement." *SMILE* magazines often employ an audacious, mock-militant tone that is reminiscent of Situationist writing.

While Fluxus artists generally didn't share the political aspirations of the Situationists, they have been at least as important for Neoism as a model of aesthetic practice. Fluxus, which emerged out of the avant-garde milieu of New York during the early '60s, was conceived, in part, as a reaction against the intellectual and creative containment of the art "movement." Fluxus sought to elude this process of identifications through constant change, or flux. The Fluxus artist Dick Higgins coined the term "inter-media" to describe work within or between traditional media, in defiance of the Greenbergian-Modernist reduction of art to the intrinsic characteristics of a singular medium.

Fluxus was instrumental in initiating numerous "experimental" aesthetic activities that have become Neoist mainstays (i.e. mail art, performance art, artists' books, and video art). Neoist "apartment festivals," which have been held in Germany, Italy, and Canada, come di-

rectly out of the Fluxus Festivals of the early '60s. The "look" of *SMILE* owes a great deal to the Fluxus/mail art aesthetic of Xerox, appropriation, and montage. In fact, the *SMILE* name is in a line of descent from FILE, General Idea's seminal mail-art publication, which inspired *VILE*, and then *BILE*. *SMILE* itself has been published as *MILES*, *SLIME*, and even *LIMES* (an issues which included a free packet of lime tea). If Fluxus was conceived as a critique of Modernist "movement" as actual stasis, Neoism ("Neo-fluxus"?) is meant in large measure as a critique of the very notion of the art "movement."

The Neoist network stopped producing *SMILE* in 1985. Most subsequent issues of *SMILE* have been generated by several different post-Neoist groupings, collectively referred to as "Praxis." These include "Generation Positive" in the U.K. and the U.S., "Anti-Neoism" in France, and the "Pregroperativistic Movement" in Holland. The amoeba-like transformations of Neoism, while confusing, are entirely consistent with the deliberate effort to critique and parody the concept of the art "movement." A comment in a recent issue of *SMILE* produced by an "ex-Neoist" suggests the logic behind their methodology: "Splits and schisms are essential to my conception of Neoism and any public slanging match between an ex-Neoist and the remaining members of the movement is worth twelve dozen great works of art. Ultimately, what all Neoists should aim for is an acrimonious split with the movement. To leave Neoism is to realize it."

Issues of *SMILE* produced before the advent of Praxis were often small in size (around 5"×7") and were relatively indistinguishable from other low-budget, peripheral art publications. Their content ranged widely. Depending on who produced a given issue it might consist of a personal reminiscence of Istvan Kantor's early days in Montreal, Xeroxed reproductions of neo-"Lettrist" works, or long running dialogues about the current state of mail-art. With Praxis-era *SMILE*s this is still the case, anyone who wants can and does continue to produce *SMILE*, but the Generation Positive faction of Praxis began to produce a series that is far more consistent in format and content than earlier versions. These *SMILE*s are less like Neoist network clearinghouses, and more like a recognizable "magazine." They are larger, feature slick covers, and use an almost identical layout. To a certain extent they represent a bid to make *SMILE* more available and "acceptable" outside of the Neoist network. Where earlier editions seldom ran above 500 copies, these *SMILE*s are being published in editions of 3,000. *SMILE*s are beginning to enjoy an increasingly wide dis-

tribution throughout Europe and North America. While many issues continue to be given away, they can also be found in book shops, record stores, and galleries.

The content in the three ("Praxis") issues I've seen is remarkably similar. Each issue begins with a manifesto-like statement of Praxis purpose, explaining, for instance, the idea behind the multiple identity concept, or plagiarism. This is followed by an art-historical analysis that examines the legacy of similar concepts in past aesthetic practice. These capsule histories of art, from a Praxis point of view, are useful sources of information on the development of European avant-garde art, particularly those segments that developed after World War II and were largely obscured by the academic hegemony of American Abstract Expressionism. The center of the publications includes a long-running tabloid-style narrative that usually features a parodic treatment of "avant-garde" art, junkies, or "class" war. Interspersed are neo-Situationist slogans and examples of photographic "detournement."

It is the constant oscillation between practical engagement and detached speculation that defines the paradox of Neoism, yet it is a paradox to which they willingly submit. The identity as an art "movement" that they so studiously undermine is at the same time a necessary prerequisite if their gestures (art strike, plagiarism, etc.) are to have any significance. While the Neoist "network" is an encouraging model for artists hard pressed by an art world that is heavily capitalized and increasingly hierarchical, it can also become an intellectual ghetto.

The decision to produce a slicker, more consistent version of *SMILE* could only have been made with ambivalence. The very changes that will allow *SMILE* to reach beyond the Neoist network will, at the same time, endanger its critical function as a magazine of "multiple origins." Readers will begin to identify *SMILE* with only one particular version. A Neoist friend has defined Neoism as "an attempt to create a totally alien and referential culture," that is, a culture which can act as a critical paradigm of art production in general. So long as *SMILE* circulates primarily within the Neoist network it can perform its critical project (the confusion of identities and authors) with little difficulty. As it moves outside this network, however, its critical "purity" is placed at risk. Neoism is, indeed, an "alien culture." Whether it *can* survive the immune system of the mainstream art world is not the issue so much as whether it should even try.

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