Post-Production Anarchism

Paul Werner
Editor of WOID and the publisher of the Orange Press, Vienna & New York City
werner@theorangepress.com

> *Jedes Kunstwerk, und präsentierte es sich als einer vollkommener Harmonie, ist in sich ein Problemzusammenhang. Als solcher partizipiert es am Geschichte.*
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> Every work of art, even as it presents itself outwardly in a fully resolved harmony, contains within itself a problematic of coherence. It is this problematic that makes of it a participant in History.
> – Theodor Adorno, *Ästhetische Theorie*, 1970.

Art, to quote some French wag or other, is like sex: first, you do it for love; soon you're doing it out of solidarity; and before you know it you're in it for the money. There are certain views of History that cut directly to the third option as the only possible one, indeed as the originary, defining, nomothetic explanation for all human action; such views are commonplace all along the political spectrum, from the traditional proponents of Historical Materialism to Free-Market libertarians. In 1973 and 1974, I was a participant in a communal experiment designed to repeal this supposedly immutable law of History, a self-defined anarchist printer's co-operative known as *Come! Unity Press* in New York City. The Press's operating principle was the repeal of money, its elimination from the world of cultural production. Its inspiration was Murray Bookchin, the American theorist of anarchism and communitarianism whose ideas have greatly contributed to present-day libertarian thought. Looking back, I can see that we at *Come! Unity Press* succeeded beyond our

wildest dreams: we failed to redefine the ways in which culture was produced but succeeded all too well in defining a mode of cultural consumption for the twenty-first century. What *Come! Unity Press* was doing at that time (along with many other artists, activists and political theorists) was truly revolutionary: today that certain special view of social behavior has risen up to bite us all in the ass.

I]

Bookchin was a kind of anarchist Zelig, his whole career a grab-bag of radical political positions in twentieth-century USA, starting with his membership in the Communist Party-USA (at age nine) to Trotskyism, to working as a union organizer in the General Motors strike in Detroit in 1945-46 to the usual opportunistic renunciation of Marxism in the early fifties, then on to a utopian faith in the potential of technology to liberate us all which in the early 'sixties merged incongruously with Ecologism, both environmental and social. In the 'sixties he was a communitarian anarchist in New York City; in 1969 he attempted to redirect the Students for a Democratic Society (SDS) toward a more democratic structure before the group broke up and a handful of its members formed the Weatherman Underground. In 1971 he left for Vermont to reincarnate as a communitarian, leaving behind a tradition of anarchist, in-your-face direct action that was taken up by several self-directed communities: the Diggers in San Francisco and in New York, Abbie Hoffman and the Yippies. Which is where *Come! Unity Press* took off; a loose group organized around a glorified office printer, an A.B. Dick 360 offset lithographic press. The principles of the commune were straightforwardly borrowed from Bookchin: up until now, society and most of its ills had been directed toward relieving scarcity—the old Malthusian bogeyperson. Now at last, the "machine" (of which our A.B. Dick printer was the metaphor) had abolished scarcity, and with it the exploitation by man of nature and of other men, women, gender choices, plants, etc. It was time to establish a culture of universal access to all resources, including access to cultural production: to form what Bookchin called a "liberated community." Everything at *Come! Unity Press* was supposed to be free without regard to its position in the circle of production and consumption: free pots of brown rice and beans at the Community kitchen; free access to the printing press; free paper to print on; free photographic plates to run on the press; free ink; free publications available

to all who wanted them, with the proviso that nothing in turn could be distributed that might encourage or advocate for others to spend money for anything. Of course, participants were encouraged to put into the project as much as they took out.

As a result the productions of *Come! Unity Press* developed a patched-together aesthetic that could be called pre-Punk. Because there was no particular pressure for any one user to buy his or her supplies it was common for a group to print their message on whatever previously-used paper was available, and in any case a printing press produces an enormous amount of waste paper ready for recycling, either from overruns or failed trials. This gave our productions a palimpsestic look, with images or text often printed directly on top of other, faded or illegible images or texts. There was abundant use of the "rainbow" effect, which consists of loading different colors to run at once from a single ink trough so that they gradually blend into one another. Of course, one could always add different inks to the trough as the press was running, or even smear dabs of color directly onto the metal plate——a rather dangerous game since the plate was revolving at high speed. A rainbow effect is difficult to duplicate in any consistent manner: one would have to take the project to a commercial printer, separate the colors, and run each color separately with accurate registration. As we realized, "consistency" is one of those bourgeois aesthetic values whose sole function is to convey the impression that the work is "professionally" done, meaning costly. It enforces a value-system in which "self-expression" is believed to be at odds with public and political efficiency; it draws a distinction between work-for-hire and labor-for-love. Our aesthetic was closer to that of Ogata Kenzan, the Edo-era designer who added his own individual and expressive calligraphy to mass-produced ceramics. I had myself studied and practiced the techniques of Japanese woodblock prints where rainbow effects are common, where a relative lack of consistency goes with high-speed mass production, even by hand; and where technique (the individual's ability to control or selectively not to control the final appearance of the object) is not sacrificed to technology (Illustration 1).
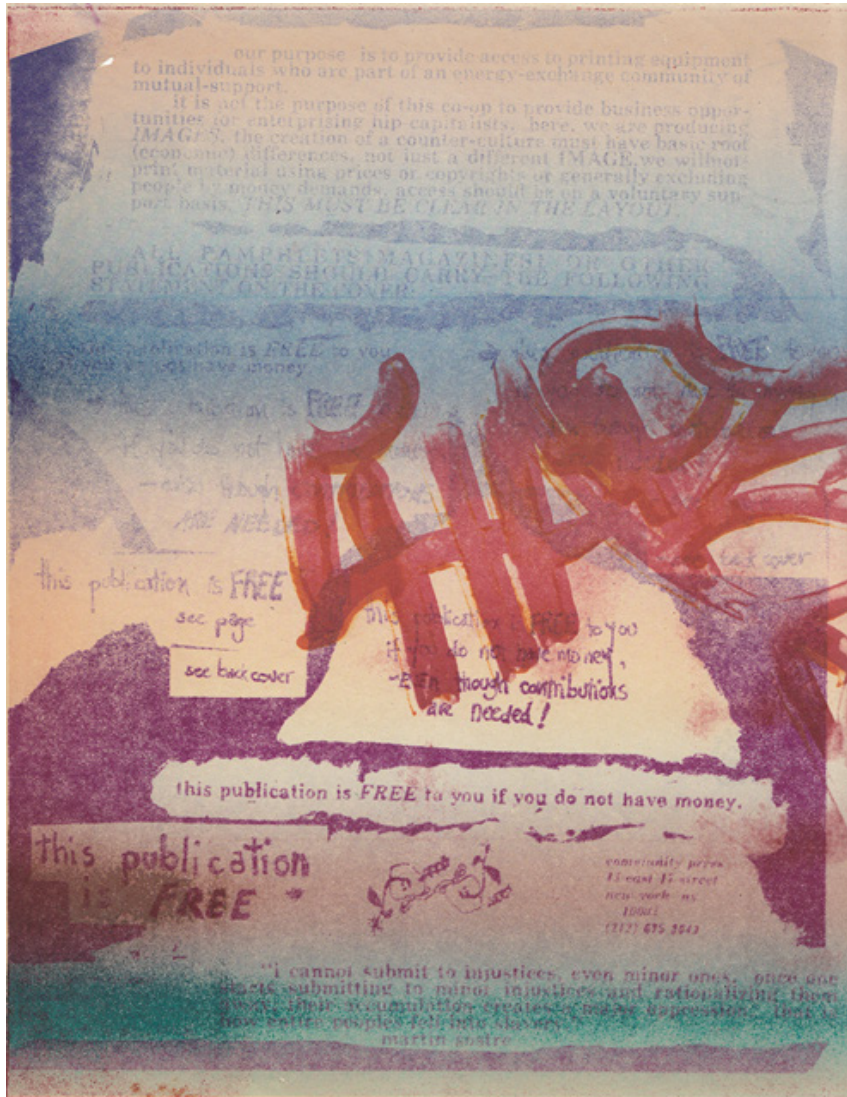
Illustration 1: Palimpsest.
Recycled page, including one of the first printed reproductions of New York subway graffiti. Come!
Unity Press, 1973.

I recently spoke to some young whippersnapper—same as an old whippersnapper, only more ignorant. When I told him about the works produced at Come! Unity Press—poetry posters, gay and lesbian writings, a children's book —he responded that he was only interested in political presses of the seventies: in other terms, in propaganda. But there was a whole area of cultural production that thought of itself as Propaganda by the Cultural Deed, and one such deed was the propagation of the idea that everything should be free. When Abbie Hoffman and the Yippies threw dollar bills all over the floor of the New York Stock Exchange or offered free

food to all or staged love-ins at anti-War demonstrations, they could fairly claim that this was propaganda for a future without money. In his deeply ironic and manipulative way Hoffman was giving his audience a vision of the "joyous empire of the future" as Friedrich Schiller called it in his *Letters on the Aesthetic Education of Humanity* (1795), the defining book on political art down through the twentieth century. Hoffman claimed his inspiration was Marshall McLuhan, whose argument that "the medium is the message" oddly parallel's Schiller's: the message is the act of performing the joyous future one wants to bring into being. Another inspiration was Andy Warhol, presumably for his curious brand of voluntarist positivism: What is, is, if I decide it is. Or, to quote a favorite phrase of the 'sixties: "Take your desires for realities."

II]

Arguably, Hoffman's message and that of *Come! Unity Press* were more radical than that of a mere movement to end a war: radical in the literal sense of going down to the very roots of society. For things to change, everything had to change. And, once one took that position, it was as important to change the ways in which culture was produced as it was to produce the culture itself; more accurately, it was as important not to reproduce the social system that produced the wrong kind of culture, as it was to produce the right kind of culture. *Come! Unity Press* drew in a tremendous number of the disadvantaged and underserved, those within American culture, even American culture of the Left, who'd been accepted to a certain degree, but marginalized: psychiatric patients, black women within the patriarchal Black Liberation movements, Puerto-Rican victims of America's inner colonialism, Native American groups, the First Victims. At *Come! Unity Press* I may have been the first to promote the emerging form, Graffiti. We felt that we were not merely producing the words and images that would somehow change society: we were trying to live the society that would somehow produce those words and images that would change it. Which is to say we had, as group, stumbled onto what is known (from now on, because I just thought it up) as Rousseau's Dilemma:

> The effect would need to be the cause, and the civic spirit that was to be the work of social institutions would have to preside at the creation of the institutions themselves.
>
> [Il faudrait que l'effet pût devenir cause, que l'esprit social qui doit être l'ouvrage de l'institution présidât à l'institution même.](Rousseau, 1762, II, 7).

In other terms: in order to live justly one would have to live in a just society that held just values, which values in turn must be defined by social institutions that had not yet come into being; unless we first created the institutions that created the art that subsequently defined (and perhaps, even, in turn, re-created) the institutions and values we had already created we were wasting our time; but to create this just society we first needed to find ways to reject the unjust society; which brings us to Savio's Solution, to quote the Berkeley radical Mario Savio in one of the most resonant public statements in the History of the United States of America:

> There's a time when the operation of the machine becomes so odious, makes you so sick at heart, that you can't take part! You can't even passively take part! And you've got to put your bodies upon the gears and upon the wheels…upon the levers, upon all the apparatus, and you've got to make it stop! (Savio, 1964).

The *Come! Unity Press* solution (the Diggers' and Yippies' solution as well) was exceedingly simple: one day I got into an argument with one of the organizers at the Press over some particularly un-progressive piece of behavior: "So tell me about the Revolution? It's here!" he answered with a smile. If you weren't part of the problem, then you must be part of the solution, right? According to Bookchin one could actively choose to passively not take part.

In 1971, Bookchin published his influential book, *Post-Scarcity Anarchism*, a collection of his earlier writings with all of their accumulated contradictions unresolved. And the theory behind Post-Scarcity Anarchism was as follows: the history of all hitherto existing human society had been the history of the inability of productivity to keep up with population growth—the Malthusian theory. Now, at long last, technology offered us all a chance to jump the Malthus, all we needed was to stop following the antiquated, irrelevant norms of a society founded on needs and wa-

nts. Similar, even shallower arguments were being discussed at the time in popular manuals like those that Theodore Roszak's *Making of a Counter Culture* (1969) and Robert Reich's *Greening of America* (1970).

The first part of Bookchin's argument is curiously deterministic; a Vulgar Marxist would have translated it to mean that, "Since the instruments of production determine relations of production all that's needed is to fully develop the instruments of production and let the laws of History work their magic." Or, as Comrade Stalin put it, "In the Age of Socialist Production, technology determines everything." I sometimes felt our printing press was more of a metaphor for social change than an agent, reminiscent of the French nineteenth-century anarchist Pierre Leroux who first envisioned the typesetting machine, the ancestor of the typewriter: Leroux suggested that, because the keyboard would resemble a piano, the typist would magically feel herself the aesthetic equivalent of a pianist pouring out Chopin. Bookchin himself came to realize that he had opened the door to that kind of libertarianism we see today: this time, instead of an A.B. Dick it's the iPhone that's going to make us all "creative." If he were alive today he'd probably catch his second wind from all those software developers, film-makers and so forth who believe they can release the true, liberating potential of the latest technological or cybernetic development by not engaging directly with market forces: by making an end-run around capitalism. Strike one against Bookchin.

The second part of Bookchin's argument is the part that says we need to stop following the antiquated norms of a retrograde society; but the question is: which norms? Bookchin had taken up the old Marxist doxa that it's the forces of production that ultimately determine relationships of production and given it the even older Anarchist spin: it's the relationships among producers that ultimately determine relationships of production. Andy Warhol would have simply loved it: you didn't become an artist by seizing control of the techniques and technologies that allowed you to produce objects that passed for art, you became an artist by hanging in bars and acting like an artist, your behavior a mere metaphor for who you were. I once got into another argument at *Come! Unity Press* with a Yippie who described himself as "The World's Foremost Dylanologist," based on the fact that he regularly went through Bob Dylan's garbage. This, too, Bookchin came to regret: that Post-Scarcity Anarchism had, in fact, turned into Lifestyle Anarchism. Strike two.

III

Bookchin's theories shared something with the earlier theories and practices of Gustav Landauer, inasmuch as neither went beyond an awareness of the distinction between *Gemeinschaft* and *Gesellshaft* (Landauer was a German anarchist who, for a brief moment, was one of the leaders of the Bavarian People's Republic in 1919: he was beaten to death after the Republic fell.). The distinction between the two terms (a common one first drawn by the sociologist Friedrich Tönnies) is as follows: a Gemeinschaft is an "organic" community of individuals united by common goals, whereas a Gesellschaft (literally a "business" or a "corporation") is a community held together by enforced needs (Tönnies, 1887). Landauer, like Bookchin, had made the fundamental anarchist error of assuming it was enough to shift from the one to the other in order to release the aesthetic forces in Society: these theories, in fact, are remarkably similar to the theories of the Cubists and Futurists, as was noted at the time in a biting cartoon:

[Illustration 2]: Revolution of the Cubes.
Anonymous. Revolution of the Cubes. (Caption: "The curve, the primary form of capitalism, is overcome. The new day dawns. Threateningly, the cubes march through the universe.") Cartoon, Simplicisssimus, January 1919.

The aesthetic anarchism of Landauer and the Cubists was not much different from what is usually called Propaganda: their actions were meant as mere metaphors of real activities in the real world, just as the organizing activities at *Come! Unity Press* were metaphors for the type of world we hoped to create.

And here's another theory Bookchin shared with Landauer—shared, in fact, with many dropouts and alternative-culture adepts in the 'sixties and 'seventies: it's a theory out of Landauer, transmitted to the Americas by the Freudian Wilhelm Reich, who was wildly (did I say "wildly"?) popular in the late 'sixties and early 'seventies: the theory of self-regulation, which itself is deeply, almost etymologically buried in anarchist theory and practice.

You see, because humans are basically good and fundamentally capable of regulating themselves, it's enough to remove the false forms of socially-imposed regulation for human beings to naturally, spontaneously return to originary, organic and natural ways of organizing themselves. To this vision, predating even Rousseau, the founding philosopher of Anarchism Pierre-Joseph Proudhon added the theory of "spontaneous order:" once the fetters of false rulership have been removed (in Greek, an-*archè*) human beings (and according to Bookchin, plants and whales and others) will spontaneously organize themselves in a harmonious manner. Oh: and artworks. Because the same concept of a social mission behind the organization of planes and colors played its part in the practices of a majority of Cubist painters, just as it played a role in the practices of the printers at *Come! Unity Press*. For the Cubists it was the style of the illustration of a new reality that was thought to provide a metaphor that might, somehow, determine that reality; at *Come! Unity Press* it was predominantly the style of the producers themselves.

IV]

One major difference, and this is Strike Three:

In 1969 Bookchin launched a verbal and organizational assault on the "Marxists" who he claimed were destroying the anti-war Movement with their rigid adherence to hierarchical organization: the accusations are not outwardly different from Bakunin's celebrated struggle against Marx for control of the Second International; except that Bookchin introduced a disturbing detail: the problem with Marxism was

not so much the type of organization as the place where organizing happened. "It is not the discipline of work but the discipline of rule that demands the repression of internal nature."(Bookchin, 1982, p. 3). And he added elsewhere:

> Proletarian socialism, precisely because it emphasizes that power must be based exclusively on the factory, creates the conditions for a centralized, hierarchical political structure. […] The factory is not an autonomous social organism. The amount of social control the factory can exercise is fairly limited.(Bookchin, 1986, p. 175).

Forget about the Dictatorship of the Proletariat; the time was right for the Dictatorship of the Consumer Class. Looking back at my time at Come! Unity Press, I remember now that only once did we ever hold a meeting to decide what type of work to produce, or how; discussions and tensions were invariably, and indistinguishably, about access: access to the loft, access to the press, access to the beans and brown rice eternally waiting to be shared.

The purpose of his own analysis of capitalist society, Karl Marx wrote, was to "lay bare the economic law of motion of modern society." (Marx, 1867). The purpose of all major theorists of a progressive movement in America has been to find the means to reverse these laws. *Come! Unity Press* failed in its mission, on two counts: one was the belief (after the Diggers and the Yippies and New York Anarchists like Bookchin) that it was enough to repeal the laws of exchange in terms of species without acknowledging, as even Marx acknowledged, that capitalism, like all existing previous societies, also relies on other systems of exchange, on other types of capital: cultural, symbolic, etc. On the second, graver count, we relied on the belief (promoted by Bookchin) that to repeal the laws of the motion of species it was enough to repeal the rule of production in the formation of capital and to replace it by the rule of consumption. To Marx's assertion that relations among producers are determined by their relationship to the instruments of production, Bookchin and his wannabes added a late-capitalist twist: a system under which relationships among consumers are determined by access to the means of production and consumption alike, and access is determined by those old standbys of capitalist ideology, greed, want and desire. "Democracy" after Bookchin is little more than a consumer choice; how many "Likes" did the President get today?

In the future, according to the author of *The Greening of America*, work would become an "erotic experience" similar, I assume, to the experience of performing a Mozart sonata on a typewriter (Reich 1970, p. 340). What has happened instead is that "erotic experience" has become a substitute for human productivity as the universal law of motion. Society has turned from the anarchy of production that defined nineteenth-century capitalism to the anarchy of consumption that defines it now. Taking your desires for realities is a dangerous game, not because of the nature of the game, but because of the nature of your desires. They may not, after all, be yours.

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