LES LEVINE'S BILLBOARDS

EVOLUTION, INTERACTION
AND EFFECTIVENESS.

THE NATIONAL COLLEGE OF ART AND DESIGN

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EVOLUTION, INTERACTION AND EFFECTIVENESS

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INTRODUCTION

The purpose of this thesis shall be to investigate the development, the strategy and the effectiveness of some of the billboard projects of media artist Les Levine.   I propose to deal with these aspects in the following way.

In the first chapter I propose to specifically show Les Levine's early work and its development from art world parody towards more positive engagement with real-time issues.

The second chapter will highlight specific works, particularly the billboard works, of the artist which seek to interact with the general public by creating awareness of the environment, the media, fear in the New York subways and particularly the Northern Ireland troubles.   This chapter will not just detail the works themselves, but will chart the development of language and image within those same billboard projects.

The third and final chapter will basically seek to discuss the effective-ness or otherwise of Les Levine's Blame God Billboard project.

CHAPTER 1

EVOLUTION

Ever since his New York debut in the mid-1960's, Les Levine has maintained

an astounding multifarious output.   This output eclectic and open-ended

has ranged over such diverse areas as plastic sculpture, environmental

art, disposable art, technological art, process and systems pieces,

documentaries, video, conceptual works, a wide range of prints and

graphics, books even pamphlets.   For the purpose of this chapter, however,

I propose to consider just a few of these works, specifically in how they

relate to the development of Levine's thoughts on art and/or the media.

Typical of his early work was his installation PAINT (Fig. 1) at the

Molly Barnes Gallery in New York in 1968.

The press release which accompanied the work gives some indication of

what occurred with a boarded off area in the white gallery.

> 'PAINT consists of pouring a gallon of different colours
> of paint into a trough on the floor, until thirty
> gallons are poured, each gallon adding a new colour.
> An automatic camera will photograph the proceedings and
> these photographs will become the work of art.' [1]

What strikes one immediately about this work is its open-ended nature.

This openness relates not just to the visual content of the installation,

but its somewhat unclear intent.
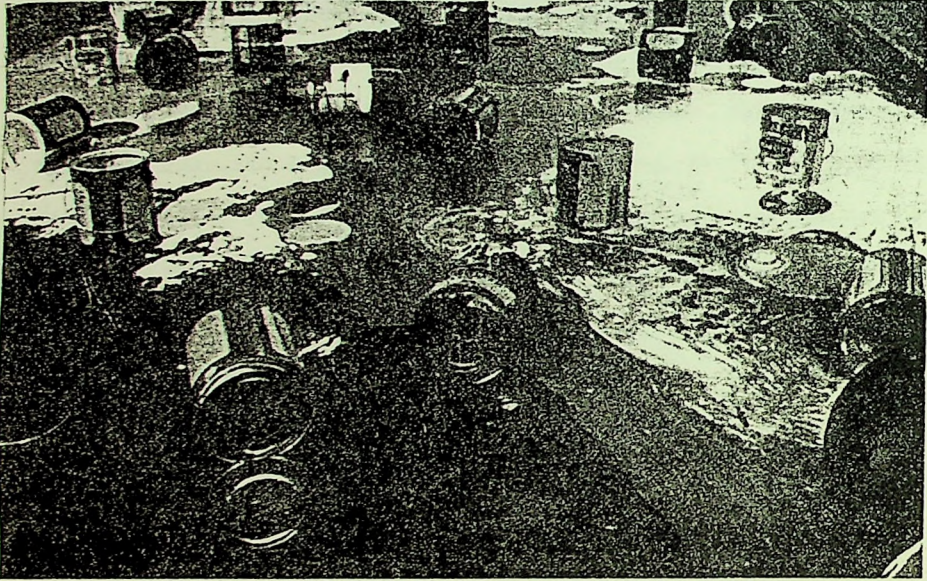
Paint. Molly Barnes Gallery, 1969. Levine: "With the development of the art supply industry, it is clear that anyone in the world could be an artist, as nothing else could be made from art supplies. . . . The work of art in its finished state is information. The result of a process. It describes what the art experience was like. The productive activity involved in the act of making a work of art in this kind of society must be considered of more value than the results of production. As all information is in itself neutral and without 'taste' therefore qualitative judgements are unnecessary."

Fig. 1

PAINT is obviously not intended as a painting, it is simply a demon-
stration of wet paint. The photographs present the information
concerning the act of pouring out the paint. No object results from
the work except the "residual information", [2] i.e. the photographs.

On a purely visual level there is surely a degree of parody in evidence.
Firstly, there is the pure physicality of the paint itself. In this
installation the paint is obviously not descriptive, indeed there is
something terribly mundane about the preparation, it is simply different
coloured paints being mixed together. In the context of the art of its
time, however, this could easily relate to and effectively be seen to
mirror the crisis of painting in the mid-to-late sixties, i.e. the theoretical
modernist cul-de-sac that had arrived with the reality of the blank
canvas. Secondly, there is the obvious allusion to process art. As the
paint is being poured, the colours are mixing, colour changes are occurring.
The energy involved in the pouring is effectively being transferred to
the mixing. Thirdly, again on a purely visual level there is the Pollock-
like mess on the floor. The reality of colours merging together, art
being made from art materials, paint irreverently poured across a floor.

Yet significantly the inherent strategy behind this work defies the expect-
ations that these obvious art world allusions suggest. The release, as
informative as the photos, explains the intent.

> 'In an energy based system such as ours, the only thing that
> can be considered of artistic work or value is that which
> uses/expresses energy; thus the productive activity involved
> in the act of making a work of art is of more value than the
> results of the production. The experience of seeing first-
> hand is no longer a value in a software-controlled society.
> Knowing what is happening is the same as seeing it.' 3

The strategy in this instance, therefore, is to present an 'open system' [4] which has parallels with a variety of differing art activity. The viewer having come in contact with the work is confronted obviously with questions regarding both its content and its purpose. In this regard the press release is central to the work.

'The experience of seeing is no longer a value in a software controlled society.'

This work, therefore, seeks to challenge this belief. It challenges not just the viewer's personal intellectual capacity in coming to terms with the installation itself, but also that viewer's reliance on the art critical network to validate his/her experience of that work. The press release, therefore, assumes a still more significant role. It provides the necessary information for the viewer to come to terms with the experience.

Finally, the press release hints directly at what Les Levine is proposing.

'The work of art in its finished state is information.' [5]

Art is information or perhaps more obviously art is being translated into information. This information is generally being provided by art critics. Therefore, one could easily surmise that in a technologically developed society, art experience is only to be found in the making, i.e. real experience is about making art. If we accept this assumption then the onus is on the viewer to ignore the intervention of the art critic network and on the artist, to bypass these same communication structures and focus his/her attention on the audience themselves.

A further example of this type of work was apparent in his SYSTEMS BURN-
OFF X RESIDUAL SOFTWARE (Fig. 2) installation at the Phyllis Kind
Gallery in Chicago in 1969.

Initially the work involved the taking of over 200 photographs of critics
and artists attending the Cornell University Earth Art Exhibition.   From
these photographs Levine selected thirty one and had them reproduced on
typewriting paper some one thousand times each.   The reproductions were
subsequently scattered on the floors of the gallery and were then covered
with liquid rasberry Jell-O.   Single copies of the work were also affixed
to the walls of the gallery with chewing gum. [6]

Just as in his PAINT installation Levine seems again to be involved in
making anti-art protest work.   In this instance, however, he seems much
more specific.   This work obviously seeks to propose an incestuous
relationship between artworks and the art world.   Les Levine is creating
art out of whatever concerns art.   In this instance a visit to Cornell
Earth Art Exhibition and the photographs taken from that visit.   Again he
is proposing art as information yet on this occasion with a degree of parody.
Art is expressed here as information about art experience, i.e. the
socializing involved at the Cornell exhibition.   On this level the work
could easily be equated by Duchamp's L.H.O.O.Q., the Mona Lisa, with
pencilled-in moustache and goatee.   After all both seek to parody the then
existing art paradigms.   This work is seen as art simply because it deals
with the art world.   In this instance the photocopies are strewn around
the floor like rubbish.   With obvious sarcasm he seeks to equate art
and its subsequent information with that same trash.[7]

Systems Burn-Off X Residual Software, 1969. Levine: "People said it was related to Abstract Expressionism. I said how could it be when I had no kinetic or gestural involvement with it; I hadn't even touched it. (Someone at the gallery did it.) Even if it looked like it, the whole premise of Abstract Expressionism was removed . . . In Chicago they really wanted to send me back to New York with the proper corrective treatment."

Fig. 2

The artists statements and handouts leave us with no doubt as to what
his intentions are:-

> 'What I'm trying to point out is that art is a locked-
> in system at this stage, so much so that it doesn't
> need to be done because all locked-in systems pre-choice
> themselves.' [8]

This 'locked-in system' as Levine stresses is the inevitable result of
the then Modernist approach. Art no longer had to be made because it
had already reached a stage where everything in both a theoretical and
practical sense had already been done before. Inevitably any future it
would have within those terms would simply be a re-enactment of its past.

The Information Show in New York in 1970 provided Les Levine with still
further evidence of the direction of art, the morality of art making and
the power of technology and the mass media.

In an article in Studio International at that time he synopsized these
views. He highlighted, firstly, the power of the information networks.
He declared that as a result of the mass media prople were beginning to
accept the dictates of that medium. He saw that the media were basically
telling people how they should behave, what they should desire, how they
should look, even how their minds should operate. He concluded that
people no longer thought as individuals, but they had clearly abandoned
all their critical capacities, they were obviously being manipulated into
acting unquestionably and that undoubtedly freedom simply meant selection
from a pre-coded number of choices. [9]

Essentially, the heart of the matter was that Levine felt people were
not consciously controlling their lives, the informational environment
was.

Les Levine wrote about parallels of this model within the art world as
well. Art he declared was part of a game, that game included not just
the practice of art, but its packaging as well. Art was simply business
practice. That business game included the packaging and marketing of
the product, art. As Levine saw it, all commercially successful artists
utilized publicity getting strategies, in doing so they sought to attract
the media and thereby promote their own products. [10]

Control of the art market thus lay in the degree to which artists could
manipulate the information/media network. Thus, as Levine speculated,
if the media already had created a situation where art audience looked
to it solely for validating art in terms of quality and worth, then access to
that medium was of prime importance. Good art was essentially good only
if the media said it was good.

It was in 1971 that Levine produced his most cutting attack on the art
world. Titled, The Museum of Mott Art Inc., it was a proposal for a
consultation service for artists. Suffice to say this work sought
to inform the world about the cynical careermindedness of artists,
critics, gallery owners, etc.. Again, this is pure satire, an exaggerated
version yet still managing to contain some measure of truth. For Les
Levine Mott Art was a way of looking at the world, a personal judgement
on an insincere system.

The proposal itself sought to offer a complete consultation service
for all those engaged within the art system, i.e. artists, critics,
collectors, etc..   The package itself combined a rich choice of
services from 'How to kill yourself', through to 'Where to get the
latest gossip', to the more practical services, 'Where to be seen',
'Art collector's appreciation service', even the more cynical, 'Be happy
for collectors', 'How to get a show at a museum' or 'Second rate artists'
which humourously sought to offer the following:

> 'In the after art period, there will be more room for
> second-rate artists than ever before.   If you're inclined
> towards making lists of surveys or documenting other
> people's art activities, let us help you to become second-
> rate'. [12]

Perhaps Mott Art Inc. was meant as a jibe at the art establishment, perhaps
as a gesture towards improving the reader's understanding of the underlying
commercial production of art, or perhaps this was sincerely meant as a
means of redressing the art media imbalance where art is projected in
terms of culture and not in terms of production.   At any rate, Mott Art
is a personal view and as such must be viewed within the state of gallery
art at that time and in terms of Levine's own personal prejudices and
opinions.   In terms of his own development, however, this proposal seems
to encapsulate his own sense of frustration at the continuing trends of
art towards irrelevant obscurity.

By 1974 Levine had come to a further understanding that people were
beginning to abdicate all responsibility for their lives.   The media
machine had insured this.

'I had the idea that the whole society was going towards
a post-conscious state, completely post-conscious state.
- No decisions would be decisions.   Ultimately there would
be no consciousness at all.' [13]

Essentially the work Trans-action sets out to demand of people that they

understand or become aware of the very unthinking way they proceed

through their lives.

The work itself revolved around questionnaires which were sent out to a

large body of people in the Vancouver area.   The object of the exercise

was to get people to go out and buy any product for less than a dollar.

The questions themselves revolved around the action involved in these

people going to the store and buying the item.   Some of the questions

were quite simple.   'Why did you choose that place?, 'Why did you choose

that product?'   But some of them were questions requiring evaluation,

like what one thought of the actual transaction, and others to remember

the exact words the salesperson said.

The answers together with the products were subsequently sent into the

Vancouver Art Gallery.   Yet Levine's handout states that the art was not

the end products or answers, but indeed the action involved in those

people going to their respective stores and physically filling out their

answers.

Even at this stage it was quite evident that patterns had emerged in

Les Levine's attitudes to the art world, the media and to people's ability

to come to terms with the environment in which they lived.

Les Levine's views on the art world were overtly cynical.   In his
view artists within the object art system were engaged in an activity
which had reached its apex with the Reinhardt black canvas.   Artists
since then had merely sought to maintain a practice which was incestuous
and basically irrelevant to late 20th century man.   Artists were thus
playing a dishonest game.   This game was in Levine's eyes no different
from any other commercial enterprise, Art was big business basically
founded on media attractiveness and art critical pandering.   Art's
relevance in Les Levine's opinion was also in doubt.   Artists seemed
quite content to avoid coming to terms with the world around them,
engagement with people's lives was not an issue.   Art, he proposed,
was solely engaged with introspective aestheticism.   What Levine himself
sought, however, was art which would engage people in questioning their
own personal lives, Art that was relevant to everyday existence.

Les Levine's attitudes to the media was also quite obviously apparent.
Levine viewed the media as the great danger to mankind in the latter part
of the 20th century.   This danger threatened not just man's sense of
freedom, but his very understanding of himself and his surroundings.
Levine clearly was of the belief that the media's influence must be
curbed if people were to engage in real living rather than media role
playing.   For Levine the dividing lines were drawn - either people
became aware of the media's awesome power or succumbed to lives of
unconscious submissiveness.

Clearly Les Levine had come to an understanding in the early seventies
of what he wanted from his art and where he proposed the focus of that
same art should be.   The openness of the early seventies conceptual
movement provided Levine with both the climate and the opportunity to
achieve that end.   The essential questions that remained were, how would
he do it and would it succeed.

FOOTNOTES

1.   P. PLAGENS, "Les Levine at the Molly Barnes Gallery",
        ARTFORUM, JANUARY 1970, P.75.

2.   ibid.

3.   ibid.

4.   J. BURNHAM, "Les Levine: Business as usual",
        ARTFORUM, APRIL 1970, P.42.

5.   P. PLAGENS, "Les Levine at the Molly Barnes Gallery",
        ARTFORUM, JANUARY 1970, P.75

6.   J. BURNHAM, "Les Levine: Business as usual",
        ARTFORUM, APRIL 1970, P.43.

7.   J. BURNHAM, THE STRUCTURE OF ART, PP. 146 - 149.

8.   J. BURNHAM, "Les Levine: Business as usual",
        ARTFORUM, APRIL 1970, P.43.

9.   LES LEVINE, "The information fallout",
        STUDIO INTERNATIONAL June 1971, PP. 264 - 267.

10.   ibid.

11.   A.A. BRONSON, "Les Levine", ART METROPOLE, 1983, P.229.

12.   ibid.

13.   G. BATTCOCK AND R. NICKAS, The Art of Performance, P.249.

CHAPTER II

INTERACTION - BILLBOARD WORKS

The year 1972 was probably the most crucial year for the artist, particularly
in terms of the development of his work and particularly in terms of its
emphasis.   During that year a grant allowed Levine to go to Northern
Ireland.   This act alone seemed to provide him with the necessary stimulus
to shift the general focus of his art from indulgent art world parody to
art that sought to challenge people's own sense of responsibility.

This chapter sets out to chart selectively the course that Levine's art took.
Special emphasis will be put on his billboard projects, their historical back-
ground and development, their focus and the various strategies Les Levine used.

That initial visit to Northern Ireland resulted in THE TROUBLES: AN ARTISTS
DOCUMENT OF ULSTER (Fig. 3) in January 1973.   The work itself comprised
five separate elements

1)   "The People" - a room filled with photographs and their captions,
      separated from the viewer by wooden framed barbed barricades.

2)   "Their Culture" - a semi-cultural conglomeration of a "revolutionary"
      folk art, recordings of IRA and Loyalist folk songs and photographs
      of working class life in Belfast.

3)   "Papers and Documents" - a room set out with a large selection of
      news clippings, taped interviews, books and pamphlets representing
      as Levine would have it, all sections of the troubled society.

Levine, *The Troubles: An Artist's Document of Ulster*, 1972. Dalla Mostra al Finch College Museum of Art, NYC. Courtesy M.L
rc Gallery, N.Y.C. Foto Les Levine.

g. 3

4)   "High Noise Torture Chamber" - A small darkroom within which
        audible white noise is used with high frequency tones .

5)   A "Documentary" type film on the civil war in Northern Ireland,
        featuring its origins, its protagonists, its victims and a
        suggestion towards possible settlement. [1]

What is initially clear about this work is that it has foresaken any

relationship with historical artiness.   Gone is any aesthetic pretence,

instead what appears is straight documentation.

The People section was perhaps the most human and tragic part of the

work.   Here Levine presented captioned photographs of people, isolated

victims of the troubled statelet of Northern Ireland.   All the photo-

graphs presented seem to demand an individual understanding of Ulster,

particularly an understanding of its tragedy.   'Sean Shannon Play with

Toy Gun (Fig. 4) made by his Father while interned'.   This photograph

plainly shows a young boy aiming a toy gun while his mother looks on.

The emphasis clearly is on the boy and his mother isolated in time in a

photograph.   The boy's face is filled with concentration aiming his

tommygun at an imaginary target while the mother's eyes echo sadness

and worry.   However, as the caption clearly suggests this is no ordinary

boy and his weapon, no ordinary toy gun.   This is a child playing with

a toy gun which his father has made for him while interned.   The

emphasis is clearly to create sympathy, not just for the father interned,

isolated from his family, but for the tragedy of the son being motivated

to follow in his footsteps.   There is indeed a sense of history caught

with this image, a sense in which people can be caught in situations

over which they have little control, positions in which they are merely

Sean Shannon Plays with Toy Tommy Gun Made by his Father While Interned.

Fig. 4

pawns in an historical cul-de-sac where alternative opinions and options
seem singularly absent.   The other photographs work on our sympathies
in a similar fashion presenting funerals in 'Digging Another Grave' (Fig.5)
and the isolation and injustice of the minority community in 'Deery Family
of 13 (Catholic):   Father Dead, Mother Shot in the Thigh on Bloody Sunday'
(Fig.6)

The "Papers and Documents" section of the work shows the media's answer
to the Irish problem.   Clearly this section plays a crucial role in the
totality of the strategy behind the "Troubles".   Fundamentally the
emphasis is on projecting the rather cliched nature of the press response
to the conflict.   The results are reports on terrorist violence, bloody
confrontational marches, etc. all more or less simplistic analysis of the
outward signs of minority unrest, little if no responses to the causes of
that unrest.

The documentary film section itself seems to encapsulate the artist's
views on the strife.   There is no denying that what is present is a
judgemental view of the Ulster conflict.   Clearly it is slanted to
support the minority Catholic community's demands for equal treatment.
The documentary itself comprised a view of the history of Ulster unrest,
a look at the 1972 situation and an apocalystic look at the future.
The historical portion of the documentary took the view that for
generations Old Celtic noble Eire had been pitted against the might of
the British Empire, the British and by implication their loyalist
descendants are seen of course as the invaders while the innocents
were of course the Catholic Celts.   The more modern times version
carries on in a similar vein.   The British/Loyalists are portrayed as the
oppressors, forcing the Catholic community into submissiveness through
gerrymandering, job description, bad housing, etc..   The documentary

Digging Another Grave
From Les Levine's, "The Troubles: An Artist's Document of Ulster."

Fig. 5

Deery Family of 13 (Catholic): Father Dead, Mother Shot in the Thigh on 'Bloody Sunday'.
From Les Levine's, "The Troubles: An Artist's Document of Ulster."

Fig. 6

focuses on the injustices particularly the housing problems of the
Catholic community while side by side presenting Loyalist marching
bands, singing, proclaiming their hatred and extremism against that same
minority. [2]

This work must have come as a great shock to the majority of the visitors
to this show in New York in 1973.   Les Levine would have us believe
that the common media interpretation of the Ulster troubles in the U.S.A.
at the time was of a religious war of Catholic against Protestant, an
irrelevant archaic struggle yet what Levine proposes here is a struggle
of a more insidious nature, namely, the denial of basic human right of the
Catholic minority community.   The intent, therefore, in this work is
three-fold.   Firstly, to present the injustice of the minority community
within the Northern Ireland State, secondly, to highlight what the artist
believed were the inaccuracies of the media presentation of that situation
in the U.S.A. and, thirdly, to give to the viewer of the work the onus
to question not only the specific nature of the Ulster problem, but
also the general ability and willingness of the media to come to terms
with complex problems of genuine human interest. [3]

In general art historical terms Les Levine's documentary of the Troubles
fits happily into the progressive movement of conceptual artists of the
late sixties and early seventies, from objective confrontation to more
subjective engagement.   Quite clearly a pattern had emerged where with
growing insistence artists sought to engage the public not so much with
objects to be grasped and held, but with mechanisms which would produce
particular sensations, even intellectual confrontation.   Clearly the
concept of art was taking a radical shift from its remote aesthetic base
to more practical levels of communication.   A central figure in this

movement was, of course Joseph Beuys. In 1967, he had founded a
radical but non-aligned political organisation, the German Student
Party. Gradually, his chief form of artistic activity came to be the
exposition of his political views, but often still, in a museum setting.
In the same year as Les Levine went to Northern Ireland, 1972, Beuys
had spent a day at the Tate Gallery, explaining his political views to
a large and attentive audience. Central, of course, to the Beuys
strategy was the concept of art communicating ideas rather than obstruct-
ing them. Les Levine 'Troubles - A Document of Ulster' with it's reportage
style clearly sought to do exactly the same. [4]

In the years since his Ulster work at the Finch College in New York,
Les Levine had become more and more involved in pushing his art out to
people, confronting them with videos, performance, installations and
billboards. Indeed it is the latter, the billboard works, which are by
far the most interesting.

Central of course to the body of these billboard works, however, is quite
obviously the use of language and the dependence on words to communicate
meaning. In an historical sense, of course, writings about art were not
novel. The Information Show of 1970, however, brought language based
art clearly to the fore. Here for once, everything from the photostat
presentations of definitions to the more conventional writing about art were
'keyed' [5] to the concept art. A key figure in this development was
Joseph Kosuth who stressed:

> 'Fundamental to the idea of art is the understanding of the
> linguistic nature of all art propositions, be they past or
> present, and regardless of the elements used in their
> construction.' [6]

This movement towards word usage had already become part and parcel
of the Levine style in the Reinhardt like use of handouts and press
releases throughout the sixties.   In these early works, however, the writing
was only seen as backup, the artist had not yet bestowed on them the
art status sought by Kosuth.   The Les Levine Billboard works changed all
that.   From 1974 on, the artist began to see words more and more as the
'sub carriers' [7] of 'culture' [8], words would be seen as the medium through
which people communicate, express themselves and transact their daily
lives.   As Levine would later admit -

> 'Words have meaning no matter how confused the state of the
> art in language may be at any given moment.   Meaning is a
> residual function of language. '

Levine's experimentation with language began in 1976 with his work
'NOT NECESSARILY A GREAT ONE'.   Here a dinner table conversation was
taped, transcribed and excerpts later used as captions on unrelated
photographs.   The results, of course, were obvious, no relationship appeared
to exist between the quotations and the photographs.   The effects were seen
to be unrecognisable and confusing.   Later in that same year photographs
of a dinner party were captioned descriptively, i.e. "A woman in a white
uniform with a black apron standing next to a running faucet in a modern
kitchen washing dishes". [10]   Here the relationship between text and
image was close and, therefore, recognisable.

In fact, as the artist had discovered it was the interconnectedness of the
word to the image that provided the relationship for the viewer to work
on.   Clearly the object of the exercise was to quantify human response to
gaps between language and image and to establish the relationship upon
which those gaps were built.

The results of these developments were best seen towards the end of
the seventies and early eighties. In fact, a striking example of this
work was evident in his billboard propositions at the Marian Goodman Gallery
in New York in 1980.

This work involved two word phrases conjoined with images as the concern
was seen to be with a much more limited range of word and image usage. A
good example was his Tired Earth (Fig. 7) billboard. Here a squared
poster format was divided symmetrically into four quadrants. [11] Two
photographs were mixed with the multi-word complexity of the words 'TIRED
and EARTH'.

The first word 'tired' appears to exercise in this instance two meanings,
firstly, tired, signifying some form of exhausted state, fatigued or physi-
cally lacking in energy, and secondly, a meaning which relates to the pun
on the word, i.e. tired, or the earth having been trodden on by heavy
machinery with large tyres. The second work 'earth', however, exercises
only one meaning, i.e. a patient mass, defencelessly at the mercy of man
and time. These words converge with their complimentary photographs of
a strip mine, and a piece of ground with large tyre marks on it. The
result of course presents the viewer with a limited range of possibilities,
where meaning again alternates between the interconnectedness of all the
formal elements, both words and images. [12]

The concern, of course, in this work seems to alternate between the specific
nature of the images and the more general intention employed within the
words. Clearly, however, the intention is to heighten awareness of specific
environmental problems relating to mechanization and to highlight in a more
general sense the exhaustible nature of the earth's natural resources.

Les Levine. Tired Earth. 1979. *Courtesy Marian Goodman Gallery.*

Fig. 7

The nature of Les Levine's experiments with billboard/advertisement propositions fluctuated between the use of complex word groupings and explicit statements in more straightforward presentations.

An example of this more explicit approach was to be found in his proposal of 1980, WE ARE NOT AFRAID (Fig. 8).   Here the format is much simpler, the image is of a young oriental couple looking out at the viewer, with the sunset as background.   Here the words are specific, but none the less mysterious, 'We are not afraid'.   The words themselves are surely not ambiguous, but their meaning is.   The proposal, of course, was to place copies on advertising space in the New York City Subway System.   The intention to allude to advertisement, to manipulate and adopt media codes but not with the express intention of selling products, but instead the selling of an idea.   This concept was chosen to allude to fear, to sensitize public awareness and to activate on a personal level, the experience of fear on the subway in the hope, as Levine puts it,

> "that people will attain insight into themselves and
> somehow go some way to alleviating their anxiety" [13]

Increasingly, however, there was a tendency within Levine's work to reduce the number of words rather than increase them.   Central to this new approach was the use of the 'imperative verb' [14] form.   Its use as a formal tool was threefold.   Firstly, its function was to command the viewer to dictate a mode of action and to reinforce acceptance of that behaviour. Secondly, its function was to allude to and exist within an acceptable mode of commercial advertising and, thirdly, it was readily adaptable to the Levine concept of an unquestioning humanity in a somewhat 'post-conscious state'. [15]

New York City Subway Project 'We are not afraid'.
Fig. 8

In "media Mass" (Fig. 9) project of 1984 Levine employed imperative verb forms alone. Here there were no images to work on, merely commands flashed onto a spectacolour lightboard in Time Square, New York among other commercial advertisements. The single words themselves were "cheat, hate, kill, lie, rape, sell, starve and win". The intention was obvious, to shock, stun and activate people's minds to question not just the commands themselves, but those topics which relate to them. Indeed, it seems quite apparent that in using these particular words Levine was hoping to allude to similar advertisement command structures, indeed to parody the very essence of advertising morality. Surely the artist was seeking to generate public awareness of the methods advertisers employ to sell products, i.e. dictating instead of enticing. [16] The words themselves, however, are open-ended. They invite the viewer to come to whatever conclusions he or she wants. "Basically the idea is to get people to think for themselves". [17]

Still more complex patterns emerged in his 1984 work BREATHE, REFLECT (Fig. 10). Here two imperative verbs complement rather than contradict. Again this is a billboard proposition where two separate words join with their separate but respective images. The word 'breathe' is written over a large palm tree while 'reflect' is positioned over a body of water. The word 'breathe' itself is a forceful command to inhale and exhale the air around. However, when coupled with the leafy palm tree it seems to conjure up the chemical process by which foliage, in fact all plant life, 'inhale our exhalations'. The word 'reflect' is a quieter word, essentially it has two meanings, firstly to ponder, to think or to meditate and secondly reflect as in reflection, i.e. to send back an image of the sender. The combination of reflect and reflective qualties of the water tend to initially suggest a mirroring of image yet when combined with the first image and word clearly allude to the delicate environmental balance between man's

Fig. 9

Les Levine, BREATHE, REFLECT, 1984. Watercolor. 61 x 39". Courtesy Ted Greenwald Gallery.

Fig. 10

survival and his related dependence on plant life to sustain him. [18]

Clearly by 1984 Les Levine billboard work had evolved to the point where by the early 19 eighties he was prepared to take the billboard proposals out to engage not just the art viewing public, but the general public as well. As has been seen he attempted to use adaptions of advertisement formats to achieve this end. Les Levine Ads, however, were billboard and media projects specifically designed to offer alternative models of information to those presented by the media. Advertising as Levine saw it had become the most power effective and persuasive experience in people's lives. Through television, magazines, newspaper, billboards, etc., advertising had assumed a leading role in controlling people, or so Les Levine believed. Les Levine's billboards set out to harness the power and effectiveness of the advertising medium and in doing so sought to undermine it.

In a factual sense Levine's billboard work differs greatly from the reportage style of the early works (e.g. THE TROUBLES). Heretofore the emphasis was on providing information, now, however, the emphasis was to activate people to their own sense of media awareness. In the majority of the early billboard works stress was put on creating awareness of environmental problems, personal problems and even media problems. In each case what the artist has presented was an alternative view of the world around man, views different from those presented through the media. The emphasis was not to present judgemental, intellectual, or moralistic opinions, but to quietly provide the onlooker with a gentle stirring in the mind. The strategy Levine employed was not to use these billboard advertisements for product promotion, but to devise ways of making fresh images, images that the artist hoped would interest the eyes, thereby creating enough interest to tickle the consciousness to greater experience awareness. [19]

As extra-gallery art, therefore, these billboards have great potential.
The work WE ARE NOT AFRAID (Fig. 8) was positioned in every subway
car in New York City in 1984.   Here the tactic was to quietly allude to
fear, to present an everyday model of fearfulness in the hope that those
who come into contact with it would dwell on those issues surrounding
it, i.e. fear, freedom, etc..   Yet the strategy was not to limit the
viewer's engagement with the topic, not to go so far as to provide a
resolution, but in a sense to leave the work in an incomplete form so that
the viewers' resolution would be one that was his or her own.   Indeed, there
was a conscious realization on Les Levine's part that once you take the
chance and operate in the public environment, where you don't have complete
control, then there was no certain way of knowing how people would react, in
fact the healthy aspect is that they could take any attitude they wished. [20]

Parallel to both aspects of engagement with the general public is the cons-
tant Levine concern with developing art, contributing to the art medium,
in essence, mould breaking exercises in which his specific contribution
would be seen in terms of effectiveness in creating awareness among the general
public. [21]

Les Levine's most recent billboard work is on a far greater scale than
heretofore.   Basically it consisted of twenty billboards, twelve of them
large horizontal rectangles (10 x 21 feet) and eight of them smaller (10 x 10
feet) squares.   Each billboard contained images cropped from photograph of
the artist's visit to Northern Ireland in 1972 and two word phrases made up
of an imperative verb, usually a violent verb like 'kill', 'attack',
'torture', or 'bomb', followed consistently by the word 'God'.

Initially, it was proposed that these billboards be installed both in public places and in galleries.   The entire set was to be shown three times, firstly in London, then in Derry and, finally, in Dublin.

In this case the formal word elements have again changed.   This time the phrases combine to form a basic five element formula.

(a)   Firstly, they all conform to a two word structure, e.g. Kill God, Blame God, etc.,

(b)   The first of these words seem to always contain an imperative verb.

(c)   These verbs are always to be viewed as specific in an action sense, e.g. Block, Kill, etc..

(d)   The second word always remaining the same, i.e. God.

(e)   The second word having at least three different levels of meaning. [22]

It is the consistency of the word God as part of the phrase structure that essentially gives these works meaning and cohesion.   In each case God is the recipient of the action whether that action be an exortation to 'kill' or even to 'play'.   God is the focus of the work yet significantly enough the word itself has more than one meaning even on a very basic level. Fundamentally, God can be looked at from three different theological stand-points.

In the theistic sense 'God' is singular, he is the creator, the builder
of the universe, he is a literal truth.   The theistic point of view is
essentially the definitive model, the Christian response to God.   On this
level 'Kill God' could be seen as a provocative gesture meaning kill the
Christian notion of God, destroy his church, destroy the essence of
Christianity. · Within the Theistic framework, therefore, the command to
'Kill God' is essentially a demand to destroy Christian piety, a 'satanic'
gesture which is bewildering to say the least.

From an atheistic point of view, the use of the word God seems just as
incomplete.   In an athesistic sense, God is not specific, he is merely a
superstitious concept, he simply does not exist.   The exhortations,
therefore, to defeat, starve, kill, God seem to mean something like 'Defeat
the idea of God in you, starve the ill will that creates the idea of God
and it's dualities, kill the desire to use this power ploy to reduce others, [23]
and so on.

From a pantheistic point of view God is THE BEING, God is not separate
from existence, God is the TOTALITY OF BEING, God is everything and
everybody.   Killing God, therefore, is a symbolic act, merely a gesture
towards destroying all existence.

The work itself, however, does not seem to submit to any specific doctrinal
point of view.   Indeed, what we seem to have is an open-ended work
where interpretation is left solely to the viewer. [24]

The changing first words of the billboards are sell, lose, starve, defeat,
attack, torture, blast, fight, play, parade and control.   All but one
are imperative verb forms, they all, however, suggest action, they all
offer to the mind a verbal stimulant to focus on horror, tragedy and

conflict. Slum, however, is not an imperative verb, it is more accurately a noun. Yet when used in the billboard with God it appears to take on an imperative verb form. It functions to direct the mind to focus in on an operation where action takes place, i.e. Slum God, or direct God to a very lowly state. [25]

In a general sense all but four of the first words are associated in one way or another with war, e.g. attack, torture, kill, blast, fight, etc.. These words provoke mental images of all that is terrifying and abhorrent about modern warfare. The remaining verbs, however, more specifically relate to the exercise of power in PLAY GOD and more theological concepts in CREATE GOD and FORGIVE GOD.

Obviously it is the very potency of the words themselves that give the billboard work accessability. Words obviously have meaning, they are the medium through which people communicate in everyday life and as such they provide the perfect prop for any ad. The nature of most advertisement, however, is the concentration on simple catchword phrases, Les Levine bill-boards, therefore, seek to go one better. In this project the strategy is to use the direct catchphrase, but in doing so, to demand of people that they question that same phrase, i.e. validate its meaning before accepting. [25]

USE OF IMAGES

The images on the twenty one billboards are blowups of oil-crayon drawings taken by Levine from snippets of photographs of Northern Ireland during his visit in 1972. The figures within the images are all quite passive, violence is nonetheless suggested, but never witnessed. Soldiers standing waiting, boys point guns, women clasp their children, policemen block

with barricades, these are images from real life, images that suggest
tension or that sense of calmness that exists before or after immediate
danger.   These images nonetheless seek to go beyond the usual politically
motivated, newsy, confrontational photographs we are used to, beyond
aesthetically beautiful moments of violence, beyond the arrogance and
deception of the media, these images seek to show how things really are.

The 'Kill God' (Fig. 11) billboard is, perhaps, the most poignant of all
the images.   Here a young boy levels a toy gun at his mirror image
while the unmistakable design of the Union Jack is to be seen behind him.
The figure is that of a child, the weapon merely a toy yet as we wait for the
smiling figure to pull the trigger, we concentrate on its meaning.   This is
a specific child, isolated from his family, his friends and his social
condition.   He is just a child in a green jumper standing in front of a
red Union Jack.   Across his jumper are red heart designs, are these colours
meant to be symbolic, if so, is this child half Unionist and half Repoblican?

Clearly the image itself does not suggest enough to offer any conclusive
answer as to the artist's intent, it is, therefore, only in the more obvious
context of word and image that the works could conceivably find validation.

On a more basic level, however, the image in the Kill God billboard delivers
on all the virtues of an advertiser's billboard.   It has a simple
composition, it is bright, colourful and easily recognizable, it uses simple
direct wordage and, obviously, occupies exactly the same space as any common
commercial advertisement, however, for once, the issue is not the propoganda
of commodity consumption.   As an advertisement work the Kill God billboard
is difficult to classify.   Certainly it interests the eye and attracts the
senses, all very important aspects of effective commercial advertisement,
yet fundamentally it differs because it basically avoids any communion

Torture God and Kill God billboards Elephant & Castle, London 1985

Fig. 11

with psychological manipulation or product endorsement. Certainly the image and text are concise, certainly they explore association and unconscious feelings, yet in truth that is where any similarity with commercial ads. cease, Kill God advertises an idea, an idea which is complex yet simple, which encourages persistent analysis yet remains deliberately ambiguous.

Somewhat similar problems arise with the 'Attack God' (Fig. 12) billboard poster. Here a clearly recognizable image of soldiers and policemen are seen to stand and wait. Over this image in bold white print, the imperative verb, attack mixes somewhat ambiguously with its keyword God. The background itself is just a flat bland purple, signifying what tension perhaps drama to the somewhat unprovocative imagery of the waiting security forces. The soldiers are obviously British and the policemen clearly from Northern Ireland, their uniforms testify to that. These security men are obviously on standby, they appear to stand, talk and wait. Wait for what? Chat about what? Are they expecting trouble or have they had trouble? Certainly the figure to the right stands rigidly, he stares menacingly to the viewer's right. The other figures, however, adopt a more relaxed pose, their slumped shoulder and back posture clearly demonstrate this. The figure to the extreme right carries a weapon happily though it is not at the ready. This is certainly not the typical photo-journalistic image we are used to getting from Northern Ireland, no funerals here, no confrontational balletic bombers, no weeping mothers, instead an image of seemingly everyday Ulster life - the ever present vigilant, watchful police and army presence. The figures within the frame are painted flat and coloured dull green, brown and black. They stand out clearly from their background, but not in any gawdy or stark sense.

Attack God ICA installation *1985*

Fig. 12

This is a quiet look for a poster, it catches the eye because of its strange off colouredness yet radiates a quiet presence as a direct result of that same low colour intensity.

However, paradoxically the word usage is not half so quiet as the image. In this instance the now familiar two word format is again used, this time though the catchphrase is 'Attack God', an imperative command to assault God in a violent manner, yet again problems arise: How can we 'Attack God'? Where is he? Is he in uniform on this billboard? If so, which of the figures is he?

With each conclusion, however, still further questions arise. Keys to the solution of the puzzle are not provided, what the questioning seems to achieve though is to highlight the specific issues that surround the billboard, namely, the security forces, God, or more specifically the question of religion and the Ulster troubles. Certainly the results of this poster are ambiguous and open-ended, but surely it is the very vagueness that provides the mechanism whereby intellectual levels of understanding are brought into play and awareness beyond the obvious is demanded of the viewer.

Many of the other billboards in this series work in a much similar fashion. Of these, 'Hate God' (Fig. 13), 'Execute God' (Fig. 14) and 'Block God' (Fig. 15) capture much more of the cliched viewpoints of the Northern Ireland conflict. Hate God presents a somewhat typical view of Loyalist demonstrators parading their flags and emblems, confidently proclaiming their religious, tribal, preferences and prejudices. The word format is again selective, but obviously not so open-ended. Here the connectedness
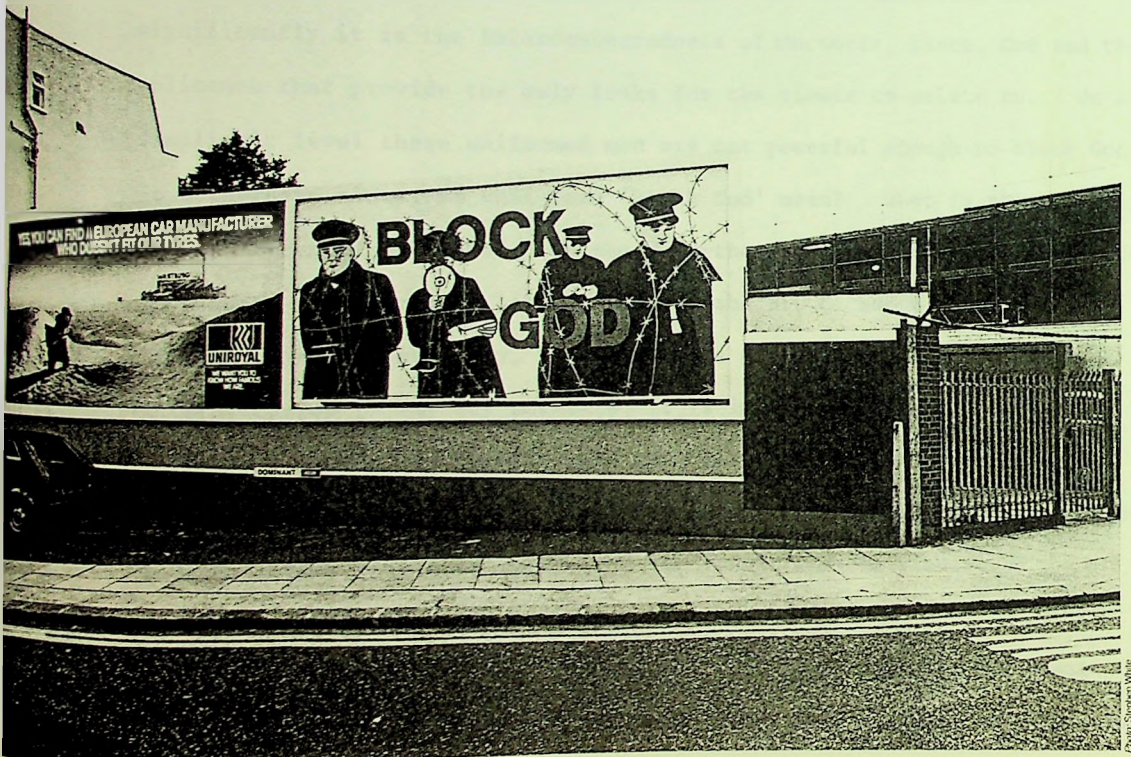
Hate God 1985

'Execute God', Elephand and Castle, London, 1985.

Fig. 14

Block God billboard Camden Town, London 1985

Photo: Stephen White

fig. 15

of Unionism, religion and hatred focus on a much narrower range of possibilities yet still somehow manages to concern the viewer with not just a conclusion to the unmistakable puzzle presented by the image, but the more general problems of relating the topic to the Ulster strife.

The 'Block God' poster again seems to highlight the connection between religion and the police. Again interpretation is difficult, but significantly it is the interconnectedness of the words, block, God and the policemen that provide the only links for the viewer to relate to. On a simplistic level these uniformed men are not powerful enough to block God in a theistic sense, so what does 'block God' mean? What is the connection between the obvious links? In their Northern Ireland context it would seem that there is an implied linkage between the R.U.C. and blocking, God, religion, or more obviously, specific types of religion. Whether this interpretation is any way accurate, it is impossible to say, however, in terms of the other billboard works and their interpretation it becomes obvious that the clearer the link between word and image, the less ambiguous and, therefore, the less open-ended the result for the viewer.

'Torture God' (Fig. 16) and 'Play God' (Fig. 17) are perhaps the least successful of all. 'Torture God' presents us with an image of a high wall with a gap in it. Through the gap we see images of simple wooden constructed buildings. Again, the two word pattern is in evidence and this time a clear relationship is built up with the orange coloured buildings in the back-ground and the word 'torture'. Clearly two thirds of this puzzle fit yet what of the third? What is the relationship between 'God' and torture. Clearly in its Ulster context the issue being addressed is institutional torture and its somewhat ambiguous relationship with religion. Is torture

Attack God and Torture God billboards Camden Town, London 1985

ig. 16

Play God and **Bomb God** Orchard Gallery installation *1985*

Fig. 17

being committed there in the name of God? Who is doing the torturing
and for what purpose? Surely the very notion of any viewpoint of God
is anathema to any suggestion of 'torture'.

The PLAY GOD billboard is, perhaps, the most adaptable of all the works.
Here the image is split between well dressed gentlemen carrying orange
banners and those of similar bowler typed men just standing. The
inference, of course, is that these are powerful men, men who run businesses,
men with political power and prestige. The words, of course, add to this
feeling, 'play God'. The inference again seems to be that these people
can and perhaps do play God, that they have the power and the ability to
rule and misrule as they see fit. These are quite clearly Orangemen, the
suggestion is that they are - playing God.

Most of the remaining billboard works are not half so clearcut. The
Protect God (Fig. 18) billboard work is again a split level image and features
three different sets of mothers with their respective children. Two of
the mothers have their children on their knees, the other mother has hers
in a pram. In only one case does fear or anxiety appear to register
on any of the mother's faces and even then it might simply be curiosity.
So what is at issue here? What has protecting God got to do with protecting
children? The three mothers are clearly separated within the picture.
Perhaps they are protecting their children from the influence of other
religions, perhaps not. The interconnectedness clearly lies between the
relationship of mother to child, protection and religion. Create God
(Fig. 19) on the other hand seeks to set up a relationship between death,
those who remember the dead, mourn their loss and the notion of 'creating
God'. Yet again the connection seems tenuous and slightly ambiguous.

Protect God and **Create God** Orchard Gallery installation *1985*

ig. 18 and Fig. 19

Fundamentally, this work continues in the same vein as the earlier
Northarn Ireland documentary in 1972 as it seeks to highlight the problems
of that strife torn state.   In this instance, however, the artist is
not being overly judgemental or moralistic, here the strategy is to allow
the viewer to come to resolutions which are fundamentally the receiver's
own.   What are presented are billboards which are incomplete models.
Their very nature is that they highlight specific issues, but in doing so
they seek to demand of the onlooker some complicit action, [26] in coming to
a resolution about what the billboard is aiming at, what it should be in
a completed form.   That resolution, of course, is the viewer's own.   The
central point, of course, is to attract the viewer's attention so that a
thinking process is set up. [27]

Les Levine had long considered art's potential to lie in the ability to
change people's minds to allow people sufficient space to adopt different
personal attitudes which were significantly different from the pre-
conceived packaged ideas that media fosters.   Basically, Levine's bill-
board demand of the viewer that they consider these kinds of possibilities.
To this extent the artist sought to harness the potential that advertisement
billboards had, to reach large sections of the public.   In doing so he
sought not just to attract the attention of the general public, but to get
press coverage as well on the contents of that work. [28]

Essentially, of course, this work is focused on Northern Ireland, it presents
aspects of the troubles and in doing so seeks to relate those problems
to religion.   Yet how can religion be linked with bloodshed and brutality?
Levine, of course, had become aware that the media had sought to do that
very thing, namely, portray the strife in Northern Ireland in terms of a

religious war.   In so doing Les Levine believed the media had sought to
influence all liberal minded people and particularly liberal America to
view the struggle as an archaic anachronism, a religious struggle which
would have had more relevance to the last century than to our own.   What
Levine realized was that putting religion next to killing was ridiculous,
therefore in proposing that on his billboards, he sought to create awareness
of not just the nature of the sturggle, but the way the media had presented
it, in fact the way media works. [29]

In terms of the overall development of his work Levine felt that finally
he had created artworks which would create and activate awareness, which
would demand complicit action and deep levels of thought, artworks
that would involve people in questioning not just the problems highlighted
by the content of the work, but those very power structures that surround
them as individuals.   The only remaining problem was would the general
public see them in that light, would they, in fact, be effective.

FOOTNOTES

1. J. BURNHAM, "Les Levine And The Troubles",
   ARTS MAGAZINE, APRIL 1973, PP. 56, 57.

2. ibid. P.57.

3. ibid. P.59

4. E. LUCIE-SMITH, Art in the Seventies, P.31.

5. J. JEFFERY, "Art Theory and the Decline of the Art Object",
   STUDIO INTERNATIONAL, APRIL 1973, P.257.

6. ibid.

7. L. LEVINE, "The Word is God",
   BLAME GOD: Billboard Projects, P.8.

8. ibid.

9. ibid.

10. T. MCEVILLEY, "The Collaboration of Word and Image in the
    Art of Les Levine", BLAME GOD: Billboard Projects, P.3

11. B. CAVALIERE, "ADS", ARTS MAGAZINE, FEBRUARY 1980, P.9.

12. E. BUONAGURIO, "Les Levine", ARTS MAGAZINE, MAY 1980, P.32

13. B. CAVALIERE, "Les Levine Ads...and More Ads", ARTS MAGAZINE,
    MARCH 1981, P.131.

14. T. MCEVILLEY, "The Collaboration of Word and Image in the
    Art of Les Levine", BLAME GOD: Billboard Projects, P.4.

15. L. LEVINE, "Artistic", THE ART OF PERFORMANCE, P.249.

16. T. MCEVILLEY, "The Collaboration of Word and Image in the Art
    of Les Levine", BLAME GOD: Billboard Projects, P.4.

17.   L. LEVINE, "Lecture N.C.A.D. Dublin",
        17 OCTOBER 1986.

18.   W. SIMMER, "Les Levine", ART MAGAZINE, NOVEMBER 1984, P.20.

19.   C. HAGAN, "Les Levine, New York City Subway System and
        "Village Voice" Cover".

20.   D. MCGONAGLE, "A Conversation Between Les Levine and
        Declan McConagle, I.C.A., London, 8 September 1985",
        PP. 1 - 25. (Extended version).

21.   T. MCEVILLEY, "The Collaboration of Word and Image in
        the Art of Les Levine", BLAME GOD: Billboard Projects, P.6.

22.   ibid. P.5.

23.   ibid.

24.   ibid.

25.   ibid.

26.   L. LEVINE, "The Word is God", BLAME GOD: Billboard Projects,
        P. 8.

27.   M. MCGONAGLE, "Extracts from a Conversation Between Les
        Levine and Declan McGonagle, I.C.S., London, 8 September
        1985", P.6.

28.   ibid.

29.   ibid. P.4.

30.   ibid. P.9.

C H A P T E R   I I I

EFFECTIVENESS: BLAME GOD:

BILLBOARD PROJECT

Although it is difficult to pin down the social effects of advertising
in any precise sense, it is an infinitely greater task when one comes
to judge the effects of Les Levine's Blame God: Billboard Project.   To
some extent, however, the effectiveness of this work should be seen in
the light of what the artist himself proposed was the basic intention
behind the project:-

> 'The point of the work is that I did the work because I would
> like press coverage on the content of the work, perhaps I
> would like the individuals passing by to come into contact
> with it, and to experience some new state of mind because
> of it.   But if the work doesn't succeed in being completed,
> ..... I will feel it is a failed work completely.'[1]

Essentially the strategy underlying Les Legine's 'Blame God, Billboard
Project was to engage sections of the general public, through the medium
of billboard advertisement in a manner which would activate them
sufficiently to consider the problems relating to the Northern Ireland
conflict and the media's role in relation that same conflict.   In Les
Levine's opinion, therefore, the effectiveness of these works could
only be judged by the degree to which the individual outdoor
advertisements succeeded in reaching the press and interacting with
the public.   In these terms it will be shown that the work was far from
successful.

Initially, Les Levine had arranged for these large billboards to replace general advertisements on hoardings in the Chalk Farm and Elephant and ·Castle areas of London. Trouble started even before the exhibition was constructed and lasted until well after it had ended. For no sooner was part of this project completed than a member of the public threw a pot of paint over one of the billboards. Still greater damage was done, however, by the billboard companies themselves who having contracted to post up the works had second thoughts and posted over the billboards with old Christian Aid posters. After weeks of legal wrangling, however, the companies reinstated the work back to their original advertising spaces. No sooner was this done, than individual members of the public again had their say by virtually completely destroying the entire work.

As a result of all this furore the London showing of Les Levine's billboards lasted for little more than a very few hours and not the whole month as expected, yet even so the reactions from the public were appreciable. [2]

A storm of protest reached the headquarters of the Institute of Contemporary Art, joint sponsors of the project. Much of this righteous mail demanded to know what the work was about. Were they meant as advertisements, or exhibition? Many who did protest expressed extreme concern at both its contents and implications, while the vast majority of the complaints came from religious leaders who christened it, "terrorist propaganda" [3] a 'calculated, sickening insult to all Christians' [4] and 'downright offensive' [5] and 'eletist' [6].

Clearly the word had not filtered down to the general public that these posters of internment camps, Orangemen, soldiers, policemen, mothers, children and bombed out buildings were not meant to be blasphemous, but were, in fact, purporting to be supportive of God. In fact, clearly

the public took the exhortations to Kill, Bomb and Hate God at face
value, they apparently did not appear to understand the real nature of
the artist's intent. [7]

By the time the exhibition arrived at its next and more potentially
volatile stop, Derry, the images were solely confined to the gallery
area as the city's intransigent billboard posting companies refused point
blank to have anything to do with them.

By August, 1986, the exhibition was mounted in Dublin.   Again, in this
instance little attempt was made to exhibit the billboards outdoors, save
for one billboard in an isolated corner of Westland Row train station
(Fig. 20).   In any event this installation at Westland Row became little
more than an exercise in self-mockery.   The billboard itself was divided
into two halves, one half showing a scaled down version of the work
PARADE GOD while the other half advertised the main body of work within
the gallery.   In effect, the art which was intended to be a challenge to
media and advertising in general became just another advertisement. [8]

There was, however, a certain amount of publicity generated as a result of
this controversy, particularly in London, yet basically the newspapers
did not in any sense come to terms with the content of the work.   What
they did, however, was document the continued row between the billboard
companies and the ICA.   Thus, not alone did the billboards not manage to
get the message through to the general public, but it also failed to get
the issue involved into general print. [9]

es Levine, Billboard Project, Westland Row Station, Dublin, 1986.

Fig. 20

The gallery exhibitions themselves went ahead undeterred in London, Derry and Dublin.   Here the reactions from the art going audience was muted but not unfavourable, yet this was not the purpose or function of the work as Levine saw it.   The art going public, as the artist well knew, would always react favourably to levels of intellectual stimulation, yet Levine's preference was to by-pass the like-minded liberality of the art world and reach as many people as possible. [10]

In terms of art criticism the work received little acknowledgement either. Those art magazines and newspaper columns that did react strove to give little analysis of the works themselves, but seemed content simply to proclaim the artist's views on the billboards' content and strategy.

The question must be asked, of course, why these billboards which adopted accepted and successful media strategies failed?   Why the general public reacted in such an aggressive fashion?   Why the billboard companies felt it necessary to refuse to paste up the billboards and, basically, where the Levine strategy went wrong?

To my mind the problems arising out of the works stem essentially from the billboards' ambiguity and as a result   its openendedness.   One of the central factors causing this ambguity was the use of forceful, provocative two word phrases, Levine's use of language was, of course, 'formally rigorous' to an unusual degree.   The pattern was to use the imperative verbs 'kill', 'attack', etc., to aggressively attract the viewer to demand that he or she take notice, yet almost certainly the results of these blunt demanding commands was that people are not provoked, but rather repelled by this type of aggressiveness.   The fact it that words like kill, hate, torture, defeat, execute, etc. demand instant reflexive reactions on the viewer's part, not the type of thoughtful tickling that provokes contemp-

lation or reflective, but reactions of an aggressive yet submissive nature. In fact, ultimately a hoarding that says 'Kill God' is in final analysis 'an exhortation' to act and not to think.

On this same level much comment was made by the artist regarding the fact that one of the street billboard works which were vandalised by the public, was on show directly beside an advertisement for the Sylvester Stallone outlandishly violent film Rambo II (Fig. 21). The question that he asked, of course, was why the Stallone billboard was not destroyed by the moral crusading public? Surely the answer to that lies in the less provocative, but more direct, use of language in that advertisement. The Stallone billboard is captioned, "Stallone is back as RAMBO FIRST BLOOD PART II - NO MAN, NO LAW, NO WAR CAN STOP HIM". The emphasis, of course, is on the return of the actor "STALLONE is back", certainly violence is alluded to, not as overtly as in the Levine Billboard ATTACK GOD, but in the much smaller print as "No man, no law, no war can stop him". Clarity is, of course, the key to the film advertisement's success, here the appetite for violence is whether, overtly the words allude to romantic superhuman qualities thereby seeking to seduce and attract both the viewer's imagination and interest. In the case of the Levine's billboards, however, little clarity is in evidence and as a result the appalling ambiguity of the verbal commands causes confusion and bewilderment for the viewer, thus making it more difficult for the real focus of the work to be brought into view.

Critical surely to any successful interactions with the Les Levine billboard works is the obvious reliance on the word 'God' to project the general religious element of the work. In terms of effectiveness, however, this crucial factor does not seem to impress. In fact, to judge from the public's reactions 'God' was evidently only seen in the narrow theistic
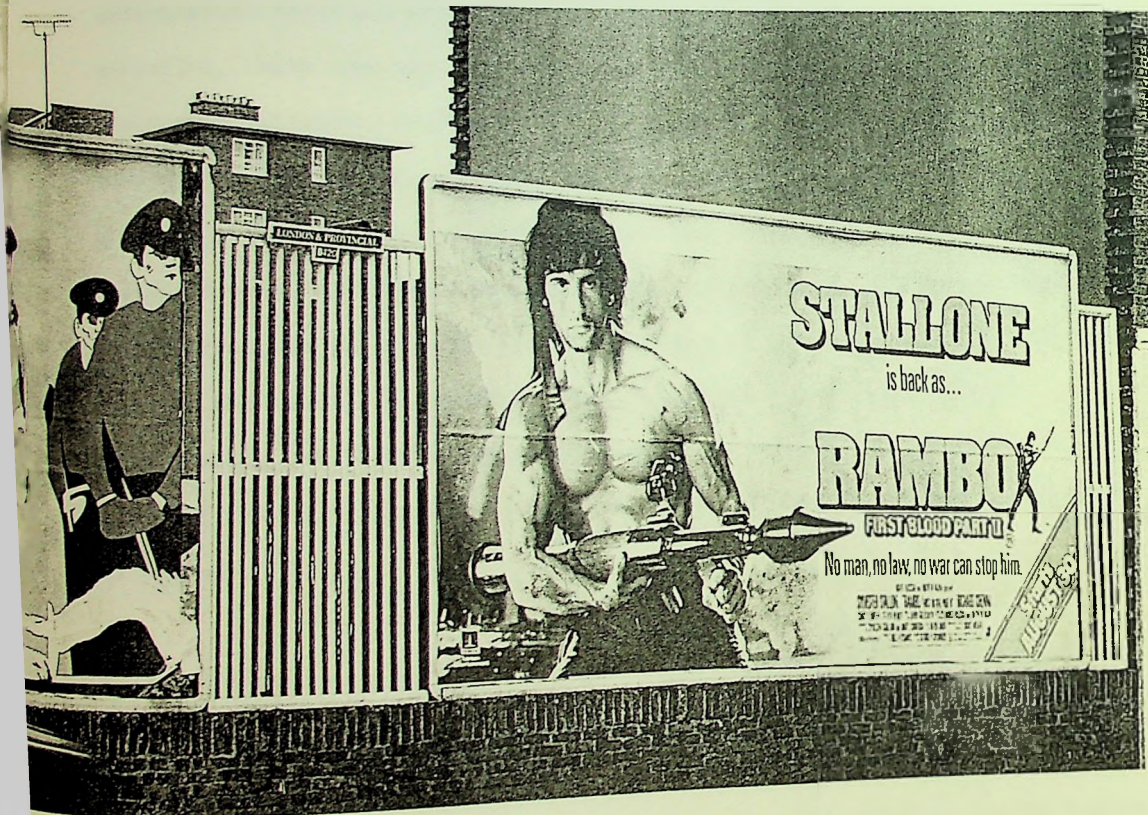
Rambo Advertisement

Fig. 21

sense, 'God' was singular, 'he' was the creator, the ruler over all the earth, any reference to killing 'him', etc., therefore, was obviously blasphemous and irreverent, in fact, to many what Levine seemed to propose was precisely what the more obvious interpretation of the work seemed to suggest, namely to attack, to kill, or to torture God.   To those, however, who did see beyond the obvious, and who did choose to consider a more metaphorical approach and link the exhortations to the Northern Ireland situation, there was the added problem of a reconciling God, religion and 'sectarian/political brutality'. [11]   Indeed the intent on the artist's part was to demonstrate through the very paradoxical nature of the three elements, the stupidity of referring to the Northern Ireland problem as a religious war.   Clearly, therefore, the intention is to suggest that it is not, that the Ulster problem has nothing to do with religion, that the cause of the troubles are other than religious bigotry and blatant sectarianism, yet surely common sense and any decent understanding of the nature of the Irish question would suggest that Les Levine has overlooked the obvious. [12]

The fact is that nearly all forms of Christianity in Ireland are bound up with their respective 'political orders'. [13]   Thus, seeking to separate religion from politics and politics from religion in an Irish context is a 'contradiction' [14], indeed, that same fact is quite apparent in the Levine works which show Orangemen proclaiming their religious presence through the re-enactment of the Protestant victory on July 12th.   Indeed, this is surely just as much a political demonstration as a religious one.   In this sense the billboards strategy could conceivable be judged an abstraction and the billboards themselves merely an irrelevancy. [15]

Effectiveness, of course, is impossible to consider in this instance
without some discussion about the ability of the Levine billboard imagery
to effect communication on a mind to mind level.

In a very physical sense, of course, billboards are devised to offer
imagery that attracts the eye and thus in a strategic sense interests
the viewer's mind on both a conscious and unconscious level. Les Levine's
Blame God billboards seek to operate in that same public billboard environ-
ment, as such they must be fresh enough in an image sense to attract and
interest that same general public. To some extent, of course, they are
successful, they do provide fresh images with attractive colour blends,
they are simplified enough to take in at a second's glance and they do link
their contents with the Northern Ireland troubles. However, these same
images which were simplified by Levine to fit their advertisement format
seem a little too simplified and thus a little cold and somewhat calculated.
In fact, these are almost bland images of figures with only very basic facial
features, almost inhuman, they appear to lack the humanity necessary to pro-
voke sympathy and interest. The effect of all this is that the eye of the
viewer, while initially attracted by the strange nature of the images, is
repulsed by their singular lack of individual character. Added to this
factor, of course, is the nature of the images themselves which are more or
less simplistic journalistic type images of Orange marches, policemen,
soldiers, children, etc.. There is nothing new in these images, nothing
that could effectively project some new insight into an understanding of the
Ulster problem, nothing that could accurately represent the effect of the
troubles on people's lives, in fact, these images are typical of the
feeble photojournalism that Ulster has become a victim of for many years.
These images, in fact, are essentially cliches, cliches that isolate the

victims of the troubles from their homes, their families and their background and seek to present them as simplistic stereotyped media objects, images that the general public can relate to on a surface level and not on any more meaningful plane.   In effect, therefore, these images which in the first instance set out to challenge media perceptions of Northern Ireland have themselves paradoxically simply become superficial presentations of that same media image. [16]

The challenge, therefore, for the viewer on an image level is negligible in the Les Levine Blame God billboards.   What is presented, however, are images which allude to trivial media presentations and with the exception perhaps of the 'Kill God' work, therefore, fail to provoke any great stirring of the mind.   A key factor surely in the superficiality of the imagery is, of course, the source of the images themselves.   Most, if not all, of these images are culled from Levine's visit to Northern Ireland in 1972. At the time the original photographs were taken there is every reason to believe that they did show a slice of Ulster life that was missed by the general media.   However, fifteen years later media analysis has improved, the general public now seem to have a greater understanding of the troubles, they can see beyond the statistics of bombs and bullets and, in fact, they can entertain quite intelligent concepts of the source and problems inherent in the conflict itself.   In any event, it would appear that what the artist portrayed as fresh images are, in fact, merely recycled images, images of a time when there was little if no sympathy, in the media sense, for the Catholic minority community and little understanding of the deprivation both material and spiritual that led them into strife.   In this light the billboard works seem to project themselves as a retrograde rather than a positive step in seeking to create an understanding of the troubles.

These images allude to 1971 and not to the realities of 1986 therefore their relevance and effectiveness as information carriers seem even more in question. [17]

From a slightly different point of view these works must, of course, be seen in a linage of works by Irish born artists on the Ulster question. In more recent years a new generation of artists like Willie Doherty and Dermot Seymour have sought to focus in on the troubles. Seymour is a painter and a native of Belfast. His imagery seems to focus on the structure and external reality of myth in the Ulster situation. Physically, however, the pictures portray stone throwing Loyalist youths, gun toting policemen, army helicopters, etc. (Fig. 22) essentially cliched symbols and emblems, irrelevant imagery that provides little insight beyond the obvious. The Levine billboard imagery could easily be paralleled with Seymour's paintings. Both seek to highlight the effects of the troubles, yet both equally fai to present images that go beyond this, both seem to grapple with simplistic imagery yet neither seem to realize that simple imagery alone can never hope to explain away the complexity of the Northern Ireland situation. Willie Doherty on the other hand is essentially a photographer who like Les Levine uses language as an extra tool in his armoury. Doherty, of course, is a native of Derry, who appears to have a greater understanding of the complexity of the Ulster problem. Willie Doherty's images are fresh (Fig. 23), they go beyond the obvious, they subtly seduce the imagination with sensitive aesthetic imagery yet stir and provoke the consciousness with singularly lucid word usage. Doherty, of course, uses content meaningfully, not in the empty ambiguous way that Levine does, but with great purpose and thought. Clarity and insight is the result, clarity of meaning, firstly in terms of content and information and, secondly, in terms of direction and direct insight into the everyday reality of pervasive alienation and insecurity. Central, of course, to the effectiveness of

Gwennit Seymour. "Let the Bastards Die". 1943. Oil on Board

Fig. 22

Fig. 23

Willie Doherty's work is subtlety, sensitivity, a real understanding of the nature of the Ulster tragedy.

At the heart of the matter, is what Walter Benjamin called "the precise nature of the relationship between quality and commitment".   Levine's Blame God billboards are an attempt at political engagement.   What they seem to lack, however, is first hand experience and a real understanding of the seriousness of the Ulster problem and of the nature of the same problem. [18]

The very essence of this discourse surely highlights the problems of political engagement particularly when that same engagement seeks to effect awareness of real time issues.   Political engagement is not new to art yet the conceptual and post-conceptual movement seems to have created an ever-increasing number of artists who have become involved in social issues. A central factor, of course, to all this work has been the dilemma of how to integrate art and politics in an effective manner.   Traditionally, artists had been adopted by the controlling forces from within the art world, into believing that if art communicates what it communicates had better be so vague as to be virtually incommunicable, or it won't be judged by that same art network as good art.   The dilemma, therefore, for modern artists who seek political engagement is how to reconcile the obvious art world bias against meaning with   the need to activate people in more thought provoking ways.   The risk, of course, has always been that by dealing in meaning, the work of art may immediately absorb itself in the world, losing its privileged shelter.   Yet still the problem remains, how to remain effective given the art world taboo against politically effective art.   Some artists, however, have succeeded. [19]

Jenny Holzer, for instance, has used many different ways, both ambiguous and otherwise, of engaging directly with the public, of interest, however, is her use of direct mail and street leafleting to convey her provocative messages about thinking about oneself in the morass of conflicting commercial propaganda that surround all of us. She does this by making her own carefully researched collections of aphorisms and essays whose messages sound ultra positive and direct, but are often, on scrutiny highly ambiguous. One of her early eighties works was a leaflet with a return response coupon that was headlined "Jesus Will Come to NEW YORK NOVEMBER 4" (U.S. election day). The small type, of course, elaborated by warning the readers that 3 million newly registered fundamentalists would most probably be voting in the forthcoming U.S. election. The language, of course, was clear and nonrhetorical, its potential for effectiveness lay in it's ability to frighten liberal-minded voters into voting against such conservative groupings. [20]

One cannot but admire the clarity yet subtlety involved in a work such as this, the strategy is direct, the commitment sincere. There is an obvious parallel here with Les Levine billboards, both Holzer and Levine set out to challenge people, to activate their awareness and to effectively demand of people that they take responsibility for their own lives and for the environments that surround them, what is obvious, however, is the different methods the separate artists employ to achieve those ends.

Holzer's pamphlets are small and manageable, they provide information in clear unambiguous language, yet deliberately refrain from any ideological input. Holzer leaflets are effective, they are not overpowering, they do not order, demand, or threaten, they simply present facts, facts which to the artist are hopefully reflected in effectiveness. Yet what is it about the Holzer work that makes it more effective than Levine's? Firstly,

and quite honestly, there is the very human scale of Holzer's work.
Pamphlets unlike billboards are by their very nature smaller and,
therefore, more manageable.   Billboards are awsome, monstrous structures
that, by their very size, glare down in an omnipotent preaching fashion,
billboards are suitable for ordering, demanding and selling, they provide
impersonal public contact while pamphlets seem to provide an alternative
intimate and more personal interaction.   The nature of the pamphlet is
that the reader is in control, he/she can decide when to read it, how to
read it, or even where to read it.   Billboards, however, are once off
experiences, the image is there just for one split second, one can instantly
choose to accept it or simply forget about it.   Large billboards, it
would appear, do not seem to touch people where it counts, on a personal level.
Finally, Jenny Holzer's pamphlets seem successful because of their size and
their clarity.   Les Levine's billboards, on the other hand, seem to fail
for completely the opposite reasons, their overpowering size and their
obvious ambiguity. [21]

Yet all these criticisms must not detract from the very great potential
that extra gallery public art engagement has, indeed one has only to
consider some of Les Levine's earlier posters to see their obvious effective-
ness in challenging people.   A classic example was his WE ARE NOT AFRAID
poster which was positioned in New York subways in 1982.   The format was
obviously similar to the Northern Ireland works, both campaigns used image
and words, both were designed to mimic advertising styles and both were
designed to represent states of mind, models of information which ultimately
sought to effectively sensitize general public awareness.   However, even
Levine would admit that where the Ulster billboards effectively failed,
the New York subway project was an immense success.   Surely again the
question must be asked why works which outwardly appeared so similar,
created such markedly differing reactions? [22]

The truth, of course, is that these two separate projects utilized
somewhat differing formats. The BLAME GOD works were basically horizontal
rectangles measuring some 20 x 41 feet square. Each billboard contained
simplified colour computer images based on photographs taken by the
artist in the North of Ireland and a two-word phrase made up of an
imperative verb, usually a violent verb like "kill", "attack", "torture",
or "bomb" followed by the work "God". The nature of these works was such
that they were positioned on streets in order to interact with the general
public. The subway posters were obviously much smaller measuring merely
some 21 x 22 inches. The format was different too, the image was a
photograph of an oriental couple, gazing quietly, calmly out towards the
viewer, above them were bright red words which read "We are not afraid".
Clearly, it can be seen that the differences, few though they may be, are
distinct nonetheless. On the one hand there is the question of the image,
in the Irish works these are colourful, yet bland and inhuman, in the
subway work the image is simple, quiet and subtle, it seduces the eye with
it's oriental, eastern couple set against the late night sky and opens the
mind for the message to come in. The size of the work is again important.
The New York project is small and manageable, it does not tower above and
seem to preach down, but is positioned at head height and thus allows for
intimate, highly personal interaction. With the "Blame God" billboard
works, however, the relationship with the viewer is not so cozy, here the
image dwarfs the viewer, making him or her anxious, uncomfortable, incapable
of satisfactory mindful engagement, here the relationship is unequal, the
viewer uneasy. In the streets interaction with the larger billboards is
accidental, brief and often ineffective, yet in the forced confinement of
a subway car the intimate subtlety of the smaller poster can operate given
the necessity to stand sit or wait for lengths of time. Unquestionably,
the most effective feature of the subway project is the word usage. In

this instance what is presented is a statement of fact WE ARE NOT AFRAID, the effects, of course, are at once both ambiguous and yet clear, the sentence makes sense, but its context remains uncertain.   Clearly it alludes to fear, clearly it demands thought yet the essence of the work is that the tone of the sentence invites the viewer to think, invites his mind to consider a vast range of possibilities.   The work is effective because it lets the viewer slowly in, it does not demand immediate attention, but entices the conscious and unconscious seductively, unlike the more aggressive commands of the BLAME GOD BILLBOARDS.

FOOTNOTES

1. D. MCGONAGLE, "Extracts From A Conversation Between Les Levine and Declan McGonagle, I.C.A. London, 8 SEPTEMBER 1985", P.23, (original transcript).

2. L. LEVINE, BLAME GOD: Billboard Projects PP. 13, 28.

3. ibid, P.13.

4. ibid, P.37.

5. ibid. P.37.

6. ibid. P.31

7. ibid. P.19.

8. D. BRETT, "BETWEEN GOD AND THE CHURCH", Circa SEPTEMBER – OCTOBER 1986, PP. 3, 4.

9. L. LEVINE, BLAME GOD: Billboard Projects, PP. 13, 28.

10. D. MCGONAGLE, "Extracts From A Conversation Between Les Levine and Declan McGonagle, I.C.A. London, 8 SEPTEMBER 1985", P.3, (original transcript).

11. ibid, P.9.

12. D. BRETT, "Between God and the Church", Circa SEPTEMBER – OCTOBER, 1986, P.4.

13. ibid.

14. ibid.

15. ibid.

16. B. LOFTUS, "PHOTOGRAPHY, ART & POLITICS: How the English Make pictures of Northern Ireland's Troubles", Circa NOVEMBER – DECEMBER, 1983, P. 10, 13.

17.   ibid.

18.   D. BRETT, "On the possibility of SOCIAL REALISM",
      Circa, NOVEMBER - DECEMBER, 1983, P. 15 - 17.

19.   L. LIPPARD, Get the Message?   A Decade of Art for Social
      Change, PP. 125, 126.

20.   ibid. P.127.

21   ibid.

2.   D. MCGONAGLE, "Extracts From A Conversation Between Les Levine
      And Declan McGonagle, I.C.A. London, 8 SEPTEMBER, 1985",
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