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RE-DISAFFIRMATION
THE WORK OF TERRY ATKINSON

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BY

THOMAS GREEN

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INTRODUCTION

The complex critique of what modernism should and could achieve that Terry Atkinson has built up during his years with Art and Language [1] and since, is central to his work. It is impossible to discuss his work without an in-depth look at all theories that contributed to it. The first chapter will deal almost totally with this dialectic theory embedded in Atkinson's work. I will then discuss the work itself and its theoretical, political and social implications. In the first chapter, I have relied heavily on Atkinson's own theoretical writing contained in the catalogue for Mute 1. [2] Although Art and Language will be referred to, I have not written specifically about their work and Atkinson's contribution to it. I believe that he left the organisation to produce his critique in the form of objects, rather than in writing. When a critique is embedded in an object and enters into the process of economic exchange, then such a critique can act as a basis for dialogue revolving around the artist rather than the critic. It is Atkinson's efforts in this area, that makes his work problematic and therefore interesting.

The work that I have chosen to discuss was contained in his most recent show, which was organised by the Orchard Gallery and shown in the Foyle Arts Centre in Derry. It was entitled Mute 2, and ran from 14 October to 22 November 1988. I chose this work not only because of its physical accessibility, but also because it was almost a mini-retrospective show containing both new works and paintings and drawings dating back to 1983.

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1   Art and Language/Terry Atkinson...(et al); ed. Paul Maeus and Gerd de Vries. Schauberg: M. DuMont, 1972.

2   Mute 1 Gimpel Fils Ltd., London, 1988.

To see works from the <u>Art for the Bunker</u> exhibition, the <u>Brit Art</u> paintings, and work from <u>Mute 1</u> contained in the one gallery, show a very clear and strong theoretical similarity and progression. It is for this reason, and the political content of the work set in the political context of Derry, that I have chosen this show.

DISAFFIRMATION

In <u>Dialectic of Enlightenment</u>,[1] Adorno and Horkheimer (of the seminal Frankfurt School),[2] argued that the enlightenment cult of rational progress makes life in our new society alienating, discontinuous and isolating. This has given rise to a mass culture which paradoxically thrives on the separation of the individual from genuine social participation in a concrete historical situation. This technological rationality transformed the vocation of reason to a utilitarian method of means and end - to a solely instrumental function. The main method of keeping this advanced state of capitalism was the authoritarian distrust of critical questioning and dissent, which was often embodied in repression and coercion so as to enforce its programme of 'progress' that was based on the demands of technocratic pragmatism. Adorno and Horkheimer argued against this blind belief in historical progress and adopted the principle of 'negation' as the best option from which dialectical reason could gain truth from pervasive contemporary existence.

Although <u>Dialectic of Enlightenment</u> was written during the First World War and was mostly concerned with the rise of fascism, Soviet totalitarianism and capitalist authoritarianism (including what Adorno called 'the culture industry'), Terry Atkinson believes there is still good reason for constructing a disaffirming culture today. To construct a culture that affirms the world's dominant political systems, which he regards as 'purient, self-regarding and barbarously repressive', is to be seriously negligent as an artist. The continuing shift to the right,

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1 Theodor Adorno and Max Horkheimer, <u>The Dialectic of Enlightenment</u>. New York, Herder, 1972.
2 See Perry Anderson et al. Eds. <u>Aesthetics and Politics</u>. London: NLB, 1977.

especially in Britain, has been accompanied by a re-affirmation of class difference. The media have become organs of propaganda for the protection of status and privilege. The society in which we live today is still, essentially, the same society that produced Hiroshima and Auschwitz. Sarah Kent has pointed out the predicament for the art world in her essay "Critical Images", written in 1985:

"The choice of this situation is either to 'roll over and play dead', to escape into fantasy - in the theatre, 1984 has been the year of the musical and in cinema of special effects, sci-fi dazzle - drama - or, metaphorically at least, to stand and fight."[3]

For Adorno a practice that does not set out from the beginning to disaffirm the society that produced Hiroshima and Auschwitz can only be said to affirm them. However, he could never fully grasp the historical challenge of mass culture, ridiculing any kind of theory which drew from the popular ethos as a source for modernist practice. Adorno saw modernism as the last stronghold for the embodiment of an authentic society, and regarded mass culture aided by technological developments, as embodying what he called a 'fully administered culture'. For example, Adorno thought the music of mass culture to be regressive, leading to a state of mind where the process of thinking was unnecessary. He dismissed all popular music, including its occasionally disaffirming fringes and its folk content, which points to an attitude touching on racism. Art and Language also call for critical suspicion as the basis for practice today. However, Art and Language also warn against the danger of a 'monotheoretical critical edifice' (something that Adorno might be said to subscribe to) which would mean critical stability and authoritarian uniformity, not just in art practice but on a

3   Sarah Kent, "Critical Images", Flash Art, No. 121, March 1985. p.p. 23 - 27

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wider political front as well.

Atkinson cites Art and Language to be theoretically closest to his view of what should constitute a worthwhile practice today. It acknowledges the concerns that show that there is a complex notion of 'cause' within any work that is an historical materialist practice. This notion of 'cause' plays a major part in Atkinson's theory and although he accepts accident and illusion as a necessary condition to make interesting art, the theory at the heart of the practice is also a necessary condition. The serious logical and historical errors of an historical materialist practice contracted by accident are essentially caused by careerism and opportunism, which in turn, are often endorsed by the critic in an effort to stablise and classify. What is needed is an awareness of the visual language - as a set of coded conventions that articulates and creates consciousness of the state of the society in which we live. However, this visual language must take into account that it is a product of that society.

The contradiction of making a disaffirming painting (for example) is that the practice of painting itself is affirmed and therefore part of the framework of a culture that produced Auschwitz and Hiroshima. This appears intractable, and to a certain extent is. However, there will always be painting (or so it seems forty-five years after Auschwitz), and it is this intractability of knowing that there will always be painting that constitutes what Atkinson calls the 'going on'. This contradiction will have to be accepted and utilised thus producing an art that Atkinson believes is bothersome and therefore interesting because it still goes on.

The key method used by avant-garde modernists to form a disaffirming culture is the 'practice of negation' that Adorno called for. The ideology is that only by consciously avoiding previously established skills or frames of reference that have been thought up till now to be essential to any serious art-making practice, can a real disaffirming practice be

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achieved. In his exhibition catalogue for <u>Mute 1</u> Atkinson discussed T. J.
Clark's⁴ practices of negation in some detail. Since these are central to
Atkinson's work, I will recount the basic arguments. Clark's list of
negating practices taken from 'Clement Greenberg's Theory of Art' are as
follows:

"(1) The various attacks on centred and legible composition
 (2) The distortion or reversal of perspective space
 (3) The refusal of simple equivalences between particular aspects of
     representation and aspects of the thing they represent
 (4) Deliberate displays of painterly awkwardness
 (5) Facility in kinds of painting that were not supposed to be worth
     perfecting
 (6) Primitivism of all shapes and sizes
 (7) The use of degenerate or trivial or 'unartistic' materials
 (8) Denial of full conscious control over the artifact
 (9) Automatic or aleatory ways of doing things
 (10)A taste for the vestiges and margins of social life
 (11)A wish to celebrate the 'insignificant' or disreputable in modernity
 (12)The rejection or parody of painting's narrative conventions
 (13)The false reproduction of painting's established genres
 (14)The parody of previously powerful styles" 5

This list is quite comprehensive and covers nearly every aspect of
established modernism - with the emphasis on "established". Each of these
practices have now been commodified and can be churned out by artists using
simple rehearsal. This shows that it is not only the artifacts which have
become commodified but also their process of conception and production.

   "The cultural strategies of late capital can now absorb not only
'negating practices' during and after these practices produce their various
artifacts, objects, events, etc. but that late capital itself uses
'negation' paradoxically as an assimilated strategic transaction through
which it affirms itself. This it does by influencing beforehand what

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4 T. J. Clark, "Cement Greenberg's Theory of Art", <u>Pollock and After</u>.
  Harper and Row, London, 1985.

5 Terry Atkinson, 'Disaffirmation and Negation', <u>Mute 1</u>.

the character of negation will be."

What Atkinson means by this is that the act of negation is now based on past practices that have already been absorbed into the culture industry of late capital, using an intent that has also been absorbed.

If you start to analyse Clark's list it helps to provide a better insight into this state that 'the act of negation' finds itself. In (8) and (9) the claims for using both the unconscious and chance are accepted resources of modernist strategies. These resources state that what is claimed to be the spontaneous and unconscious side of the artist's 'nature' is the most authentic side. However, Atkinson points out in his earlier essay, "Remarks from Hindsight":

"Trotsky ... emphasised that the subject, the 'me', is socially produced ... the self is not already there, born with us so to speak, simply to be sought out, to be discovered, but is formed and reformed in the arenas of struggle, in increasing self-consciousness."[7]

The modernist claim for spontaneity may even imply that there may be no intention behind a work at all, not even an intention to be spontaneous. Although this might seem illogical or daft, being daft is often seen as one of the greatest forms of authenticity that surrounds the superior 'creative' position of the aleatory and the unconscious. This is something that has also been easily accepted into the culture industry. This idea of the authentic runs all the way through Clark's list. For example in (4), 'painterly awkwardness' is seen as the sign of authentic expression, and in

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6   Terry Atkinson, 'Disaffirmation and Negation', Mute 1.

7   Terry Atkinson, "Remarks from Hindsight", catalogue of his Whitechapel exhibition, 1983, p. 60.

(7) the turning of 'unartistic' (unauthentic) materials into authentic materials. (13) points to the complexity of the situation today by the inclusion of the word 'false'. This is the idea of a 'false reproduction' as being authentic, the word 'false' usually meaning the opposite to authentic and 'reproduction' usually meaning the reproduction of an original or an authentic object.[8] The emphasis seems to change from negating the established forms of art to negating the authentic. This is something that artists such as Warhol came close to, but now his work is seen as very 'authentic' in the modern commodity market. The idea of negating authenticity has been consumed by the commodified culture as an authentic idea.

So the next step towards a disaffirming practice must be to negate 'the act of negation', but if this is achieved it will too in time become commodified. What it comes down to is that it is the audience that is doing the commodifying. Atkinson picks a blatant but interesting example, the IRA murals in Derry and West Belfast and checks them against Clark's list. These murals fail on every single point, mostly due to intention. The murals do not try to work within an art historical background, for example they may display painterly awkwardness, but not 'deliberate' awkwardness as Clark states as one of his conditions. Simply, they are not sophisticated enough in respect to the complex problems of modern painting. The public for 'modern' art wants this sophistication and therefore the points of Clark's list may seem like a closing rather than an opening for

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8   In his essay, "The Work of Art in the Age of Mechnical Reproduction", Walter Benjamin describes the effects that modern technology have had on art. Photography has the ability to eliminate the 'aura' of an artwork therefore liberating it from its 'authenticity' and gaining it access to a larger audience. For Benjamin this was a positive development, but he failed to foresee the lingering attachment to the 'singular' artwork. It may also be said that Benjamin and Adorno took directly opposite attitudes to technology, Benjamin believing that it could liberate the artist and culture while Adorno argued it would enslave them.

the disaffirmative practice. What the public want first and foremost is a formal realisation of a subject with the audaciousness of the subject coming in second. The IRA murals are not 'autonomous surfaces' which is what the bourgeois investment in modern painting is all about. Therefore the IRA muralists do not even count as artists, and therefore they have no 'consumers', they are seen as propagandists. Atkinson then sees 'real artists' as propagandists of the autonomous surface.

Atkinson's arguments so far have led to nothing concrete on which to base an art practice. Any art practice operating in our culture in some way affirms that culture, even the practices of negation have been absorbed into the culture industry. The IRA muralists can produce a form of 'art' that is successful because their public is already made, they do not expect the formal realisation of the subject that interests them. But this is not the audience that Atkinson is interested in reaching, his target is the art colleges and art institutions. With an audience as 'artistically competent' as this a more in-depth approach must be taken. Atkinson uses an historical materialist practice which takes into account what the artist's predicament is in the light of this.

Atkinson finishes this essay with two descriptions of negating practices by Clark. The first is to cast out the normal conventions of art which had previously given it its raison d'etre. Secondly, that the practice of negation has tended to overwhelm modernist practice and suffocate it. Although the second is a warning, the first is more positive and argues for making something critical rather than making something nihilistic. Although modernism has championed pure aesthetic harmony and pure art experience it should not be combated by degenerating into nihilism and futility. Art has to 'go on' despite the intractable assertions and this is the type of art that interests Atkinson.

"The practice is a predicament that attempts (some kind of) cognitive

competence and expects to be problematic."

AUDIENCE

What Atkinson has tried to emphasise in both his painting and his theoretical writing is that artworks acquire their meaning from the social and political relations in which they operate. This performative dimension must be understood to grasp the real meaning of any art work. For the majority of art work this performative dimension is the relationship between the work and the audience, which is mediated through institutions and institutional knowledge, and is therefore addressed to the participants of those institutions. For example, a book or a catalogue on an artist can spread his/her ideas to a different audience and therefore may open a relationship with other forms of political consciousness. Atkinson produces his work for a specific audience, those people associated with such institutions as the educated art audience, and for them the galleries offer the possibility of dialogue and the exchange of ideas. Therefore an art gallery that simply acts as a place where art is deposited fails to acknowledge that it is part of a network of communicative exchange. In many ways the idea of the catalogue is to encourage this communicative exchange as a theoretical extension of the work but what has tended to happen is that the catalogue has become a commodity in itself. Most galleries still function for, and are run by these institutions, denying access to the wider culture, which many artists see as their potential audience. Mute 2 was exhibited in the Foyle Arts Centre in Derry, which because of its particular political setting, has certain exceptions to this general view, or at least in intent.

Declan McGonagle has been the Director of the Orchard Gallery since

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9   Terry Atkinson, 'Disaffirmation and Negation", Mute 1

its inception in 1978. He sees one of his functions as trying to formalise ways of bringing people in the community of Derry into contact with visual art:

"I wanted to establish ... a structure which would <u>make demands</u> on the audience here and that at the same time following up with shows <u>giving something</u> to the audience."[10]

With this barter system McGonagle has tried to generate an above average interest in the role of the gallery, which for him should try:

"To develop a position for that gallery as an inlet as well as an outlet."[11]

"I also felt that it was important in this community to demonstrate that art was not a rarified practice, which needed special mental or physical skills to do or appreciate. That view of art is untrue and unnecessary; it is there to serve a very particular status quo, which is very hierarchical in its approach to art."[12]

I think this is very much wishful thinking on McGonagle's part to suppose that work that has been shown there, such as Victor Burgin's and Terry Atkinson's is accessible to the whole community. But it is not the 'hierarchical' status quo of the artist that makes it inaccessible, but the bourgeois democracy's powers of ideological exclusion which keeps art in

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10   Interview with Declan McGonagle by Christopher Coppock. <u>Circa</u> 10, pp. 10-16.

11   Ibid.

12   Ibid.

the realm of 'high culture'. For an artist to in some way reach more of his/her audience, he/she cannot merely simplify their art and add it to the growing consumer list, or simply produce more political art to support this inaccessability:

"The crucial issue in a way is not about getting more people in front of art on the grounds of making art more popular, but of bringing people together in front of art to discuss it."[13]

John Roberts argues that this is a question of education and politics which is out of reach of the individual artist. The capitalist education system cannot support the notion that real meaning and cognitive value can be gained from art because it would disrupt the passive consumption of the working class. Roberts sees this as a common link between art and socialism.

"Winning people over to an acceptance of [the idea that art exposes capitalism's promotion of passive consumption] is as hard as winning people over at the moment to the idea that socialism is a higher form of democracy. Which is in a sense why a defence of one today is intimately bound up with the other."[14]

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13 John Roberts, "Terry Atkinson's History Paintings", as yet unpublished.

14 Ibid.

CHAPTER II

THE IRISH WORK

"The issues of a modern developed society are so complex that the left-wing heavy-booting kind of thumping operation I just cannot take seriously. I do not think it takes on board the basic day-to-day contradictions of experience. The ... exhibition was set up with the idea of exemplifying contradictions and exemplifying the complexities that come from contradiction."[1]

The earliest work in the Mute 2 exhibition was a selection from the Art for the Bunker exhibition which travelled around England and Ireland in 1986. This exhibition included several cycles of Atkinson's work, the Bunker paintings, the Stone Touchers series and the Happy Snap series - all of them containing an element of violence. In the Bunker series, Atkinson attempts to address the contradiction and peculiarities of English class rule, which he believes is a culture of containment that has suppressed the Republican and revolutionary traditions of England which date back to the English Civil War. He argues that there is an alliance of amnesia between the English Bourgeoise, ruling class and a large section of the working class which works against these traditions - and that is where Ireland is important. Ireland points to how deep a process of forgetting is entrenched within British politics. This aspect of Atkinson's work has become known as 'history painting' because of his efforts to try and find the forgotten causes and effects that have worked within countries and cultures, by re-looking at their history. However he does not believe that Ireland should necessarily be the issue for English socialist artists as

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1 Terry Atkinson, In discussion with John Bird, Audio Arts Supplement, London, 1985.

the economic exploitation of the colonial situation has been greatly reduced in the last fifty years. However Ireland still does depend on Britain economically and industrially to a great extent, and the British presence in Ireland does distort the relationship between the British and Irish working class. On one level this work is an attack on the British partnership of all classes that tries to silence the Irish struggle using censorship and increased military expenditure, rather than finding a political solution that would in any way show them to be historically wrong in their involvement in Ireland:

"Top bureaucrats keep close control over all programmes dealing with Ireland. Reporters and producers, overwhelmingly white, male and middle-class (and, in the BBC, vetted by MI5 to weed out progressives), are normally trusted to make the 'right decisions'. But when it comes to Ireland no-one is trusted."[2]

This type of censorship is also an aspect of Irish powers which comes under the title, Section 31. The recently introduced British equivalent of Section 31 stops freedom of speech for the minority but does not stop Thatcher's assertations about terrorists, that they "should be wiped of the face of the civilised world. They must never win."[3] This shows how a political belief can be manipulated until it is shown as abstract violence.

However, there is violence. The morality of armed struggled, and the complex history of Ireland has been a deterrent for most British artists. A few, including Irish artists, have approached it as a form of political

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2   Lis Curtis, 'British Broadcasting and Ireland' Screen, March/April, 1986, pp. 48-49.

3   John Roberts, 'Terry Atkinson's History Paintings', Unpublished.

spectacle, of people struggling in an unresolvable background. Richard Hamilton's The Citizen is the portrait of a martyr. Antony Gormley's Cruciforms rely heavily on their situational context to differentiate themselves from his other less political works of the same form. Gormley's work was sponsored by Television South West Arts, 3D, under the guidance of Declan McGonagle, who denies that he accepts work from 'international' artists who simply want to have work exhibited in Derry because of its political situation. However, he does admit that the 'sexy' [4] image that the conflict has outside of Northern Ireland attracts artists for other than genuine political reasons. On the other hand, it is clear from Atkinson's work that he knows his history and although this may not be enough in itself to produce interesting work, it shows the real and complex contradictions of the struggles and conflicts. Atkinson has produced a body of work of Northern Ireland unlike many other British visual artists who have just touched on the subject. This has taken the form of a self-conscious strategy on the metaphor of a sketch book, not of sketching on the spot, but an attempt to sketch from an ideological position. As I have discussed, this ideological position is not one of Northern Ireland as being 'a suitable subject for art' but that the Anglo-Irish struggle is brutalising the historical reflexes and responses of Britain. Atkinson at times is quite patriotic about Britain:

"I think my country in some respects is a good country, it has some great secular traditions ... These traditions have been gained in struggle against the traditional British ruling class, whose reflexes ... are still more or less intact." [5]

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4   Declan McGonagle, In conversation with the author.

5   Terry Atkinson, Unpublished interview with John Roberts.

However Atkinson believes that these secular traditions have been consumed by the aspect blindness of the British establishment, in this case it would be the majority of the country, in the way they perceive Ireland. This perception includes a clear superiority complex, making it in many respects, racist, - the exact opposite of Atkinson's wish for the return of the 'great secular traditions'. The sketch book came out of an accumulation of the day to day set of media references produced by the establishment that could not be avoided and were sufficiently important to warrant a response.

But how and what does one represent in relation to Irish politics without falling into the type of sloganeering that might be found in IRA murals. Atkinson depicts the terrain of Irish politics as seen from Britain as an ideological bunker containing metaphors that play on the emotional ambiguities of armed revolutionary struggle. These heavy black cabinet spaces also suggest the intractability of both Irish Republicanism and British imperialism - they are both dug in deep. These are set against the media notion of Ireland as a beautiful and pastoral land, which is central to the ruling class ideologies as the continuity of culture and community through landscape. Against this parody, which might also be seen as a Gaelic Romanticist's view of Ireland, are placed the effects and instruments of war. They suggest a series of hidden presences in the landscape, therefore politicising it to a different form than the usual landscapes. Other metaphors are added such as ghosts, and still lifes. The ghosts depict Republicanism as a haunting presence in the area of British history and affairs, while the still lifes, made up of war machinery and pots of flowers, play on the French word for still life: nature-moste, meaning dead-life. This is the idea of a booby trap, something quiet and sombre that could explode at any moment. In Daughter having returned from an annual mission being greeted by her mother near a Christmas wreath we see an attempt to say something about the myth

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of terrorism insofar as it tries to show that terroristic actions are not abnormal. If people are provoked they will do certain things and Atkinson believes that the Irish have been provoked to take up arms. This is one level of the picture, the terrorist and mother attempt to display a conventional relationship that includes tenderness, which is ironic because of what the promotion of terrorism is. The conventional image of terrorism as 'evil' is promoted by its enemies and obviously not by the people characterised as terrorists. No terrorist would say "I am a terrorist" and fill in the meaning of the term with Thatcher's meaning. The ideological complexity of the subject is also furthered by the question of gender in Irish politics. A number of the terrorists in the modern IRA are women and for Atkinson this suggests, with a certain amount of irony, that under certain historical conditions there is a possibility of his two daughters becoming terrorists. Although this might merely suggest a lot of patriarchal concern on Atkinson's behalf, it may also suggest the emotional feeling attached to 'Mother Ireland' that has been generated through Republicanism.

Technically the Bunker paintings are in the "style" of what Atkinson calls 'bad painting'. This shows his first attempt to negate styles and genres of painting and the aesthetic. Because this type of painting does not draw on any given ideology to show how it should be read, Atkinson uses long titles as both a means to gain access and to extend the meaning of the work. The other half of the Art for the Bunker exhibition, the Stone Touchers and the Happy Snaps series also use 'bad painting' in the format of a family album, which references the sketchbook of the Bunker series. These large paintings from small colour photographs also reference the authenticity discussed in the first chapter. It is pointless to paint a large ugly painting from a photograph unless it is the act of painting itself, or the 'going on' that is important.

This second half of the show also deals with 'bunkerism' but on a far

larger scale, the bunker of nuclear preparation. To be anti-nuclear is to be against state violence. Yet pacifism as a political solution cannot work under capitalism because capitalism itself creates the conditions which cause violence. By placing these works against the Bunker paintings Atkinson suggests that Republican violence is also a product of capitalist logic.

Atkinson represents the issues of nuclear warfare, not by trying to match the horrors that it could produce, but to show it as a reality. He does this by adopting the conventions of a holiday snapshot of his wife and two daughters in the cemetaries of World War I German and French soldiers in France. These images, which have been uglified through their painting, now provoke a sense of moral and political breakdown instead of the secure harmony normally associated with the notion of the family album. As well as the background of the results of pre-nuclear imperialism Atkinson also sets his family in the context of a secure domestic setting in the accompanying work. This parody of the family snapshot suggests what we all stand to lose in the event of a nuclear war. Again it might be said that this use of the family is a patriarchal assumption but John Roberts argues that:

"There is essentially a play on the phrase nuclear family here; if capitalism celebrates and polices the family (in order to secure the production of labour power) it is also the first economic system that stands to destroy family relations altogether. Atkinson is not defending the nuclear family, but rather generational continuity."[6]

This show also deals with the political position of being anti-nuclear. If this position is taken to its logical conclusion it results in

6   John Roberts. Terry Atkinson's History Paintings. Unpublished.

pacifism, a conclusion where you say you cannot use violence at all. Therefore, the intentional contradiction in the show is that one half leads to pacifism while the other half leads to some kind of support for violent armed struggle. The black of the Irish drawing and the white of the anti-nuclear painting was the outcome of this idea. In his interview with John Roberts[7] Atkinson says that this contradiction was never picked up in any review of the exhibition when it was first shown in Britain. This again reiterates the lack of popular memory around insurrectionary struggle in Britain itself, and a lack of historical knowledge about its own traditions of Republicanism. Atkinson believes that the historical currents are there, but the monarchy in Britain is so constitutionalised inside a modern ideology of Western democracy, that it would take a long time for a Republic to be realised, if ever. What he is suggesting is that there is a set of historical comparisons between Britain and Ireland that say something about British Republicanism and Monarchism. However, the final contradiction in this series comes when you examine the record of British Republicanism in Ireland - Cromwell, one of the original British authoritarian Republicans was responsible for mass persecution and butchery in Ireland. Therefore there is an element of pessimism in the black of the work on Ireland as well.

"The Irish struggle is one of the most pessimistic aspects of what we might call national British behaviour. It seems almost blinding."[8]

The only assertions that Atkinson makes in this series of work is that both the art practice and the political and cultural realities are both

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7   John Roberts, Terry Atkinson's History Paintings, Unpublished.

8   Terry Atkinson, 'Interview with John Roberts', Unpublished.

contradictory. There is no hope offered except that of continuous critical analysis of both the past and the present. However, this critical analysis must not be so blinkered that it does not take into account the day to day problems of living within a culture or art system.

ABSTRACTION

Atkinson's critique of modernism states that art defines itself against other art as well as against the world. Although art in the future may not participate in or extend the 'great lineage of art' that we call the Western avant garde, it cannot go forward without realising that it is historically attached to it. Atkinson works within these formal limits and yet is still committed to gaining new knowledge. He does this by working on representation as being part of the world. He has utilised the fact that art is both a product of, and a response to social and historical life. Because modernism's supercessive logic has been exhausted and yet there is still a need to 'go on', Atkinson uses parody to recast what has gone before. He asserts that this recontextualisation, linked with the creation of meaning, is integral to any art that claims cognitive and aesthetic engagement with the world that has produced positivism and expressionism. However both parody and irony assume a contract between encoder and decoder that cannot be fulfilled unless the encoded intention is fully realised by the receiver. This implies a large amount of spectator competence, or at least enough to recognise the transformation of aesthetic and cultural norms. This has obvious conservative effects in that the decoder must have an historical knowledge of Western genres, but since the art audience that Atkinson is aiming at should have this knowledge, they then join a participatory form of spectatorship that brings their own knowledge of the parodied subject to bear on the overall meaning of the painting. By recasting signs and conventions in another context the difference between official ideologies and an real world of agencies and

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structures can be set. If parody can be defined as repetition with critical distance it means that figurative resemblance in art does not solely mean political resemblance. This critical recasting can change the meaning of any background genre or political ideology.

The Mute 2 exhibition contained a selection from a series or work that toured from London to Switzerland in 1987 under the title of Brit Art. In this series Atkinson turns from figurative resemblance to the non-representational. This non-representation is a return to the ideology of 'non meaning' to gain a new 'aesthetic' of the grotesque. What he attempts, by parodic repetition, is to show that a theory of reference is not necessarily synonymous with a theory of resemblance. The codes of abstraction can be recast in the same way as any other set of visual conventions. These works show clearly Atkinson's dialogic approach. By parodying certain conventions of abstraction he produces a map of Anglo-Irish relations as a map of ruins.

"The opacity and intractability of the Irish situation for the British finds its formal equivalent in the opacity of Modernist painting."[9]

These works obviously suggest a strong irony in that they liken the ruin of representation to the blindness of the British engagement with Ireland, while at the same time being abstract paintings. Several of the Goya Series (as they are subtitled) share the black background of the Bunker series and also utilise the white underpainting of the History Snap series, and to a certain extent reiterate the points made in the earlier imagery. However, here the Anglo-Irish political situation is amalgamated with the politics of modernism. This amalgam takes the form of a map of

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9   John Roberts, 'Terry Atkinson's History Paintings', Unpublished.

both the cultural politics of modernism and conventional politics, drawn from a non-affirmative view of modern culture and politics. Atkinson likens the conflict between the Gaelic and Anglo-Saxon cultures to what Walter Benjamin called modern society - a series of allegorical ruins. The metaphor he uses for this is the luminosity of the foreground, representing the conflict today, on the black background of Anglo-Irish history. In the Brit Art catalogue,[10] Atkinson describes the black historical background as generating a luminosity that not only blinds the British but increasingly the Irish. But is is also meant to represent something less definite, that of not knowing which is the background and which is the foreground - an intractable historical scenario. The English are blind of their historical role in Ireland and cannot see their own Republican histories.

"The metaphorical black hole vis a vis the black background/surface of the Irish and Goya series is then an attempt to gain a representation of an historical pit in which cultural vertigo and historical closure is the typical condition. It is as these points in the mappings that the 'black' is mapped into the black of Goya's Quinta de Sordo, into the black of the Desastres and Caprichos prints."[11]

The second level of the series works on the paralleling of Black Spain with an historically reconstructed Black Ireland of inquisitional Catholicism censoring cultural Ireland in the 20's and 30's. Also drawn in is the irony of the Irish Catholic church's support for Franco and the socialist James Connolly Brigade fighting for the republicans in the Spanish Civil War. However, 'cultural vertigo', 'historical pit' and

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10   Brit Art, Gimpel Fils, London, 1987.

11   Terry Atkinson, 'III', Brit Art.

'closure' suggest a catastrophism that does not correspond to the materialism of the rest of Atkinson's work. Although the idea that our culture is in ruins is a legitimate one, when such metaphors dominate the work it becomes what John Roberts describes as "a weary existential platitude."[12]

The most recent works in the Mute 2 exhibition were the abstract paintings from the Mute 1 series which were shown in Copenhagen, Basle and London in 1988. In this work we again see Atkinson's use of the conventions of abstraction to create a map of capitalist grotesquerie. However, what starts to make this work interesting is that he identifies certain kinds of political art, in particular a certain left visual culture, as being a capitalist grotesquerie. The work continues the dialogue around the issue that meaning in art is fundamentally a question of conceptual definition. Again Atkinson uses negation as a practice of refusal. On doing this he is commenting on an area of conceptual and aesthetic predicament that a lot of political art has ignored. Namely that a critique of capitalised relations must be embedded formally in the work.

In the catalogue for Mute 1, Terry Atkinson and his wife Susan Atkinson discuss the sumptomative weakness of the category 'political art'. The arguments that they put forward in this area are central to the meaning of this work - the paintings are almost impenetrable without understanding the text. They argue this weakness to be:

"That the social referent has been elevated to a point where the relative autonomy of the surface of the work has been completely eliminated."[13]

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12   John Roberts, 'Terry Atkinson's History Painting', Unpublished.

13   Terry Atkinson and Sue Atkinson 'British Political Art at Coventry, Mute 1

Political art in general is becoming an empty formalism comprising of its own set of behaviours which feed on the availability of moral issues as a set of consumer items. The social significance may be picked out arbitrarily, or at least with little genuine concern, so as to fit this formalism. This is not just a trait of political art, every category of modern art will develop to a stage where it is increasingly subscribed to and defended by custodians of that 'tribal' narrative. Although the content of the narrative may change the formalism will be defended as a legitimate vehicle of expression. Political art in particular had a very short life span of technical and conceptual audacity before being absorbed into the culture industry, unlike some other categories which at least flourished for a period long enough to suggest a new formalism. If political art is to ever have any real function it should be to disaffirm the political world in which we live, including the historical art world into which the category 'political art' now fits.

Political art is often guilty of unintentionally reinforcing a stereo-type of oppositional practice which has already been appropriated by the culture industry, thus affirming the political status quo. It has long lost any technical or conceptual audacity and often simply states that 'the Nicaraguans are good/the Americans are bad' which makes little progress in the direction of making relative art. Atkinson believes that this attitude of assuming the public are already interested and just want to be blatantly told what is right/wrong, or good/bad, is patronising. The particular work that Atkinson is talking about was from the State of the Nation exhibition in Coventry and was almost totally leftist and anti-Thatcherist. In Britain there is a similarity between labour party culture and political art. The Labour Party is the official party of opposition and follows the official rules of oppositional behaviour and the political artist affirms dissent as a formulaie exercise, while what is actually affirmed is that the political artist is a caricature of a worthy and predictable

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'struggler'. These official rules of oppositional behaviour point the artists to the easier targets, usually those that are the simplest and furthest away like South Africa, while subjects like Ireland are too close and complicated, with a greater chance of failure, to be seriously pursued. Both in politics and in art these controlled dissidents are part of a cover to resist attack from serious disaffirming forces. Political artists, affirming and acclaiming their dissenting roles, are part of consumer protection.

Atkinson argues that it would be more relevant to list the causes that produced the work rather than listing the causes with which the producers sympathise. What characterises what a particular picture is about is not that which is actually in the picture but the chain of causes leading to its production. For example, if a painting contains an uncritical use of the achievements of expressionism and this is the reason for its appearance, then this has more relation to its meaning than its listed political cause. To use expressionism to carry a straight political meaning without considering that 'expression' is itself a political subject is misleading to both the artist and the viewer. A better way of reading a picture like this might be to acknowledge all the 'causal connections' which will indicate how the picture was made, and the functional connections – what the picture is of. This is a challenge to the presumptions about pictorial organisation and the uses of materials. The presumption being the rehearsed and given set of responses which are uncritically taken for challenging such presumptions:

"Political art has become one of the presumptions it claims it is challenging. It presupposes it is a framework of critical perception, this is bravado."[14]

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14 Terry Atkinson and Sue Atkinson, 'British Political Art at Conventry'
    Mute 1

The political issues that should be challenged in such work are the presumptions about pictorial organisation and uses of materials.

The last point Atkinson makes is about the status of expression among political artists in the West, what he calls the 'pictures express feelings' syndrome:

"Political artists express feelings, the work of political artists express meanings."[15]

This relationship between intention and meaning is important because when it comes down to it the feelings of the artist may be worthless when viewing the finished piece. This is very much a materialist point of view, what is being attempted and what has come about by accident is a meaning. The majority of political artists, either explicitly or implicitly, claim an allegiance to a materialist view of art. This materialist view of art argue that there are no autonomous expressive resources, all resources historically and socially have a meaning. A denial of this is contradictory without being intentionally so.

The abstract works from Mute 1 are not a defence of 'abstract' painting but a reiterating of the predicament of continuing to practice. The refusal to represent and be 'intelligible' tries, through the negative to open up a gap for discussion and analysis. Atkinson's target audience for the show is the comfortable kind of political practice that I have discussed, the kind that suppresses the problems of locating meaning in the problems of pictorial organisation. By mimicing arts of Modernist non-conformity, he tries to stress through exaggeration, that verism and technical proficiency is not enough. The strongest and the most common mimic used is grease. In the catalogue for Mute 1 he sarcastically lists

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15 Terry Atkinson and Sue Atkinson, 'British Political Art at Coventry' Mute 1

all the uses that grease might have to a modernist practice. For example:

"Grease as a disaffirming material - will it ever dry? I do not know, but I can find out. From Castrol for example - Castrol the art object consultants."[16]

"Grease is the perfect material of socialist realism. Because of its working class associations. The local car mechanic. (But how about Formula 1, Silverstone, etc? Within the next decade we will see the Leningrade Glasnost Grand Prix). Please don't try to be ironic, rather try and make a noble stereotype out of the material of the car mechanic."[17]

What he is pointing out are all the causes why such a 'non-conformist' material could be used. For career, for opportunity, for technical proficiency and for verism.

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16   Terry Atkinson and Sue Atkinson, 'British Political Art at Conventry'
     Mute 1.

17   Ibid.
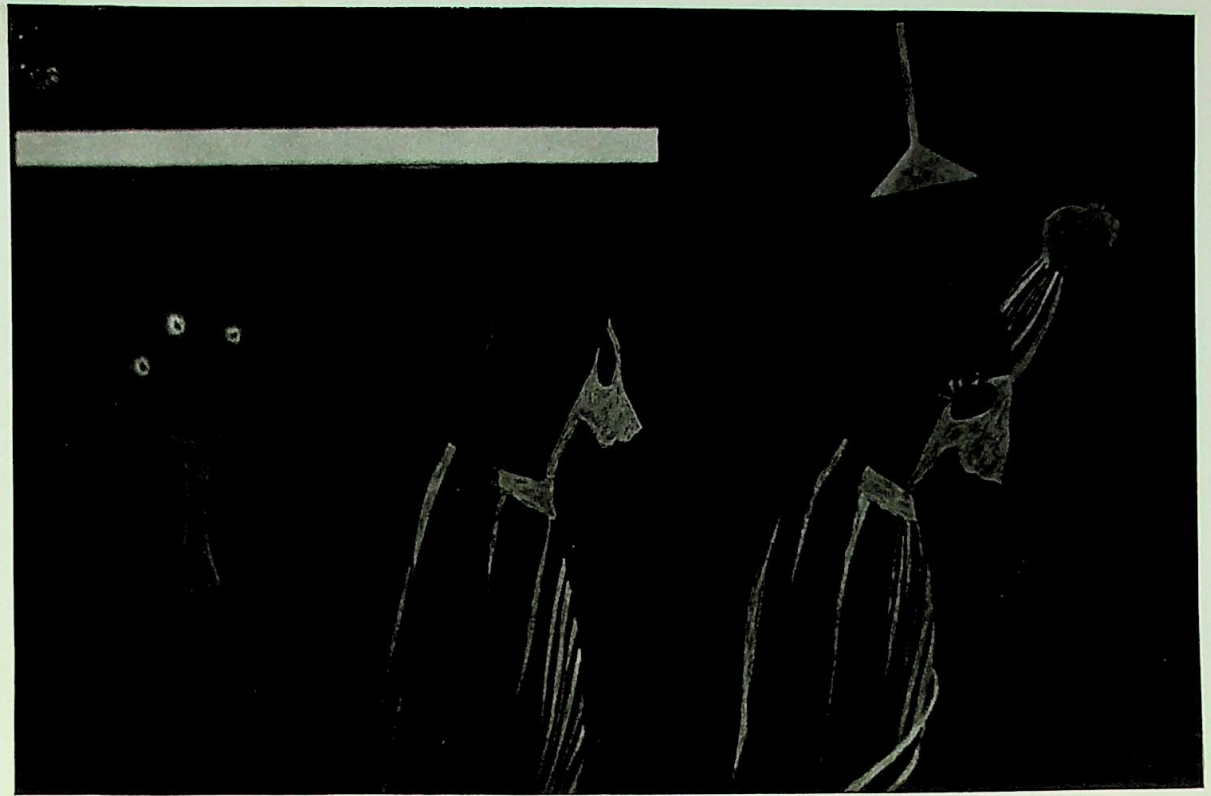
1. Terry Atkinson. Art for the Bunker 3, 1984. Two terrorists in British ideology proof suits going through a decontamination shows after completing a tour haunting the border.

2. Terry Atkinson. History Snap 4, 1984. Portrait of a nuclear family; Sue, Ruby and Amber above the Dordogne river near Souillac on Hiroshima Day, 7 August 1983.

3. Goya 12, 1986 – Letters from the Republic. Blanket-strip study for
Goya series 2 – careful as we go, the xerox is risque.

4. Terry Atkinson, 1988. Grease-Green.

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CONCLUSION

As far as I know John Roberts has written more about Terry Atkinson than any other critic, and shares quite similar ideological views on art, culture and politics. In his unpublished essay on Atkinson, Roberts describes his (Atkinson's) method of working as one of 'subterfuge.' Although Roberts tends to write in quite a dense style, the tone of the text suggests that he means this in a positive sense - Atkinson puts himself in a predicament and tries to work out of it using his art based and social based historical knowledge, therefore producing an artistic practice that takes into account the predicament of being an artist. However, I think that there is another element of 'subterfuge' in his work, in the negative sense, or at least in the 'dictionary' sense of the word - to conceal real motives, to avoid censure, or an underhand trick of evasion. This he achieves by controlling his audience and therefore controlling the interpretation of his work. Rather than making his work specifically for his audience, he makes work that can only be accessible for a certain audience, and that is why he has had to choose them.

Atkinson himself argues that 'bad painting' is a negation of painting styles, and yet in the Mute 1 series he uses bad painting in his execution of a style that is already supposed to be parodic in nature. This is an obvious double negative that points to other aspects of his art that just do not work. The 'bad painting' may lead to a lack of pictorial understanding (or just plain pictorial simplicity) which I think is the main reason why Atkinson relies on text so much, as both titles for the work and in the accompanying catalogues. His efforts to make his paintings as a clear commentary on painting have to some extent failed, and this is why he has to rely heavily on the use of text. This text (mostly in the form of catalogues) like John Roberts' writing also uses very dense

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language and is therefore conservative in its ability to be understood. Atkinson I think _escapes_ this predicament with his views on audience understanding. As I have discussed, Atkinson's views on this are that it is a question of education and out of reach of the individual artist. This enormous issue about his work is not embedded in it, and yet it is probably the most important one in his "critique of capitalist relations". His dialogic approach in his painting must contain an element of this aspect of it is to fulfil its function of talking about both art and the rest of the world. Atkinson has discussed education (in his Whitechapel exhibition catalogue) but in such a dense style that the artistically 'uneducated' could have little or no access to it, creating a situation where only the 'education' can join in the discussion on the implications of education. It should also be reiterated that the catalogues themselves have been readily accepted into the affirmative culture industry, their glossy reproductions and high price tags makes them ideal for the middle-class coffee table. (Atkinson's 'bad painting' does not look so 'bad' in his glossy catalogues as it does in the gallery). This is another contradiction that Atkinson seems to have ignored. For example, the _Art for the Bunker_ show toured to the Garter Lane Gallery in Waterford - a city with, so far as I know, virtually no 'historical materialist' artists who may be interested in his work. It seems the only reason the show toured there was so that the art gallery could have the 'privilege' of an international artist showing. This does not seem to have disturbed Atkinson.

These points seem to suggest a slightly condescending or patronising attitude, and I think this does appear occasionally in his work. Patriarchal assumptions exist in both the _Happy Snap/History Snap_ series and the _Bunker_ series. An uncritical, patronising use of women as the innocent or the 'to be defended' point to an attitude that could be said to run through the whole of his painting on Ireland. Atkinson seems to

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suggest that Ireland is incapable of looking after itself, it is falling down a 'black hole', and 'historical pit', and only he as an outsider, or as a _real_ British citizen can look at the situation with clarity. This coupled with the way he uses the situation in Ireland for his own ends shows itself in the paintings in their quite mocking style. The whole concept of mimicing and parodying needs a 'fool' to mimic and I think Ireland is close to this 'fool' in Atkinson's work.

However, I do believe that Atkinson's work fills a gap, his approach in _most_ respects is a critically informed historical view of the contradictions inherent in both art and culture, and an analysis of the predicament of trying to change what can be changed and 'going on' in the face of what cannot. It is problematic but that must be expected of any art that is progressive.

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