

Play in the street

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Can we find contemporary use of avant-garde methods? I will look at two phenomena that use avant-garde methods to communicate and interact with the world. With his ‘space-invaders,’ the street artist *Invader* tags, or invades, the cities of the world with space-invaders. He then documents his invasions, making maps so everybody can take part in his “reality game” as observers. My other example is ‘*The Pink Army*’. This is an actionist movement that is happening in Copenhagen as well in other cities of the world, by whoever who wants to participate. This street play consists of painting miniature soldiers pink and gluing them around the city in a common battle against all the wars in the world.

Invader

Invader is a French street artist who makes his own game of invasion all around the world. He invades the cities he visits with illegally re-contextualized video game characters from the 1970’s Atari video game, Space Invader. To simulate the video game characters of digital pixels he has used a traditional medium, making mosaic tiles of invaders. He glues tiles of the figures on street corners, on public buildings etc., and gives himself points for the most challenging places to put them. Starting in the late 1990’s his invasion has been going on for 10 years now, and he has invaded about 40 cities worldwide.

Invaders mosaic tiles are small ephemeral objects appearing in street corners, but Invader documents his invasion and gives them an everlasting future by making maps for each city invaded. By this he offers the public to walk in his footsteps by following each space invader. One can find his maps on his web page where he also sells t-shirts, shoes, stickers etc. By being a tourist following his maps or wearing the artefacts he sells one can say that one is invaded, just like the cities are. Another aspect to Invaders street-art is that you can also be interactively included in his work, by getting news-feeds on mail from his past journeysⁱ. Invader remains anonymous after all these years, wearing masks when appearing in the media and in action in the streets.

The Pink Army Copenhagen

“We demand that war must be brought to an end. All weapons and ammo must be melted into toys”ⁱⁱ. This is the statement of my second street-art example, a group that doesn’t have one

creator but many. The Pink Army movement in Copenhagen is working together against all the wars in the world in a playful way offering everybody to come and join their project. The group had an idea, and that was that they by playing in the streets with little pink soldiers could help stop war, or at least communicate a symbolic value to awaken contributors and random spotters. The idea of this play rose from the board game Risk, a strategy game where one works to invade areas of the world with soldiers. This game goes from the board game to the streets of Copenhagen, where one can battle each other on suitable spots on street corners, around statues etc.

The group was formed in 2007, and the year later a similar group ARTillery arose in Aarhus in Denmark. Internationally there are about 15 departments with people playing the same game; these are spread all around Europe and North-America. To gather the troops and to communicate with each other the departments use Myspace, Flickr, Facebook and other web-forums. Here they also invite new readers on these pages to come and join the movement, to buy green toy soldiers, paint them pink, go out and glue them, then ask friends to join as well.

Reaching out to ordinary people

Invader and The Pink Army are in battle with their own present. By appropriating figures from a computer game, Invader criticizes how the computer age is controlling our lives. Invader's work mirrors the video game culture it refers to, acknowledging the sensory-overloaded public's need for the immediately digestible. The Pink Army on the other hand, protests against all the wars in the world. With a street art movement people participate to awaken a passive community with a disgust of war. Both Invader and The Pink Army also criticize the use of the streets by invading them, and making claim on them with their objects, tiles and soldiers. This can be seen as a protest against all the other visual pictures that are in the public environment, such as commercials, and also of who is in control of the public spaces. In their way The Pink Army and Invader redecorate the city with their work.

One could say that my two examples are attempts to reach out to people of the everyday life, and this reaching out in the everyday life can be traced back to the Situationists, represented by the leader Guy Debord. The everyday life was, according to them, in their time, a stream of coincidences which threatens to reduce humans to passive objects. They saw that the introduction of technology into everyday life, which took place within the frame work of modern bureaucratized capitalism, tended to reduce people's independence and creativity. They saw that the society they lived in automated people into isolated consumers and

prohibited communication. The city was also at odds with the Corbusian vision of people at ease in an ideal urban landscape, a place where the struggle with nature, with the body, with space, and with class issues had inexplicably come to an end. The task for the Situationists became to create situations in the everyday life, to transform life with a creative processⁱⁱⁱ.

Psycho-geography

The Situationists used psycho geography in their interference with everyday life. Psycho geography is a study of the laws and specific effects of geographical environment and how this effects the emotions and behaviour of individuals. In 1956 Debord wrote the “*Theory of Dérive*” describing derive, one of the basic Situationist practices performing psycho geography. Dérive was a technique of rapid passage through different environments^{iv}. The Situationists arranged a rereading of cities by their drifting, a new way to walk and re-experience the environment around them. At its best dérive was a social activity organizing small groups to gather in a collective drifting in the city's urban environment. From the outside, the Situationist drifting was regarded as a sort of therapy; it was like a rescue for people from the clutches of functionalism, and an exciting of the senses and the body^v.

Debord once said:

“That *which changes our way of seeing the street, is more important than that which changes our way of seeing a painting*”^{vi}.

With the soldiers of The Pink Army and with the space-invaders of Invader, a rereading of the city is taking place. After spotting one object one could be interested in finding more, one could be encouraged to go out on a “treasure hunt” in the streets for street-art-objects or simply remark that *just* there on the house corner is something new catching my eyes today.

The idea of drifting was borrowed from military tacticians who defined it as “a calculated action determined by the absence of a proper locus”. The power of psycho geography lay in the intoxication of subjective and objective approaches to urban exploration. The city and its interpretation needed to be contested for the Situationist if it was not to become congealed by the dominating language of capitalism, rationalism, modernization, and spectacle in the society. Debord complained that “*today cities themselves are presented as lamentable spectacles, a supplement to the museum for tourists driven around in glassed buses*”^{vii}.

Guy Debord and his fellow Situationist Asger Jorn made psycho geographic maps such as *The Naked City* and *Guide psychogéographique de Paris* after their dérives. These

maps was reconstructed guides to Paris showing places they had been to during their drifting, places that they meant were still not spoiled by capitalism and still worth visiting. The Situationist maps described an urban navigational system that operated independently of Paris's dominant patterns of circulation. The drifting and the maps were to alert people to their imprisonment in routines. In a playful way Invader documents his conquests all around the world, he makes maps for us to see the cities he has invaded. The maps invite us to follow in his footsteps, just like the maps of Debord and Jorn. By following the maps of Invader one is invited to experience the cities in new ways, following each point on the route like a poetic drift around in the city. His maps don't show us the ordinary tourist way to discover the city, but show us Invaders.

So, Invader's street-art doesn't stand alone but have different levels of experience. With the map in your hand you are a part of the work, a new relationship is created. Just the same kind of relations, the same feeling of participation, you can find with The Pink army when you decide you want to glue soldiers in the streets along with the rest of the group. With the technique of *detournement* Invader and The Pink Army take known images, pieces of the culture, and make them into works with a different expression. Invader and the Pink Army try to challenge us in our way of seeing the city and our daily life. Besides the street as a medium, both groups also use the internet as a way to gather people to see their projects and participate in them. Invader documents his invasions, sells artefacts and offers newsletters to his fans, while The Pink Army uses internet homepages to gather troops. During what they called "*Operation Pink Daisy*" The Pink Army Copenhagen decorated park-sculptures in Marselisborg Slotspark with the pink soldiers, this with the purpose to protect the Queen on her birthday against wars. And in august 2009 they conquered all the bridges surrounding Christiansborg^{viii}. With the internet as a medium this common battle can take place; there is an easy flow of information on the internet, and it is easy to keep in touch with each other. After the establishment of the army group in Copenhagen there have been made several blogs from this activism, and troupes have arose in other cities around the world.

Reuniting with life- effect of others life

The Avant-garde today stands in front of the task to create new situations for art, new forms of production and reception. The avant-garde is not just a response to the development of art, but perhaps most of all a reconfiguration of movements in the present society^{ix}.

The historical avant-garde before the First World War criticized the institution; they battled against mediocrity and fought for a golden path reuniting art and life. The Dadaists

refused the artwork per se and replaced it with a joke. The surrealists released the creation force, a reaction against the oppressed, and wanted to show the unconscious. They wanted to show art as a force to new life in an everyday life with no glamour. The soviet-Russian avant-garde gave the art a functional role, which then suffered in the communist project^x.

The Situationists on their hand looked at society they lived in as a society of spectacle. There was a gathering of postindustrial production and communication that was acting out as the *world*. The humans in this world were reduced to passive observers taking in whatever the media created for them and they were living in a controlled society. The everyday life refused people to control their own everyday life, and the Situationists wanted to shake the city out of the functionalistic grip and change it into a playground making a playful experimental behaviour for everybody. They wanted an everyday life where released creativity was like a collective lifestyle.

Theorizing the avant-gardes over the years have reached different impressions of what this uniting with life would mean. For what does one mean by life when united with art? For Bürger the avant-garde ended with the historical avant-gardes in the 1910- and 1920's with Dada, surrealism, and constructivism. Bürger's premise is that the cultural project of the historical avant-gardes can be subsumed as a project to destroy the false autonomy of bourgeois art. In the period since the historical avant-gardes "*the culture industry has brought about the false elimination of the distance between art and life*" Bürger claimed. For him there is a need for a social revolution for the avant-garde revolution to succeed, the avant-garde needs to be judged by their success in transforming and aestheticizing everyday life. In modern life, for Bürger, there is only one revolution at work, the revolution of capitalism and the commodity^{xi}.

By paying closer attention to how everyday life was being envisaged by both avant-garde artists and associated philosophers, the theorist Ben Highmore on his side thinks we can get a more vivid sense of the historicity of the avant-garde as the various formations awkwardly negotiating the complex forces of modernity. Highmore argues that everyday life is an ambiguous, but central category for the historical avant-garde and he uses Henri Lefebvre to theorize how the everyday life is to be understood. The avant-gardes wanted everyday life to become a work of art, and then the work of art wouldn't be found in the canon of art history, or in new commodities masquerading as art, but within daily life itself, within the possibilities of creative transformation to be found in the everyday. An attempt to make sense of a present everyday that is always mutating into something else is a difficult task. Theorizing and criticizing everyday life becomes a lifelong task due to the continued transformation of social

life. So, stress on the history of the everyday life needs to be taken into account while describing the acts of the different avant-garde projects. Highmore believes that Lefebvre allows us to insist on the historical particularity of both avant-gardism and everyday life^{xii}.

So, the avant-gardes didn't just respond to the new in the society, but acknowledged it and worked on it actively to realize it in their own time. They fought against their own present for the present. Debord claimed that there were two ways of performing the avant-garde project, one of them strong and the other one weak. The weak way was to just attempt to make progress, the stronger to create ways to go beyond the social totality and make an alternative way to inhabit the world, with a starting point in the existing production resources. The strong avant-garde, such as the Situationists, didn't produce artworks any more; and if they did it was hidden. The primary activity had become the creation in itself, the realization of the avant-garde^{xiii}.

To summarize

In fact nobody has been able to change the world, change life and create situations as strong as the avant-gardes enemy: capitalism claim Mikkel Bolt^{xiv}. The avant-garde have succeeded too well; the new they wanted to realize with have become accepted. Thomas Crow has noted that the avant-garde has often served as an unwilling (and unknowing) "*research and development arm of the culture industry*"^{xv}. The avant-garde neutralizes the modern shock. The change they want doesn't appear, it releases unconsciousness and fantasies, but it also becomes a chain in a consumer society. The avant-garde helps capitalism to change the world. If we are not to be reduced to mere observers in our own time we need to act. We must break out of a passive roll taking in whatever the society feeds us with. With their street art, Invader and The Pink Army transform the streets to an act of play, and infiltrate them with beautiful mosaic tiles and a playful twist with the pink soldiers. They arrange a rereading of the city, making us break out of our habits and the controlled ways we perceive cities. With these two examples one can be inspired to make street art oneself. If they can do it, why can't we? There is an urban battle going on, and this is what they want to show. My examples do not want a big revolution, but they work for small change in their own way. Street culture can play a strong part in city identity and urban narrative.

Literature and further reading

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ⁱ Invaders homepage: <http://www.space-invaders.com/>

ⁱⁱ Pink Army Copenhagen, blog:
<http://profile.myspace.com/index.cfm?fuseaction=user.viewprofile&friendid=248375216>

ⁱⁱⁱ Sadler, Simon (2001) "Formulary for a New Urbanism: Rethinking the City" (s. 69-187) i: *The Situationist City*. MIT Press, p. 77

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^{vi} Ibid, p. 69

^{vii} Ibid, p. 99

^{viii} From one of their homepage:
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