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Authentic Decor[ti]caine or "So it goes"

Attila Richard Lukacs, *Power Plant*, Toronto, June 29 to September 10, 1989

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[See table of contents](#)

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Attila Richard Lukacs, *Authentic Decor*, 1988.
Oil, tar, enamel and varnish on canvas; 414 x 319 cm.
Photo courtesy of the Diane Farris Gallery, Vancouver

**Attila Richard Lukacs, Power Plant, Toronto,
June 29 to September 10, 1989 —**

Attila Richard Lukacs has peeled away the cortex of Western culture to reveal the unequivocal experience and uninflected matter-of-factness of a malady. The assertive gestures, stalwart poses or sometimes submissive positions of the artist's skinhead

subjects appear to hold out no possibility for remission, no viable alternatives for counter attack — the skinheads have simply reconciled themselves to the abandonment of all hope affecting change. Deadpan expressions announce the futility of indignation. Any operation to remedy societal debility is notably absent. Judgement is suppressed. As Kurt Vonnegut nonchalantly refrained after each tragic passage in *Slaughterhouse Five*: “so it goes”.

The skinhead population arose from the first generation of Caucasians since the advent of the industrial revolution not to be afforded improved opportunities for education or employment. Western society betrayed them by failing to live up to its promise for unlimited prosperity and untethered growth. Although the skinheads are a marginal, reactionary group that is often associated with racial violence (some skinhead factions have been linked with white supremacist and neo-Nazi movements) Lukacs has cast them as much oppressed as oppressors. A detached, no-comment approach to controversial subject matter enhanced by the stark juxtaposition between these clean-shaven individuals and their defiled living conditions initiates a sense of ambivalence that persists in contemplation of the work. One may be neither entirely repulsed or seduced by overt social, sexual and political connotation.

In some measure such ambivalence may also be credited to a so-called dramaturgic perspective¹ adopted by both the artist and his subjects. Theorists argue that a dramaturgic point of view can arise when experience has lost its continuity, when the larger architecture of a culture sprawls and lacks organizing focus, and when a substantial proportion of members of a society no longer believe that the best is yet to come². Inability to cope with the real (the 'authentic') eventually leads to refuge being sought in appearance ('decor')³.

Lukacs' penchant for heroic scale, fascination with the dramatics of the human ordeal, and virtuosity of material manipulation might be read as an attempt to recapture the braggadocio of a bygone era (something of the spiritual essence of the nineteenth century Salon 'demonstration' pieces by Delacroix, Gérault, Courbet...) and to bolster the recently flagging authoritarian status. A free wheeling, ahistorical appropriation of compositional elements from masterworks by Degas and Caravaggio (for a canvas entitled *The Young Spartans Challenge the Boys to Fight*, 1988) and from Gainsborough (for the *True North* installation, 1989)⁴ are obvious examples of trading in decontextualized cultural commodities. Plundering the past for 'image effect' is one very clear indication of an intolerable present.

The dress code of the skinheads can be even more directly related to the inner dialectic of dramaturgy which posits appearance as simultaneously significant and inconsequential. On the one hand, appearance is often our only instrument of communication and identification (since we engage only a very small number of the people we encounter in conversation). On the other hand, those individuals generally held in high regard within a community also have appearances (often stereotyped) and those appearances (as vehicles of initial exchange) are no more or less important than any other person's. A skinhead dressed in hightop

construction boots, blue jeans and suspenders is no less expressive than a Wall Street financier clad in a custom-made, pin-striped, three-piece suit. Thus in the play of dramaturgic roles there is a tendency towards a heightened appreciation of things conventionally slighted and a slighting of things conventionally exalted. Boundaries are blurred between the real world and the stage, between hidden truth and mere appearance, between the heaviness and lightness of being.

Lukacs' various value inversions and his imploding of philosophical polarities underscore the present-day irrelevance of further propagating the myth of 'difference'. For example, the artist's "re-writing of art history" from an all-male (gay?) perspective parodies a re-write previously initiated in feminist discourse. The decidedly anti-social behaviour of most skinhead factions is tolerated by the current politics of liberalism and the display of this tolerance is flaunted in the salons of the *bourgeoisie* (i.e., the museums). Conventional ideals of normalcy and humanism are both subverted and transcended.

Graffiti scrawled on the walls of Lukacs' warehouse/refectory interiors is raised from the gutter of profanity to become an expression of a quasi-religious, social morale. This emergence of graffiti as a statement of street-level culture can be viewed as paralleling the inversion of so-called 'high' art's value/commodity status through recent developments in environmental, conceptual and performance projects. Graffiti as a form of aestheticized recommodification becomes a sign and a symptom of our late capitalist society.

Finally, in the composition entitled *Authentic Decor* we are left with one ultimate uncertainty. The skinheads have barricaded themselves in a dilapidated architectural structure pierced by paired window openings. In the distance we see a landscape veiled in the subtle light and atmospheric chiaroscuro of a Leonardo painting. Where such a vista was once interpreted as an outreach of Humanism, the context of this landscape leaves the spectator adrift somewhere between the early dawn of enlightenment and twilight's last gleaming. And "so it goes".

Allan Pringle

NOTES

1. Used here as in Plato's theory of Forms wherein dialectic eventually causes all distinctions to fade.
2. See Alvin Gouldner, *Enter Plato* (New York: Basic, 1965)
3. Hence the ambivalence inherent in both the artist's and this essay's title — *Authentic Decor* [...]
4. See Louise Dompiere, *Attila Richard Lukacs* (Toronto: Power Plant, 1989)