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## The Art of Conservative *Détournement*

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Hole in Wall.

## POSITION

### The Art of Conservative *Détournement*

†he revelation that the Operational Theory Research Institute, an Israeli Defence Force 'think tank' directed by Shimon Naveh turned to the philosophy of Guy Debord, Gilles Deleuze and Félix Guattari, the architectural work of John Forester, Bernard Tschumi and Clifford Geertz, and the 'Anarchitectural' site-specific urban interventions of Gordon Matta-Clark to facilitate the re-spatialization of contemporary military theory and strategy, appears initially shocking.

Upon further inspection, we are able to map a wider system of cultural and ideological assimilation through a range of military organisations that employ theories and works from the traditionally perceived humanitarian disciplines of music, architecture, art and philosophy. Examples include the U.S. military's use of music for 'battlefield preparation' as well as for torture in Guantánamo Bay and Abu Ghraib, and Canadian military training centres such as 'Pretendahar' in Toronto, to prepare soldiers for combat in the Middle East, which reference 1990s installation art practices. These examples give adage to the notion that this is not military 'business as usual', but rather the martialing of the business of culture.

As a consequence of such forms of cultural assimilation, we propose that the situated territories of the left, traditionally mapped out by cultural producers within the humanities are enduring a 'conservative *détournement*.' Engaging with Guy Debord's dynamic of appropriating and reusing bourgeois materials in new contexts, turning power systems against themselves; the

right are assimilating the tools of the left, resulting in a re-territorialisation of one of Western culture's cherished notions of resistance. Subsequently, a gradual disappearance of the traditionally identifiable leftist critical dynamic is discernable, a system of socio-political placement which allied modes of philosophy, art, architecture and music with radical gesture and made identifiable structures of resistance to hegemonic right wing doctrine.

Throughout the history of philosophy, politically oriented resistance theory has been a vital tool of direction and validation to the traditionally perceived leftist artist, writer, architect, musician and politician. With such tools being co-opted by right wing politicians, militaries and law enforcement organisations, it ultimately results in the stark realisation that the traditional leftist position can no longer count on its ideological weapons. By invoking the term conservative *détournement*, we acknowledge the inverted state of socio-political and cultural affairs, and extend the notion to propose that the right has grabbed the rights to culture and the left are now left without arms. Establishing this proposition we subsequently ask how, where and when do we start drafting up a new cultural cartography of resistance?

#### Rupture: from Psycho-Geography to Bi-polar Geography

The geography of the agents of conflict has irrevocably changed, a historical shift beginning with the decline of Communism resulting from the fall of the Soviet Union and the removal of the Berlin Wall stripping the left of its physical weaponry. This forced the left to retreat into academia to hone its ideas and tac-

'IDF use of Matta-Clark and Deleuze in Palestinian territories.'  
[http://www.itiph.org/en/Legal\\_Awareness/Right\\_To\\_Compensation/](http://www.itiph.org/en/Legal_Awareness/Right_To_Compensation/)  
 Date accessed – Friday 16<sup>th</sup> January



tics of resistance to the ever-expanding global systems of capital and military dominance. Right-wing thinkers have perhaps arrogantly dubbed this rupture and acquiescent collapse in binary oppositional politics (Capitalism vs. Communism) as “the end of history”, echoing Francis Fukuyama’s famous dictate that there was no more history to be written.<sup>2</sup>

One central shift emerging from this transition is the agenda of a right-wing political coalition (made up in part by the U.S., U.K., IDF and Canadian militaries) to co-opt strategies and tactics of what we term ‘leftist’ resistance and to assimilate them by utilising music, art and philosophy that historically critiqued them. The co-opting of the guerrilla’s methods of mapping, moving and attacking owes much to a number of theorists and thinkers embraced and celebrated by exponents of left-wing theory. The left is in a bind; their tools of criticism and production have been *détourné*.

Philosophy, art and music have become pacifiers of resistance; they have re-activated strategies of attack and proliferation upon their own value systems. A pertinent example is the IDF’s utilization of guerrilla strategies (the traditional nomadic left wing mode of conflict agency) to circumnavigate the streets and houses of Palestine by literally cutting holes into inhabited abodes. The IDF’s rhizomatic strategies<sup>3</sup> extruded a set of practices out of the philosophy of Deleuze and Guattari; overtly referencing Gordon Matta-Clark’s cutting of voids into buildings. Matta-Clark’s commentary on the decay of industrial urbanization, *détourné* by the IDF to protect the Israeli soldier, results in increased Palestinian civilian casualties. Other examples of such political assimilation include the U.S. State department’s use of Hegel, which can be seen as a refusal of Marxism, and Paul Wolfowitz’s studies with Leo Strauss which afforded the Bush administration the conservative philosophical tools of Heidegger and Nietzsche.<sup>4</sup>

Nazi Germany is the last time we witnessed anything akin to such exploitation of the arts supplementing physical force in right-wing hegemony. The difference with the Third Reich was that art, music, philosophy and architecture perceived as being anti-Nazi such as Dadaist, Cubist, and Expressionist painting and sculpture was tagged as ‘degenerate’ and was subsequently destroyed. Joseph Goebbels, Albert Speer and Bernhard Rust employed art, cinema, architecture and philosophy that they considered cultural and historical evidence of the Nazi’s perceived entitlement to power. Whereas Nazi Germany only used culture that they deemed to be aligned to their own aspirations, the current coalition of right wing adherents has started to use metaphorically ‘degenerate’ culture against itself, rendering it so starved of political manoeuvre that it devours its own potency. By asserting that culture currently finds itself in this political position, we purport that the roles of philosophy, music, art and architecture are currently ethically ambiguous and further declare that their ‘worth’ as ideological tools of struggle are toothless, corrupted and defused and when redeployed by conservative systems of power dangerous.

Writing during the rise of Fascism in Italy, travelling as a journalist and labour organizer from southern Italy to Turin, Antonio Gramsci faced questions of the potency of the intellectual in capitalist culture. He outlined the hegemony of Italian political society as being codified between agents of the state (originating from the south) and a northern bourgeoisie who controlled and defined the conditions of labour.<sup>5</sup> Gramsci located the power of the intellectual as both avant-garde and populist ultimately believing that the intellectual’s critique can undermine capitalism. Bound in historical materialism, Gramsci demands that the intellectual constructs a ‘counter-hegemony’ in ‘practical life’, as [a] constructor organizer, ‘permanent persuader’ and not just a simple orator.<sup>6</sup> This has the impact of countering the ideology of the right, denaturalizing the politics and practices of their appropriations. In the current theoretical bind that the intellectual and cultural producer finds him/herself in, it is necessary to not

only map the appropriation of leftist criticisms but to go further by deploying cultural practices that engage with disappearance to reveal modes of political crisis.

### Disappearance: Lost in the Post.

In the Chilean coup d’état of 1973, President Salvador Allende was overthrown by the U.S. backed military pre-empting a new era of martial brutality and co-option, codifying the traditional dualistic division between oppressor and resistor. This new political environment of cultural suppression meant that the cultural producer as a social bearer of resistance was removed from view. As the overt signifiers of struggle morphed, practitioners of resistance became enveloped in the guerrilla tactics of mobility. The example par excellence of this transitionally subversive practice is Eugenio Dittborn’s Air Mail Paintings. His works were folded and sent to international galleries, the envelopes displayed as an integral part of the art form.

Dittborn’s work represents the artist’s disappearance from the externalised geography outside of his homeland, which recharged and reignited the explosion of interest in his packages. The work was forced to vanish as it entered alternative systems of transmission (in a politically analogous manner to the way Picasso’s *Guernica* was forced into exile at MoMA) forcing the aesthetic to be consumed in illicit networks. Edward Said identifies the work of the intellectual as existing in similar spaces to those proposed by Dittborn’s air mail paintings, arguing that exile is not to be excommunicated, but acknowledged as existing in “half-involvements and half-detachments.”<sup>7</sup> Said invokes Kissinger (whose policies displaced Dittborn), noting that as a displaced German-Jewish scholar he assimilated to American political culture, eventually taking an active role in directing it. However Kissinger is not a model of exile for Said. Instead he suggests that exile is outside and unsettled, always restless, defining a new style of criticism.<sup>8</sup> Theodor Adorno becomes a key example; here the intellectual in exile is discontent, desiring to share his work, pushing against both the home and exiled community.<sup>9</sup> Said notes that exile is not just bound by nationalism, but rather being outside of dominant systems of power and its discourses is in itself a system of exile.<sup>10</sup> This conception of alienation and intellectualism places exponents of the left in a unique position of being exiled in their own homeland.

Rather than work with metaphor, (as have many artists throughout history under regimes which forbade public acts of resistance to the ruling party), Dittborn translated his message via post, substituting allegorical and intellectual readings for direct and physical deliveries. The work bespeaks exile, veiled inside the envelopes that hold them, juxtaposing a critique of his homeland with the lack of dissent from external sources of influence. Military strategies in 2009 reshuffle cultural producers like Dittborn, from a marginal position of exile into a socio-political core of influence. Through the aesthetics of disappearance, military identity becomes abstracted between the lines of commerce, industry and now culture. The military’s models of classification, territory and perception are disappearing into an everyday civilian matrix of subjectivities, surveillances, and rhetoric. Donning cultural camouflage and creating new taxonomies of meaning, the ‘military-industrial complex’, would be more relevantly renamed the ‘military-cultural complex’.

### Reappearance—Exposures of Guantánamo Bay

The military has disappeared as being an organized representation of extension and protection of territories through physical aggression and has reappeared as a joint representative of culture as force. A politics of transformation is present in the culture of military accumulation and transformation of theoretical texts, music and installation art aesthetics into repressive state practices. In an intellectual sense and through brute force, the armed forces of Israel, Great Britain, and the United States expose the point



Whilst history proved Baudrillard somatically inaccurate, his writings about simulacra are still pertinent and revealing. The *détourned* space of the Canadian Military's training centre named 'Pretendahar' (a verbal pun on the simulated construction of the city of Kandahar) being a case in point; with its aesthetics of lo-fi assemblage reminiscent of the ad hoc, thrown together stylistic tendencies of late 90's YBA (Young British Artist) culture, Pretendahar constructs an interior landscape of floating signifiers, eschewing the grounded realities of life in an Afghani city. Reminiscent of works from the 1960's Italian Arte Povera ('Poor Art') Pretendahar reconstructs a Middle Eastern *mise en scène* using the excess of everyday materials, but for very different reasons than Arte Povera's pioneer-curator Germano Celant's intended. Guantánamo Bay, the troubling alter ego of Pretendahar, forms an offsite locale to a simulated centre of disappearance. As divisive as it is complicated, Guantánamo Bay, with its secretive games of exposure caught in photographs and videos represents the copy of the infinitely reproducible body contained in an orange suit, the endless display of tamed 'threat'. As a nexus of political destabilisation relaying the notion of hegemony, Guantánamo makes the threats of a repressive state all the more terrifying because its activities are veiled and exposed at the same time. The military desire, and know that there is, an audience. As voyeurs we think we know exactly what goes on as we watch captives that

Publicly acknowledged that it exists without a humanitarian or legal pretext by international treaty, this detention camp represents the ultimate spatiality of government-sanctioned violence. There is not only the illusionistic disappearance of bodies, and legalities binding international etiquette for dealing with 'threat', there is also the disappearance of known and accepted military modalities of torture. It is here that we witness the adoption and co-option of culture, in the form of music, as a tool for manipulating and damaging psychologies and physiologies. As exposed by the 'Zero db' campaign<sup>11</sup> (an artist led coalition against the use of music as a weapon) TV show themes, heavy metal, and disco music are all used repetitively, played over hours or days to 'fracture' a prisoners resolve and/or sanity in an effort to extract information from their broken systems. Often using music that has anti-war sentiments, such as 'Born In The USA' by Bruce Springsteen, Guantánamo Bay confirms the co-option of sonic culture much in the way that Palestine is witness to the co-option of philosophy for IDF strategies and Afghanistan is witness to the co-option of art installation techniques for training soldiers to fight against the Taliban.

Harking back to the Chilean dynamics of hidden jails and death camps where disappearance was all too common, clandestine, and too real; where people today still don't know if their loved ones are alive or dead; the body disappeared from the social fold, often irrelevant of whether the captive considered him/herself as an agent of resistance or not. Representatively Guantánamo announces the reappearance of the body as a target for the political demonstration of discipline, punishment and will in a similar way and with equally nebulous 'evidence' of any 'wrongdoing'. The ritual abuse in Guantánamo becomes the martial art of reappearance, as photographs, written testimonies and videos expose the brutal situation of the detainees to the world. We have to look at

Photography by Colin Davison <http://www.axisweb.org/seCuratorProjects.aspx?CID=20>







Gordon Matta Clark *Conical Intersect* (detail) 1975 27-29, rue Beaubourg, Paris  
courtesy of David Zwirner, NY and the Estate of Gordon Matta-Clark  
<http://www.artnet.com/Magazine/features/smyth/Images/smyth6-4-4.jpg>

times of chronological digital synthesis in which the past, present and future modes of resistance are all screened at once, culture becomes camouflaged, conflict is lateralized and the military disappears into the midst of the other.

Paul Virilio intonates the cultural producers's power in wartime, but does not go on to explore the idea in *The Vision Machine*; stopping short of giving it the exposure and research it warrants. The statement he makes is relevant to WWII but is an important reference to the trajectory of cultural utility that we have been discussing: "the Special Branch (Propaganda) would finally twig that artists who had just won the battle for the New Deal in the United States and raised the morale of a whole nation in the grip of economic depression, had the power, with their particular talents, to do likewise in time of war... finding as yet unguessed shortcuts to victory."<sup>14</sup>

Virilio's suggestion comes at a time of cultural crisis; the conservative *détournement* of the left has become normalized, seen and yet not seen, heard and yet not heard. The IDF is open about its use of philosophy, documentation of Pretendahar flaunts its own aesthetic tendencies, and we have a continual unveiling of the repressive forces and musical torture tactics practiced in Guantánamo Bay. The power of the cultural producer in times of war must be taken back at this moment of economic and political crisis. There needs to be exposure of the factors that lead to the blurring of identities, functions and allegiances between civilian and military institutions. Resistance must reappear out of the disappearance of its cultural tools. It must engage in those very same practices that the IDF deployed to construct counter-hegemony capable of renegotiating and transforming cultural and political systems creating a desire for utopia.

HEYS & HENNICH

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the re-appearance of the abject and how this is controlled, how it territorializes and externalizes latent fear from inside the USA and to the exterior of its borders to realise that the simulation is the threat.

### The Culture of Camouflage—Seen and Yet Not Seen, Heard and Yet Not Heard

We conclude by saying that this is not the first time art; architecture, music, and philosophy have been utilized by the military. Slavoj Žižek notes for instance that architectural practices informed by Surrealism were used by the Franco regime to construct a "series of secret cells and torture centers built in Barcelona in 1938".<sup>12</sup> This early precursor is an important precedent, but it does not signify the systematic implementation of military strategies based on assimilated cultural ideologies and practices that the use of music as torture, installation art practices for training centres and the use of philosophy for martial manoeuvres do. We are currently observing the inversion of enemy territory, as the military travels inside, mining its own culture to negate threat, drawing up a new cartography of culture and in the meantime camouflaging the landscape of resistance.

"As the last two great wars have shown, victory goes to the nation most capable of mobilizing its industrial might" stated Manuel De Landa.<sup>13</sup> This notion needs updating to read—victory goes to the nation most capable of mobilizing its culture. It is a terrifying moment of reality in our history that philosophy, architecture, art and music matter politically, and that their exposure to the mainstream is being used for right wing purposes which wantonly suppress and abandon human rights in favour of self-interested economic proliferation and return. With this in mind it is to Gramsci's calls to action that we must turn. In these martial environments of counter-conflict simulation and

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