Boris Lurie and NO!art

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In New York, in the late 1950's, an independent, anti-establishment art movement evolved around The March Gallery, one of several artists' co-operative galleries at that time on Tenth Street on Eastern Manhattan. The group was originally called The March group, but was later renamed as NO!art - the phrase "NO!" often occurring in their artworks, signalling social indignation and protest. Probably the most left-radical art movement in New York, NO!art never became part of the established art scene, as other emerging movements of that period - Pop Art, Minimalism, Neo-dada, etc. - but remained outside it and has basically been ignored by art history ever since. Recent years, however, has witnessed a growing interest in NO!art, manifested in retrospective exhibitions, conferences etc., particularly in Germany and the United States.

The group was started in 1959 by Boris Lurie (b. 1924), Stanley Fischer (1926-1980) and Sam Goodman (1919-1967) and comprised approximately 20 artists. The active period of the movement is often described as 1959-1964, but those dates are refuted by Lurie as artificial (see the adjacent interview). Although rather diverse in style, most NO!artists shared a trashy anti-aesthetic and a fierce, outspoken critique of American commercialism and politics in general, and of the New York art establishment/market in particular. The titles of such shows as Vulgar Show (1960), Doom Show (both 1961), NO!show (1963), The American Way of Death and NO!Sculpture Show/Shit Show (both 1964, the latter at Gertrude Stein Gallery), testifies to their irreverent attitude against "high art".

In Shit Show, Sam Goodman filled the gallery space with painted plaster sculptures, which looked like huge piles of excrement, evoking strong reactions from audience and critics. The artist commented: "I'd like it understood that this is my final gesture after thirty years in the art world. This is what I think of it." Later, the German art historian Georg Bussmann has described Shit Show as the ultimate NO!art manifestation: shit as art, Bussmann claims, meant the complete negation of all traditional expectations on art, such as sublimation and aesthetization. Similarly, art critic Harold Rosenberg also saw negativity as the essence of NO!art: "To say no to art through art requires [...] slaying a god - or an angel, God's messenger. If anything less is involved in No-art, it is simply non-art, and modern society is full of that." Today's interest in NO!art has hitherto mainly focused on Boris Lurie. When Whitney Museum in New York launched their Abject Art exhibition in 1992, the catalogue counted Lurie and Goodman as fore-runners of John Miller, Mike Kelly, and other artists that were occupied with the macabre and the obscene in the 80's. Particularly Lurie's collages with juxtapositions of pornographic imagery and documentary photos of Nazi concentration camp mass-graves have received much attention. Here, a shift of focus is evident in the understanding of Lurie's work, towards a stronger emphasis on the artist's personal history. Lurie was born in Leningrad by Jewish parents in 1924. The next year they moved to Riga, where he grew up; he lost several family members during the Nazi occupation of Latvia, and was himself imprisoned in concentration camps 1941-45, including the infamous Buchenwald camp. In 1999, when Weimar was European Capital of Culture, Lurie was given a retrospective exhibition at Gedenkstätte Buchenwald, the former camp site. Undoubtedly, the tendency to read Lurie's work as "Holocaust art" or "survivor art" reflects our own time's
interest in the Holocaust. In the 60's, when emphasis rather was put on art's relation to its contemporary political context, the Holocaust aspect seems to have been considered less relevant. The exception is one critic, who, probably unaware of Lurie's past, condemned him for desecrating Hitler's innocent victims and accused the artist of possessing a "subhuman conscience". Lurie himself has mainly related NO!art to his personal past in metaphorical terms, as in his introductory text to the Shit Show: When I was imprisoned in a German concentration camp during the war, Jewish prisoners drowned a fellow Jew in the accumulated excrements of the latrine for collaboration with the enemy. The price of collaboration in art, too, is excremental suffocation.

Today's interest in NO!art seems still to be growing; among its most recent manifestations is the American film maker Amikam Goldman's film NO!art MAN, presently in its finishing stage. The inclusion of this to-long-obscured art movement into our recent/contemporary art awareness is most welcome. Furthermore, the study of its shifting reception points to mechanisms of exclusion in the art world and in art history, as well as to which degree the understanding of culture is based on contextual factors.

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Interview with Boris Lurie

Max Liljefors: NO!art is often described as an art movement active between 1958 and 1964. Do you agree about these years as the beginning and end of NO!art? If NO!art has continued after 1964, has it been in less organized, more individual forms?

Boris Lurie: NO!art has continued way beyond 1964 and also prior to 1958. The "cutting-off" date 1964, as espoused by the art historian Estera Milman is, in my opinion, entirely artificial, and I have argued about it with her. Such cutting-off dates are common to art historians, done for cataloguing purposes, and what is more, for accreditation of monetary value in the art market. The cutting-off dates also have a devastating effect on the production of artists, who are, by those means, being convinced that what they produce after a cutting-off date is secondary in importance, and do not belong any longer to the "new times". An example would be the Italian painter De Chirico, who dated his late paintings with early years, on the basis that the idea had come to him at that early date, but he got around to executing it only at the later date - quite valid, in my opinion - yet the art market hated it, for practical reasons of creating confusion about monetary value. That is, in my opinion, the main and real reason for art historians and critics insisting on this untrue measure. So called NO!art must have existed way before the group-exhibitions at the March Gallery, and then, as a "unified" trend as the re-named March Group. How then could the artists immediately switch to a "new style"? My Dismembered Women paintings were done from 1950 (and exhibited) and they are definitely "NO!art", though in a totally different "style". Michelle Stuart was strongly socially influenced earlier, Sam Goodman was doing caricatures at night-clubs, travelling through the USA, Stanley Fisher was writing beat-type poetry, John Fischer was doing classic-kind Flemish-type wrenched oil paintings, and similarly, Isser Aronovici a mix of classical painting with primitivism, above all on the then drug-scene. What concerns "after 1964", shows at Gertrude Stein Gallery took place to 1967 (if not later). Dorothy Gillespie, Goodman, and I exhibited at René Block Gallery in Berlin in 1974, later at the "Kunst & Politik" exhibition at Karlsruhe Museum, at Hundertmark Gallery in Cologne and other places. Wolf Vostell, the German artist who facilitated most of these German exhibitions, was closely allied to NO!art, even though he collaborated with the Fluxus group (I believe for practical reasons). Dietmar Kirves in Berlin compiled for years the NO!art book
finally published by Hundertmark in 1988, because we could not get it published in New York despite the editor Seymore Krim's good connections in the publishing world. Your question about less organized, more individual forms, after 1964: it is correct that exhibitions by individuals spread over more exhibition-places, but the content on the other hand became more concentrated in one sole way. Originally a "free for all", "libertinistic" approach prevailed, that went against Formalism (including expression of social attitudes and extreme "personal expression") and permitted "all". That changed as a result of the failure of "anarchic hopefully idealistic" conditions in society, and the failure of the New Left, into more hardened and explicit anti-establishment forms.

Are you still active as an artist? What is your relation to the art establishment?

I am "still active as an artist," never have been "un-active", though less directly involved in promotional activities. I have been an artist since my school-days, and even earned money with my work doing illustrations in 1940-41 in Soviet Latvia. (In New York it was much harder!) My relation to the New York "Art Establishment" is at present Zero. Last time I heard from them, was in the 90's when an exhibition of "Beat-poetry & art" was presented by the Whitney Museum in New York, and I was invited and submitted a painting, and then was informed two hours before the opening that the object would not be shown...

Some critics have proposed a psychoanalytical understanding of NO!art, regarding it as an expression of (or an impulse against) unconscious psychic repression. You have argued against this view, that NO!art instead was a politically conscious movement with defined goals and collectively planned strategies. How do you see the relation between psyche and politics in NO!art?

"Psychoanalytical" understanding of NO!art is not correct, but "psychological" expression by an artist is not only desirable; it is the only avenue to achieve a "great" work. "Political goals with a collectively defined strategy" is perfectly OK, but the work must come out of personal necessity, otherwise it remains as nothing but political propaganda. Not that "propaganda" is bad - but there is a difference between propaganda and art (sometimes hard to tell, and sometimes depending on how much of each ingredient is in the work, and how it is handled: Eisenstein's movies come to mind.)

The negativity in NO!art reminds me about Dada. How would you describe the affinities (or lack thereof) between NO! and Dada. Did NO!art have any specific artistic models or sources of inspiration?

"Dada", in my view, had a jocular negativity (or intellectual titillation, as in Duchamp). "Dada" is of course unique and valuable because of its attack on all "formalist" "bourgeois" art. "Dada" to us was more or less an intellectual upper-class movement. At the time we knew practically nothing about "Dada". We considered that NO!art came "from the soul" of the artist under social neglect, arising out of the slum-neighbourhoods of New York, who finally had had enough and rebelled any way that he could (including obviously against the fancy art-establishment-art-market, which is in objective practical terms one). "Dada" was only "outside", if at all, for a very short time: the Museum of Modern Art in New York promoted it from the very inception of the museum (together with surrealism), so I doubt that it could have constituted a serious threat to the status-quo. "Dada" today is guilty of spawning or justifying all kinds of 'artists' (art market's) movements", from Pop Art on (having clothed itself in U.S. chauvinism) to highly refined and - sickly - "Conceptual" off-shots (which does
not negate the fact that certain conceptual art could be very positive.)
If anything was an "inspiration" to early NO!art, it was extreme Abstract Expressionism, as sometimes practised by Pollock, DeKooning and Kline, and of course the old German Expressionism. (DeKooning and Kline were alive at the time, and in contact with the March Group, and more so with the older March Gallery. DeKooning had his studio around the corner.)

*Does contemporary art interest you? How would you describe the contemporary art scene? Do you see any equivalents to NO!art today? Are they possible?*

Contemporary art is such a mishmash of various items, all practically under the guidance of the all-time-worst art market, that it is very difficult to answer this question in a totally inclusive sense. Basically, as I see it (outside its pure commercialism), we are in an "Academic period", the likes of late 19th century, but different because it "feasts" on the pioneering Modern Art. It is mostly an art-history-books-learned procedure (results of university education, which further such), combined with hopes of "hitting the target" of wealth and fortune as the Rock musicians do at times. The personnel of younger artists is mostly upper middle-class or rich, university-educated, and they relate in a different manner to the establishment, disliking it at times, but being convinced that there is no other alternative. "Performance art", now going out of style, is an exception: in many ways it is remarkable. Also to be considered is the "higher cost of living" today in comparison to the 50's and 60's, that forces young artists to run fast - they only have a limited time to become "successful". Earlier, the artists did not have great financial ambitions, were content with very little, wanted to mature slowly. Now, the ridiculous auction-prices, based on emotional fashions and investment/speculation, attempt to drive the young artists out of their wits. "Equivalents" to NO!art are always possible. But to acquire top quality and hitting power, they should be "outside" of the art establishment - which is hardly possible today, considering costs, as well as considering the psychological and political makeup of younger artists today. Nevertheless we do not have total information about what is really happening everywhere, and therefore what is really possible: information is limited and controlled, where it really counts, i.e. in accredited newspaper reports and in the art magazines, which have turned into directly or indirectly subsidized sales-catalogues (as by costly full-page advertisements). On the other hand, NO!art glimmers through in the "highest order" of accredited "avant-garde" art, such as the London Saatchi-sponsored people, whose total work - with the exception of political subject-matter! - totally mirrors NO!art but on a physical grandiose (and expensive!) scale, but lacking, to me, "heart"; and substituting for it grandiosity of scale, applied "conceptualisms", and a "look" of commercial-art-design. Now it may happen, that in this young generation having grown up under total (TV) commercialism, and willy-nilly having swallowed "art history propaganda" (like that about Pop Art...) nothing else is realistically possible. "Avant-garde art" is not created only by artists, but as well by the education and formation of the intellectual circles of the time, not to speak of financing by not-disinterested financiers of projects (who, as is natural in business, will only invest in projects which will be most accessible to consumers, in this case, art-consumers.) So then it happens, that certain NO!art currents are visible from time to time in a form adjusted to its new environment, that is the fully commercial and/or nose-poking intellectually playful conceptualisms. A similar impression is also gained, to a degree, in the "Nazi exhibition" at the Jewish Museum in New York [Mirroring Evil. Nazi Imagery/Recent Art. 2002. ML], basically excellent, but often marred by meaningless "Pop" influences, gadgetry and precious conceptualisms.)
The art-world-market practically controls the dispersion of artworks; but there also exists an academic field into which outside-market persons are incorporated, but which effectively has
no power - in visual art (different perhaps from other arts). It is the investment and powerfulness of collectors/institutions, which controls, starting out, usually, with art-speculators.

NO!art dealt with several political issues. What is your opinion about political issues in art today?

NO!art dealt with "political issues" only indirectly, i.e. through "art". Political issues are today, as they ever have been, galore. Political issues are excluded form today's official market-art. For instance, the Saatchi-art deals with all issues, strictly psychological and personal and horror (in the form of animal corpses, which NO!art on a more modest scale also dealt with), but the "political" is there, as elsewhere, the only subject-matter strictly excluded. There was a group show at the former Twin Towers, New York, in a non-commercial gallery environment, which celebrated the counter-revolution and demise of the Soviet Union. There are strictly "ethnic" artists who exhibit their work in public non-gallery spaces in ethnic Harlem or Spanish Harlem. Of course Leon Golub's work is political in content, but it refers literally to events in Latin America (not here) which most anyone can identify with sympathetically. There are strictly political cartoonists, but to me cartoons don't fall strictly under the gender of "art" - unless they in some way unusually excel. The problem with "protest art" and even left-leaning "political art" is also the environment in which it is being shown. When exhibited in the pure-commercial space of an art gallery, or in the space of an "established museum" (whose real purpose is not just the dissemination of art and/or culture), such an enterprise (to a person aware of these conditions) becomes problematic, and may even hinder such a person from being convinced by the exhibited works. Vice versa, exhibition of such works may automatically put the seal of approval on all quite different works which the art-gallery of renown or the museum promotes. To do "political art" in the 60's and on was different than today - besides the "protest", there was an air of general (international) optimism (developments in Russia, Cuba), whereas today that optimism doesn't exist. Optimism is a good ingredient to produce "art" (see, for instance, the poet Mayakovsky). It's difficult to produce powerful "art", solely out of negativism and despair.

The new interest in NO!art and yourself has focused to a great extent on NO!art as a reaction to the Holocaust and on your own experiences as a Nazi concentration camp prisoner. Sometimes your work is regarded as closer related to your personal past in the 40's than to the political context of NO!art in the 60's. Do you see think this approach is valid?

What concerns me personally, I have been an artist since childhood. My imprisonment during World War II and its experiences certainly are a part of my personality, and it also enabled me to take a contrary (to art-fashions) point of view. But the NO!art that later followed was a direct result of the very tough circumstances in New York. It was only at the very beginning when I arrived in New York in 1946 that I did illustrational painting connected with the concentration camps etc. The Dismembered Women, though directly referring to New York, also had a war-content. And later, within NO!art (particularly after my first post-war visit to Riga in 1974) I included extermination-subjects (such as the Rumbula-boxes with torn pinups; Rumbula being the extermination spot in Riga.)

NO!art seems to have been very productive. How much of the work remain today? Are there collections, are they catalogued?
I have a collection of NO!art, and part of it was shown in Berlin, in Buchenwald and at the University of Iowa and at Northwestern University, Chicago. A show is planned for Kunstverein Mannheim, Germany, for 2003, but it may contain just my work. A great part of NO!art is lost, with a slight possibility that some might be found after investigative work. The works are not catalogued. There is also a film and photos of a quasi-happening and street-demonstration. It turned out lucky, that so little was sold - what was sold is likely irretrievable. I have managed to save much of the NO!art works for many years, but a great deal (particularly of certain artists like Stanley Fischer and Sam Goodman and some others) are lost. Two works are in my storage in New York and in Germany. Documentation exists, but no cataloguing, at Dietmar Kirves’ NO!art archive in Berlin (www.no-art.info).

Which NO!artists do you think should receive more attention today?

I'd prefer to extend that question to several artists as well, who didn't participate in NO!art exhibitions; yet working in a similar (and sometimes different) spirit: Peter Alvermann, in Germany, who did very early strictly political alike NO!art; Isser Aronovici, deceased (suicide) and whose most work & writing is dispersed; John Fischer, whose "military weapons" assemblages had been done very early (but who wishes no connection with NO!art at present); early work by Michelle Stuart; Peter Saul; graffiti-like work by Clayton Patterson, New York; Paulo Baratella (early work) in Milan; one artist likely indirectly close to and living around the March group gallery whose work I picked up on the street (thrown out). Artists very close to NO!art, of the "Viennese actionists", are Guenter Brus, etc., who commenced their activities shortly after our NO!art's; the "Guerrilla Art Action Group" of Jean Toche and Jon Hendricks of the 70's; Dietmar Kirves, conceptual and literary artist, who also worked with Joseph Beuys, and edited and prepared the Hundertmark NO!art Book.

5 Rosalind G. Wholden, "Spectres - Drawn and Quartered", in Arts Magazine, May-June 1964, pp. 17-18
7 Amikan Goldman, NO!art MAN. New York: Main Street Films, 2003
8 See also Max Liljefors, Bilder av Förintelsen. Mening, mime, kompromettering. Lund: Palmkrons, 2002