

## **Tilo Schulz: I WAS SHOT IN THE BACK**

*The solid (bourgeois) amphitheatre has yielded to an aquarium of floating, evanescent forms – the projectors and managers, auditors and janitors, administrators and speculators of contemporary capital: functions of a monetary universe that knows no social fixities and stable identities.*

*Perry Anderson*

*Give me back the Berlin Wall, give me Stalin and Saint Paul. I've seen the Future, brother, it is murder ....*

*Leonard Cohen*

*The centre will not hold.*

*W.B. Yeats*

The premise for this exhibition began in 2006 when Tilo Schulz and I held initial conversations about doing a project that would commemorate the global protests of 1968. The original idea I had had to do a forty-year anniversary project about student uprisings specifically - their histories, and their currencies - then dovetailed with a number of ideas that Schulz has been working through in his practise as an artist. Namely, Schulz's work confronts and analyzes the transmittance and transformation of histories and perceptions of histories through the shifting of aesthetics. A large part of his concern has been around memory, history and resonances from the Cold War, and the political divide in his native Germany until the 1989 collapse of the Berlin Wall. Schulz has lived exactly half his life behind the Berlin Wall and the other half within the new, post-*Iron Curtain* Germany, which places him in an almost unavoidable position of largely being privy to, and often in-between, what we might define as typically western (capitalist) and eastern (communist) politics.

Schulz has tackled the above issues pertaining to 1968, student revolt, Cold War politics, and the cultural clash of ideologies arising in action painting; all with a specific focus on the university context – specifically this university campus. For his project at the Blackwood Gallery, Schulz had earlier researched elements of the Cold War in Canadian history, and discovered a figure named Igor Gouzenko who,

according to some historians, set off the first major international event of the Cold War. Gouzenko spent his final years in Mississauga, and his dramatic role in post-war espionage in Canada was an irresistible image for Tilo to draw upon for this project: Gouzenko – as the images in the exhibition ephemera and in the publicity around the exhibition demonstrate – would only ever appear in public wearing a hood.

Gouzenko's 1945 defection to Canada exposed attempts by the Soviets to steal nuclear arms secrets, as well as the Soviets' alleged widespread espionage campaign in Canada. Gouzenko's defection has also been described as ushering in Canadian modern security intelligence, where the thirty-nine arrests his intelligence work brought about were the beginning of an increasingly sophisticated secret service in Canada, and likewise influenced Cold War politics above and beyond those associated between the Superpowers.

In 1954, Gouzenko was awarded the Governor General's award for his non-fiction novel *The Fall of a Titan*. Prior to that he had been a quasi-celebrity, with rampant appearances of his hooded head in print media and even on Canada's television program *Front Page Challenge* exactly fifty years ago. This hood that kept Gouzenko's image anonymous was bitterly complemented by his unmarked grave decades later. A few years back, after his wife's death, Gouzenko, in his time commonly referred to as *The Great Defector*, was commemorated by the Canadian government as a hero.

Today, the most prominent defection in Canada has been another foreigner from a Superpower nation – this time sent back to where he was from. On July 16<sup>th</sup>, 2008, American Army deserter Robin Long was deported by Canada to the USA after a long-fought legal battle by the former soldier to remain in Canada. This decision, orchestrated by Stephen Harper's government, brazenly took place less than a month after an NDP-introduced parliamentary bill was voted in by opposition parties, which had stated that deportation of American defectors would be disallowed. To put this into perspective, there are currently between fifty and two hundred American army defectors in Canada. In comparison, up until the end of the Vietnam War, there were over a hundred thousand draft dodgers and war resisters who fled the USA for Canada. Many of these Americans were granted permanent resident status under an initiative set by Prime Minister Pierre Trudeau, where Trudeau sought to make Canada a "refuge from militarism." Today, the death penalty is the severest punishment for court-martialled "defectors" in the US, and Canada's role in making

news stories and new images around and about defectors, no matter their political stripes, has shifted dramatically since 1945.

If one considers political histories in the past few decades, the 1960s within which Igor Gouzenko became more publicly forgotten saw great strides in organized political activism worldwide. From the Civil Rights Movement in the USA, to a more revolutionary Irish Republicanism in the North of Ireland, to great growths of socialist movements in France and Italy, to sophisticated anti-war activities in the UK, to growing efforts in Africa for independence, to the Prague spring in Czechoslovakia (which ended with the Soviet occupation of the country), to the environmentally-minded *renaissance* in Scandinavia, many of these movements were student-led and student-orchestrated.

As opposed to the more popular images today that represent peace, love and hippie culture as being the defining images of the time leading up to and emerging after 1968, this time was in fact greatly a time of armed insurrection and suppression. The Cuban Revolution had been a great influence for 1968 movements, and it was an uncompromising, armed and bloody revolution. On the other side of the global revolution, in Mexico for example, ten days before 1968 summer Olympics, the government issued a USA-assisted clamp-down on student protests that resulted in the slaughter of over three hundred people. Student riots in West Germany were set off by the shooting of Benno Ohnesorg in West Berlin by German police (June 2, 1967), who was killed the same day that Israel invaded Palestine, commencing the Six Day War. Key political figures, who were helping to imagine and define new forms of society, were killed in and around the explosion of 1968. These included Martin Luther King (April 4, 1968), Robert Kennedy (June 5, 1968), and Che Guevara (October 9, 1967) to cite a few. Many of the shifts that came in that period – such as President Johnson signing the Civil Rights Act immediately after Martin Luther King's assassination in 1968 – came at a violent price.

The wake of 1968 did see many transformations, including the collapse of dictatorships in Latin American and the Mediterranean, but it also witnessed, effectively, greater USA imperialistic hegemony, both at home and abroad. Richard Nixon was elected president in late 1968. Following in Nixon's shadow were a company of Americans, from Ronald Reagan, George Bush, to Donald Rumsfeld, Paul Wolfowitz, Karl Rove and, Dick Cheney, who collectively believed dearly in deregulation of international markets and a consistently advancing USA military supremacy. Since the 1970s both of these forms of domination have escalated at a more and more rapid pace. We might

define these two global tendencies, which are orchestrated as much as they are perpetuated through sheer chaos, as the most direct instigators of the world's crisis we have experienced and shall continue to experience.

In times of war and international crisis, rigid policies have trickled down from Cold War politics, as they continue to trickle down from War on Terror politics, within university administrations and faculties. Student uprisings have always arisen in response to new powers and policies being implemented on different socio-political levels, including the university level, such as the 1968 Berkeley protests against the Vietnam War, which spread like a wave throughout North America. Today, as Nixon had climbed over Bobby Kennedy's corpse to the presidency, a top-down, market-oriented structure dominates many university systems, having had emerged from the rather recent advances of a progressive, unflinching pursuit of knowledge and of relative student-ownership of the university system. As in decades past, students are currently questioning the role of the university in creating a new society. Amongst Canadian students' grievances today are the distribution of funds throughout the university which tend to reinforce a powerful hierarchy with an unsavoury relationship to corporate power structures, high tuition fees, poor transportation systems perpetuating overuse of the car, the exclusion of many from a university education, the university's intimate relationship with and emulation of militarism, the political and ideological governance of university departments marked by vulgar careerism and bullish jingoism, and the complexities of a university bureaucracy set to serve itself before students. Within such a structure, pedagogical approaches to knowledge, and open forums around imagining and constructing new forms of civil society, philosophies and/or innovations in various fields, might find themselves more and more taking a back seat to decadent, self-serving interests. That is, forms of rhetorical language from university departments may at times circumnavigate, and most certainly employ this language to create particular appearances, but the force of language in the pursuit of an academic mission will find itself originating from agendas parallel to political and military hierarchies. As a result, we might ascertain that pursuits of knowledge are often in the university context, in fact, out of the demands for ideological, market-dominated and normativizing structuring. Where Terry Eagleton writes, "norms are oppressive because they mould uniquely different individuals to the same shape," this long-emerging conservatism in the university system and within, as Eagleton insists, cultural theory emerging from the university, and the tendency for the university to place great power-brokers who would rather divide

departments than unite them in collaboration, is in many ways analogous to the university structures that students were reacting to forty years ago. Except, as Eagleton comments, "middle-class society had been reckless enough to set up institutions in which young, clever, morally conscientious people had nothing to do for three or four years but read books and kick ideas around; and the result of this ludicrous indulgence on society's part was wholesale student revolt." The arbitrators of power today may have learned from what was mainly their own experience – on the other side of the coin, forty years back.

Considering the state of some university structures today, the case might be made that political motivation and activity has become estranged from contemporary student life, especially in Canada – at the suburban University of Toronto, Mississauga campus particularly, where an ultra-conservative, market-oriented, often ideologically-driven administration appears to dominate with little student reaction. However, what is palpable on this campus is the very ability of students to organize and create different chapters of political groups. There are student interest groups inclusively gathering around contemporary ethnic, Muslim and Christian identities, there is a small student chapter of Amnesty International on the campus, there are larger gatherings of students who demonstrate – albeit relatively non-disruptively – about both local and global issues. Because of the strong suburban culture of the campus, it might appear that a conservative administrative and faculty structure has perceived itself as being able to incubate and foster – for example, having drawn little student reaction over the past two decades. However, a shift in the means and tendencies of activism today, forty years on, might be described here, where there is both a widening of identification by students with global issues (due, at least, to the frequency and production of global information, personalized and distributed on many students' personal computers or hand-held devices), and the greater dependence upon the aestheticization of these global issues; which in itself is often pessimistically associated with Guy Debord's use of the term "spectacle" and Jean Baudrillard's term "simulacrum." In this light, the *Real* of political activity might be seen to have fallen beneath the surface of image, and is often considered, for the most part in academic terms, irretrievable. The footfall of student-related activity may prove to deem otherwise.

For the project I WAS SHOT IN THE BACK, Tilo Schulz has constructed a commonly un-political or even anti-political aesthetic (action painting) that circles through a number of the above histories that are usually hidden or suppressed from this very aesthetic. It should be

considered that American Abstract Painting has been identified by historians, such as Serge Guilbaut, as serving, both indirectly and directly, American imperialist interests abroad from the 1950s onwards. Schulz's staging of the creation of the action paintings in this exhibition was manifested through a November 16<sup>th</sup> performance involving students acting out an armed revolt (publicized by the gallery as "Canada's first armed student revolt on a university campus") with paint ball guns used to make enormous abstract paintings. In one sense, the political stuff once infused in this aesthetic of abstraction, yet suppressed from reaching any recognizable aesthetic form in itself, is called upon – and in reverse order – utilized to actually form this aesthetic. The creation and exhibition of this aesthetic – in its various forms in and out of the gallery and within the exhibition ephemera – dramatically diverts what is almost exclusively considered "art for its own sake" (abstract painting) by investing its production within a symbolic revolt that has true historic resonances.

It is arguable today that where politics has normally been inherently and deliberately separated from the world of art and high aesthetics, by association or by action, politics are now inseparable from any aesthetic, simply by virtue of the inescapable and vast dominance of representation to depict and distil political realities from around the world on a consistent basis. That is, as the media theorist Boris Groys insists, politics have merged with the world of aesthetics – and have done so for some time. Where many individuals and institutions, such as governing structures that might for example house contemporary art galleries, continue to construct the idea of art as having no other value than to be a pure aesthetic in itself, coolly and pleasurably considered and perfected within academic discourse, Schulz's project takes the most seminal aesthetic of modern art – abstract, action painting – and combines it with both a historical context which had been blinded from this painting's form (Western and Eastern Imperialism, Cold War Politics, contemporary politics). The original idea for this project – to shoot up the university to create a work of art – does insist on direct references to over-taking authority by forming an aesthetic that embodies "gesture" (as in abstract painter's timely gesture) as a political potential and a politically-active power and action. In the language of art theory that typically describes abstract painting, this action of symbolic revolt (with true potentiality as an organizing force) that is the foundation of the exhibition is, in effect, the 'hand' of the artist, and here, of the student.

In its entirety, this project could be seen, in one sense, as an insistence of the reality of the political to exist at every level of human

activity. This project might also be seen as a reminder to ourselves to not permit memory of and discourse about the realities and aftermath of political realities such as that of university settings of the late 1960s, the "cockpits of culture as political struggle" (Eagleton), to disintegrate into a romanticized, discarded or faded stain. However, the project's references to and reliance upon the realities of students' sit-ins, teach-ins, and go-ins of the 1960s and beyond, are an insistence on the potentiality of uprising or revolt that might arise to alleviate unequal hierarchal systems that perpetuate the construction of a society that doesn't reflect ideals attained through an open pursuit of knowledge. It is arguable that political power rests on cultural hegemony, which is embodied dramatically and defined by institutions. In this case, if the intellectual's task - as Edward Said spoke of - of unflinchingly confronting, producing and supporting knowledge and socio-political constructs that resonate for a better society is not taken up by faculty and university administrations, that is, beyond the rhetoric of "academic mission," then it is the necessity of the contemporary artist and the contemporary student to conjure strategies that construct a counter-hegemonic culture and take them to force within these institutions. The question remains, is it better to think the way we are taught to, or to take up the ongoing vocation of creating one's own conception of the world? This latter premise was a key catalyst of the movements in 1968 – across the globe – and is not unrealizable in any sense today.

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All Terry Eagleton quotes are from *After Theory* (London: Penguin Books), 2003.