

The following panel discussion was held at White Columns, New York, on January 25, 1987. The participants were:

Judith Barry - multi-media artist

Peter Halley - artist and theorist

William Olander - curator

Julie Wachtel - artist

Oliver Wasow - artist and gallery owner

The discussion was moderated by Group Material. Doug Ashford and Julie Ault were present for Group Material. Tim Rollins could not be present. This text was edited by Group Material and Bill Arning, director of White Columns.

GROUP MATERIAL We organized this discussion because we want to specifically inform the exhibition, *Resistance (Anti Baudrillard)*.

In the past for various reasons our shows have been misunderstood. We wanted this show to have a statement or text. Instead of it being singular, just from us, we wanted to create a dialogue that would show different sides of what we are trying to do.

JUDITH BARRY Could you talk about the title? I'd

like to have more of a sense of what Group Material's position is.

GROUP MATERIAL *Resistance (Anti Baudrillard)* is offering alternatives to what Group Material sees as the present use and abuse of the writings of Baudrillard. Our position is complicated. On the whole we find ourselves opposed to Baudrillard's work because we see it further disarming the idea of culture as a site of contestation/ resistance. Hence the title of the show. Most of our op-

position remains as a series of questions.

We see a series of recent developments in the artworld where works are labelled as critical which we don't feel function critically. In our work we have been trying to establish methods of working with culture, either within the cultural industry or outside of it, which we feel really are resistant to dominant systems.

We see Baudrillard, even though there are things in the writing that we have used, as becoming part of that complicity of the "artwork". The show is really a question.

OLIVER WASOW At one point Group Material mentioned to me that Anti-Baudrillard in some ways comes out of the passage in *Simulations* where Baudrillard talks of anti-theatre proving theatre and anti-art proving art.

WILLIAM OLANDER The point that Baudrillard does not necessarily view culture as a possible site of any kind of resistance is worth discussing.

GROUP MATERIAL What is the appeal of Baudrillard that has given him his recent place within art institutions, i.e. the art journal, the gallery and curatorship?

PETER HALLEY Let me suggest that we divide that into two questions: what we see as the real contribution, and what we see as the symptomatic situation where Baudrillard fills a need. Both these things are going on,

and there are issues which are valid in both areas.

Without seeming to be unaware of the symptomatic issues, let me try to address Baudrillard's contribution because I believe there has been one. I think there is good reason to believe that late capitalism or post-industrialism, whatever the current state of economical-cultural development might be called, is in fact a circular system that has become detached from any sort of absolute, particularly that which used to be called nature. In this way Baudrillard can be seen perhaps as a culmination of the enquiry begun by Nietzsche in the last century. If this is the case I think Baudrillard's work is important and can constitute the basis of a contribution in the real world.

Surely Baudrillard is removed from concepts of resistance. The idea of resistance is predicated on the idea of reality. If Baudrillard's contribution is to put into doubt the idea of absolute social reality and then the possibility of resistance to it, we may find ourselves in a more difficult situation vis-a-vis the social. But perhaps an accurate appraisal of this situation is the first step in reacting to it.

JULIE WACHTEL It seems that one of the dynamics of Baudrillard's writing is the notion of exteriority — of a social reality that is a constantly regenerating image.

What an absurdity it is to pretend that men are "other", to try to convince them that their deepest desire is to become "themselves" again! Each man is totally there at each instant. Society is also there at each instant. Courderoy, the Luddites, Rimbaud, the Communards, the people of the savage strikes, those of May 1968 — in every case the revolution does not speak indirectly; they are the revolution, not concepts in transit. Their speech is symbolic and it does not aim at an essence. In these instances, there is speech before history, before politics, before truth, speech before the separation and the future totality. He is truly a revolutionary who speaks of the world as non-separated.

—Jean Baudrillard, *The Mirror of Production*,
St. Louis, 1975

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GROUP MATERIAL Baudrillard's early project was a very concrete criticism of Marxist institutions. To get so caught up in political economy was to give into capitalism and that we had to look elsewhere. Where, he never really said.

OLIVER WASOW I'm very interested in the symptomatic contribution or place Baudrillard has within the art institutions which I think is analogous to McLuhan in the sixties. There was a piece recently, "Simulations" in *Art News*. It seemed the beginning of the end if not the end of that symptom, whereby it becomes that you don't really have to read it, if you know the phrase.

What happens is that you have artists building artwork around the text or around one aspect of the text rather than relating the artwork to it. It sort of becomes something to live up to.

GROUP MATERIAL So by working around the text, by being symptomatic they're ignoring the social consequences of Baudrillard's work.

OLIVER WASOW Or that aspect of the writing which addresses the social.

WILLIAM OLANDER There is no question that the art community has simplified certain ideas. The more complex issues like a post-Marxist analysis of use value and exchange value, have been dropped out. And Baudrillard himself has been partly responsible for this, at least recently, by focusing on that key word, "Simulation". That notion in its global significance definitely problematizes the notion of resistance. This is what the artworld has focused on. I don't know if any of us are equipped to focus on the political issues that Baudrillard certainly has discussed in the past.

GROUP MATERIAL We disagree. There is culture that we experience on a day to day level as resistant. It is culture that doesn't take part in the dominant cultural industry. One of the ironies of Baudrillard is that this sub-culture is one of the things that got him started on his project in the first place, and his texts are now being used to suppress that sub-culture. When he wrote *The Mirror of Production* he pointed to classical leftist analysis, cultural; Frankfurt School, politically; Gramsci.

Insofar as the market for paintings is specifically concerned, it may be said that it is the appropriation of the paintings as signs which acts as a factor of legitimation of economic and social power. But that gets us almost nowhere. We are still within the political vulgate: culture annexed and manipulated by the dominant class. The same is said of "needs", "consumption", leisure or sex.... But where do these signs originate? Are they already inherent in things, in a social nature, so that it is enough to forcibly appropriate them? Magical vision. And how can signs or myths be articulated upon an objective social and economic condition, in order to confuse its meaning? *There is little use in appealing to the "consciousness" argument!* Moreover, why would the dominant class have need of culture if the economic is truly the determining instance?

—Jean Baudrillard, *For a Critique
of the Political Economy of the Sign*,
St. Louis, 1981

Both left out the possibility for viewing the public consciousness as something that could make socialism more concurrent with people's everyday experience. That just got lost.

JULIE WACHTEL In *In the Shadow of the Silent Majorities* the only notion of resistance is terrorism which is described as apolitical. It is metaphorical for his notions of implosion, as opposed to politics functioning in an explosive way on some sort of political scene. It is an apolitical notion of resistance.

JUDITH BARRY One thing that he did do that was interesting was to take up what was left over in the writings of the Frankfurt school and problematize questions about the masses. I see in the artworld now, a war between the Frankfurt oriented people and those aligned with the French and Baudrillard. Baudrillard's use value in the artworld seems to be that he has given people a wedge into mass culture that postdates Brecht, who was the the last person that the Frankfurt sociological people quote. He was trying to go beyond McLuhanism which no one takes very seriously anymore, at least philosophically.

OLIVER WASOW It depends what you mean by seriously.

JUDITH BARRY He's a pretty hard guy to build an

argument on. As a critic it is difficult to make a logical argument using McLuhan and it is getting hard to do that using Baudrillard as well. I think Baudrillard has had a real impact. When I first started reading him I was real excited that here was someone who was not from the thirties writing about mass culture. Later I was completely disappointed...it's like a bad love affair.

GROUP MATERIAL Is it because the later works can't be used?

JUDITH BARRY Somewhat. The French have the concept of language as being real that we don't have; of things happening through language and residing in the language, so that language has a material reality.

PETER HALLEY Late Baudrillard has drawn me back into Situationalism which I think probably is the source for his later work. Situationalism is the only political stance that makes any sense to me in a media dominated world. Do you react to that?

JUDITH BARRY Yes. I think things have changed since the Situationalists' project. I think their texts are worth re-examining.

For me, one of the appeals of Baudrillard's later books is that they were easy to read, you could read them on the subway.

JULIE WACHTEL It's like poetry...very beautiful writing.

It makes perfect sense to me that the great masses, very snobbishly, delegate to the class of intellectuals, of politicians, this business of managing, of choosing, of knowing what one wants. They are joyously dumping all those burdensome categories that no-one, deep down inside, really wants any part of. That people want to be told what they want is certainly not true; it is not clear either that they really want to know what they want, or that they desire to want at all. The whole edifice of socialism is based on that assumption. They start from the fact that this is what people ought to want, that they are social in the sense that they are supposed to know themselves, know what they want. I think we have pressed beyond that point, beyond truth, beyond reality.

—Jean Baudrillard, *Forget Foucault*,
New York, 1987

OLIVER WASOW That brings up the idea of accessibility in regards to the symptomatic place of Baudrillard.

GROUP MATERIAL Why is the work so inaccessible?

WILLIAM OLANDER The question of accessibility is something people love to fixate on when they don't want to deal with issues or ideas.

OLIVER WASOW It's fine to make work that's informed by Baudrillard, but when work is dependent on that text, or refers only to that text, then I think examining the issues of accessibility is valid. Particularly if the work is offered as a model of resistance.

JULIE WACHTEL It seems also a problem to view Baudrillard's view as a world view. I think that's a serious mistake.

WILLIAM OLANDER In its simplified form people have really embraced this idea and have managed to market it in any number of ways. The complexities have been lost.

GROUP MATERIAL But is this the fault of the market or is this because of the text or is it the way images have been marketed around the text?

JULIE WACHTEL I don't think it is really a problem with the art, I think it's a problem with the institutions that surround it. I don't know where or who I would point a finger at, if it's the critics or the publishers or the

collectors...I'm not sure. But I think that the appreciation of a lot of artwork has suffered unfairly because these name tags have been put with them in very simplified ways.

OLIVER WASOW I'm curious to hear from Peter — almost invariably people talk to me about your work in relation to Baudrillard.

PETER HALLEY I've felt somewhat ambivalent about that because in the process of trying to make a theoretical statement around my work I was very upfront about the fact that I was interested in Baudrillard's writing and I guess that's been somewhat latched onto. I always find myself thinking of the example of Robert Morris who, when he was writing about art, was secretive about his sources. I often think it is a bit more clever to be less forthright about what one is reading or looking at or what is informing one's thought processes.

One thing that we haven't gotten to: the world that late Baudrillard describes is certainly emphatically reproduced in the artworld with its emphasis on reverberant stylistic changes and its equation of interest with abstract numerical values. I've often found myself wondering whether recent Baudrillard is not particularly well matched to have a cozy relationship with that world.

JUDITH BARRY You mean like an alibi...

PETER HALLEY Perhaps so.

WILLIAM OLANDER ...as an alibi for the late capitalism that we have developed and sort of accepted.

JULIE WACHTEL There's an inevitability to the world as Baudrillard described it. That feeds into a lot of pre-existing cynical feelings that people have about the world at this point.

WILLIAM OLANDER I think finally the entertainment industry is the more suitable model. I guess that's my idealism... that the world Baudrillard might be trying to describe is that world of artificial intelligence, the real genuine simulation, that we in the artworld are in fact not participating in. It's of interest to me the way the artworld has attached itself to that futureness, yet it really does not represent it.

JULIE WACHTEL It seems anachronistic.

OLIVER WASOW Or Utopian, perhaps Dystopian.

PETER HALLEY Actually in Baudrillardian terms the artworld is a better model than the world of mass entertainment. The world of mass entertainment has as its projected audience what might be described as still being the masses. Baudrillard describes them as a peculiarly unpredictable or resilient or uncooperative lot, whereas the artworld is entirely made up of participants in a more bourgeois or haut-bourgeois value system.

JULIE WACHTEL I don't know if Baudrillard would describe the masses as being uncooperative as much as indifferent.

PETER HALLEY Well, yes.

JULIE WACHTEL If you take the logic of something you're describing and reproduce that logic in an excessive way, the potential is to throw it into a frightening new reality that is possibly more subversive than being labeled and localized, as resistance often is, into some sort of momentary media event. It becomes neutralized instantly.

PETER HALLEY I think that from the point of view of resistance and dissatisfaction with what exists, anybody would honestly have to say that a person in that position has their back to the wall...it's not exactly going so well. I think the issue of resistance and the issue of subversion has to be put aside in favour of the issue of understanding, and that would be the first step back... or forward.

OLIVER WASOW I don't understand why.

PETER HALLEY What scenario could be created by a traditionally resistant culture to effect change, and I don't see any scenario that would succeed, I would see it as resulting in reification on the part of the media and the economic system.

JUDITH BARRY That's what's sad about Baudrillard

because if he really had analyzed the media like he promised it would have been much more useful for me personally than his poetic phase.

WILLIAM OLANDER I see the resistance to Baudrillard on the part of traditional leftists because Baudrillard is so effective at silencing that kind of organized resistance. It's very difficult to argue with theory that is constantly circular, spiralling out of control. To deal with that from any sort of conventional activist position is almost impossible because it is so detached from reality and most activism pretends to some sort of reality.

JUDITH BARRY Or specificity.

OLIVER WASOW It seems to me most people while giving up traditional modes of resistance, especially in the artworld, forget entirely about context...where the work is being seen, who's seeing it. It all becomes very insular and ineffectual.

JULIE WACHTEL But has the artworld ever really been the site of resistance?

GROUP MATERIAL We do see the institutions of the artworld as sites where ideas can be contested.

JULIE WACHTEL But they are not resistant from an activist point of view.

PETER HALLEY I'm much more comfortable with the word contested rather than resistance, that seems a

potentially useful concept. If you are interested in using the artworld as a site for contesting assumptions or ideas, perhaps creating a site of resistance, would that then not be seen as a moderate project of expanding the open mindedness or liberalization of the bourgeoisie?

GROUP MATERIAL By showing certain levels of cultural production in a gallery you legitimize the sources of those productions. If you show posters from SWAPO you legitimize them as icons, as images of importance. People see the sources of those things as valuable and they try to figure out why they're valuable. Rich and powerful people who go to art shows and are exposed to different ideas, and then support concrete political struggles. Artists' Call Against U.S. Intervention in Central America was basically a liberal project in that it used art institutions in not a very radical way at all, but raised hundreds of thousands of dollars that were sent to Central America and were used in much less liberal ways.

JUDITH BARRY Is the artworld the most effective place for political action? Historically it hasn't been.

PETER HALLEY I think it is actually, on the most theoretical level. Just because it is addressing an audience near certain centers of power. If you want to effect some sort of change, as the world is presently constituted, I think it's as good a place as any to begin.