Herbert Read: Neither Liberalism nor Communism. Discussing Art and Democracy from an Anarchist Point of View

Herbert Read : ni libéralisme ni communisme. Perspective anarchiste sur l'art et la démocratie

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Résumés

Français English
Cet article examine les travaux de Herbert Read (1893-1968) pour discuter de sa vision anarchiste de l'art et de la société et de ses relations avec la démocratie. En tant que poète, essayiste et critique d'art, il a présenté le surréalisme et l'existentialisme au public britannique. La psychanalyse freudienne a également éclairé sa vision de l'anarchisme, de l'esthétique et de l'éducation. Dans cette perspective, il considérait les arts comme un outil de réforme de la société et l'anarchisme comme une réaffirmation de la liberté naturelle, c'est-à-dire une communion directe avec la vérité universelle. Dans la vision de Read, l'amélioration des conditions matérielles, la prospérité économique et l'émancipation politique se sont développées à partir de la capacité des individus à être et à exprimer leur créativité naturelle. Sa position est contradictoire car l'essence de l'anarchisme de Read est enracinée dans le ruralisme britannique, mais elle est en même temps présentée comme le système de gouvernance le plus progressiste et le plus fiable pour les êtres humains. L'anarchisme de Read offrait une vision différente de la société, l'individu pouvant exister au-delà de toute représentation idéale de *demos*.

The article examines the works of Herbert Read (1893-1968) to discuss his anarchist view of art and society and its relationship with democracy. As a poet, essayist and art critic he introduced Surrealism and Existentialism to the British public. Freudian psychoanalysis also informed his view of anarchism, aesthetics and education. In this perspective, he saw the arts as a tool to reform society, and anarchism as a reaffirmation of natural freedom, *i.e.* a direct communion with universal truth. In Read's vision, the improvement of material conditions, economic prosperity and political emancipation developed from the capacity of individuals to be and express their natural creativeness. His position is contradictory as the essence of Read's anarchism is rooted in British ruralism, but, at the same time, it is presented as the most progressive and reliable system of governance for human beings. Read's anarchism offered a different view of society where the individual could exist beyond any ideal representation of *demos*.

Texte intégral

1   Thomas Docherty's *Aesthetic Democracy* analysed how democracy is both founded and conditioned by aesthetics: 'it is in art and in aesthetics that we find a privileged site of the very *potentiality* of selfhood that establishes the democratic condition' (2006, xiv–xviii). Further on in the text, Docherty pointed out the substantial confusion that we make between democracy and consumerism. In other words, he highlighted the connection of the Self, Art and Democracy as concepts, suggesting that democracy is more than a political system, and should be discussed beyond its economic and social value (ix).

2   The two World Wars of the 20th century have structured democracy in Western Europe both in political and economic terms. The Allied Forces established democracy as economic liberalism, which was accepted as a generator of peace since economic prosperity became a real-life experience for the countries that adopted the system, and the benefits of the new order (Killick 2014). Economic growth reinforced the belief that democratic capitalism could be the right choice to foster peace (Schweickart 2018). Yet, the weakness of such an assumption is currently the object of debate: during the last decade, we have faced one of the worst economic crises of modern times to the point of questioning the equation 'liberalism–capitalism–democracy' itself. Mass access to web information has highlighted the flaws of Western civilisation, calling for the necessity of a different approach to economics and society on a global scale. Not surprisingly, there has been a new interest in anarchism as a form of digital freedom, while the tendency to question capitalism has problematized the way art is produced and communicated too (Franks and Kinna, 2014; Van Dijk and Haker 2018; Literat 2018; Rutten 2018).[1]

3   From this perspective, this article discusses democracy in its relation with anarchism and art by evaluating the ideas of Herbert Read, whose work encapsulates an original cultural and political response to the advent of post-war modernity. Read embraced anarchism, but at the same time, he situated himself on the side of a conservative and nostalgic view of society that is rooted in his biography, his personality as a poet and a critic.

4   Although his view of society may seem contradictory, it must be remembered that anarchism itself is notorious for its diversity. Its accepted varieties range from the egoism of Max Stirner, through the mutualism of Proudhon, both of whom accepted private property, to the collectivism of Bakunin, the communism of Kropotkin, the revolutionary trade unionism of the syndicalist movements, to the *purposeful* violence of late 19th and early 20th-century Italian anarchists. With classical anarchists, Read shared the idea that anarchy springs bottom up as a federation of self-governed individuals, but no revolution or insurrection is needed to liberate society, rather a constant change which is non-violent, pervasive, and based on the ability of everyone to express their unique talents and abilities (Goodway 1998, 177–195).

5   Read's modernist anarchism was meant to seek a direct communion with universal truth, which is the rule of a God, the law that governs Nature, spontaneously. While trying to adhere to Nature, humans look for beauty by surrendering to their imaginative faculties (1940, 30–31). Read trusted Art as a force that could enhance humanity: through art 'the will of man seems to be identified with the universal forces of life' (1963, 176–177).

6   As suggested by Docherty, we may assume that democracy is a value and a condition over and above any economic organisation of society, and we can separate democracy from capitalism to see it at work as a force in ethics and aesthetics. In the same perspective, we can frame freedom within democracy, and see it as a dynamic force which allows artists to work, and affect society (Pickett 2005 102–120; Castronovo 2009; Schwartz 2013, 45–110; Mattern 2016, 17–38; Mattern 2019, 589–602; Evans 2018, 109–152).

7   As Shiner points out, the Modern Age saw the establishment of the art market as liberation from patronage, a system that compelled artists to celebrate power. By the 20th century, though, artists represented themselves in conflict with the power, embodied by the market itself (Shiner 2001, 126–129, 169–186; Möller 2019; Meecham and Sheldon 2013). At present, art pretends to be revolutionary and disruptive, but it does so in the safe

space of the democratic debate. In other words, art is kept within an anodyne condition by money (commodification of art) while the narrative of art (sometimes the marketing of art) constructs its acceptability, its recognition and its value (Alexander 2018).[2]

8   Without democracy, though, the freedom that artists seek could not exist: even if democracy is opposed and criticised, it allows for a constructive conflict that shapes the artist's self and artwork as well.[3] In other words, democracy 'accepts' to be defied, disparaged, and refused by artists as this is the essence of democracy (Evans 2018).

9   However, the dialectics between art and democracy is not embedded in the 21st-century dystopian visions of art and state: it is rooted in the high hopes of modernism (Potter 2006). Modernists bridged the celebrating role of art into the new century by working out the mechanisms of art as a language expressing the self. In a period of transition between the past, disrupted by the two wars, and the hope to create a new society of equals, Modernism was a turning point (Sandler 2018).

10   In this perspective, Herbert Read is a fascinating voice: he believed in the centrality of freedom and trusted its function of enhancing aesthetics. Yet, free art could only develop into an anarchist organisation of society where one could develop the self in full, whatever his/her social class (Harder 1971; Goodway 1998). Read pinpointed issues that are still relevant in contemporary aesthetics, such as the role of individuals as creators of meaning, and the limits of democracy as a space of *poiesis*, along with the centrality of writing *for* art (Thistlewood 1984; Agamben 1999, 68–93).

11   Throughout his career Read was a prolific essayist, a poet as much as an art critic. To Read, writing was a fundamental act of creation, an act of responsibility itself, the manifest realisation of his role as an intellectual, and has to be considered as the primary achievement of his aesthetic consciousness. The form and structure of his essays embodied the linear patterns of his thoughts. Style supported his political views by displaying a strong theoretical outline. In other words, his writing looks reasonable and coherent and hence, convincing. By working from a very personal perspective, he involves the reader in a sensible and plain exposition of the theme that is addressed in the essay. Abstract concepts are dealt with simplicity—Read being interested in universals more than factual information. His essays aim at discussing *his* philosophy of art and politics rather than doing criticism per se. His views are brought to the reader with an essential, minimal style that visualises the concepts described.

12   In *English Prose Style* (1928), Read defined his idea of narrative and the role it plays in supporting the imaginative and creative consciousness of the reader:

> . . . Narrative is of two kinds, being descriptive either of events or objects; it is either active or passive. The object of the narrative is to transmit to the reader an exact visual account of the object or action represented. What is seen must be translated into symbols by the writer, and these symbols must, in turn, convey to the reader the impression of the things seen. The writer should convey the speed of the events, and the actuality of objects and both are best secured by the economy of expression . . . .
> (Read 1928, 104)

13   Read conceives narrative as a reader-centred, reader-oriented task. In his view, any author, a poet or a critic, writes for a purpose that is social, not personal, with a sort of scientific, argumentative approach to writing that is confirmed by style:

> . . . The narrative is primarily addressed to an audience: it is not a self-revelation or self-expression. It is accurate reporting. It is therefore devoid of comment, and the only point of view it represents is the point of view of an interested observer. These qualities of objectivity, concreteness and impersonality are a natural possession of our earliest writers . . . (Read 1928, 106)

14   The act itself of shaping an essay was part of his construing the meaning of art. With the elegance of his prose, he also gained authority and justified with rationality his anarchism as an alternative mode of life. In his view, anarchism would support the positive development of the self, and promote a purposeful use of art: this was a matter of logic that could be infused all his writings. His poetry is also paradigmatic as it shows his desire for rationality and his aspirations and frailties as a man.

15   In 1929, the year that marked the end of the war in Spain with its attempt to realise a socialist society, Hogarth Press published the anthology *Poems for Spain*, about the Civil War. The editors were Spender and Lehmann. The book collected poems by W.H. Auden, Louis MacNeice, Pablo Neruda, Cecil Day-Lewis, and writers who had volunteered in the International Brigades to support the Spanish Republican government. The book was meant

to highlight the crucial role of poets in the international struggle for socialist liberty and expressed the desire of a whole generation for a new genre of popular narrative and mythology. Read gave his contribution by publishing *A Song for the Spanish Anarchists*:

> The golden lemon is not made
> but grows on a green tree:
> A strong man and his crystal eyes
> is a man born free.
> The oxen pass under the yoke
> and the blind are led at will:
> But a man born free has a path of his own
> and a house on the hill
> And men are men who till the land
> and women are women who weave:
> Fifty men own the lemon grove
> and no man is a slave.

16   At a basic level, the poem encapsulates Read's ability to mix tradition and modernity, idealised ruralism, where the land nurtures self-sufficient individuals, and the force of Nature as a source of empowerment for humanity (the lemon, here, a symbol of Eternity). The essence of Read's anarchism looks back to the past and at the same time presents itself as the most progressive, trustworthy system of governance for human beings. His clear voice, built on parallels, highlights the logic of choosing freedom. Labour is positive when it allows a man to be: no man is a slave.

17   As mentioned above, Read was a man of contradiction: as an art critic, he introduced Surrealism, Existentialism and Jungian psychoanalysis to Britain, but he also wanted to be a poet, and indeed he was knighted for that, though his acceptance of the title marred his reputation as an anarchist. In fact, he was a disciple of Shelley, Ruskin and Wordsworth, and he admired Coleridge. He believed in the power of feelings and sensations—something that justifies the themes of most of his poetry. Nevertheless, he was also a writer of experimental poetry, which relates to the comprehensiveness of his political positions and taste in literature, and the conflicting views of life.[4]

18   In an article published in *Standpoint Magazine*, Read's son Piers Paul Read describes him as 'gentle, kind, silent, remote', a man who had lived the First World War as an adventure but had turned into a pacifist.[5] A man who had seen how social distinctions proved to be irrelevant compared with the qualities of character that emerged under fire, and therefore had understood the true nature of men unconstrained by the strict social limitations of British society—a man who developed a sceptical view of institutions to be matched with bourgeois life.

19   Read was born in rural Yorkshire in 1893. His father was a farmer but died at thirty-four. As an orphan, he was sent to a charitable institution, the Crossley and Porter School, near Halifax. At the age of 15, he was taken on as a junior clerk in a bank in Leeds where he lived with his mother. After work, he went to night school and in 1912 enrolled as a student at the University. The intellectual life in Leeds was vigorous around institutions such as The Leeds Arts Club, which celebrated its artistic engagement with civic reform, being a unique receptacle of radical sensibilities, antibourgeois ideas alongside the socialist and feminist politics of the early Labour Party and the Suffragette movement—well away from the London scene (Steel 2007, 112–122).

20   It was there that Read first encountered Marx's *Capital*, Kropotkin's *Fields, Factories and Workshops* and works by Bakunin. He grew up in a place which highlighted the contrast between the rural world and the urban scenery of industrial slums, and at the same time, he lived within the *topos* of pastoral Britain, its wilderness. Read saw British landscape as infused with an emotional sense of Nature that had developed from the Picturesque of the 18th century into the aesthetics of the Sublime and hence into Romanticism (Pryor 2010). In the same environment, though, he also faced the aftermath of World War I and its economic crisis, unemployment, the harsh life in Leeds' back-to-back houses that profoundly affected the social cohesion and identity of working-class communities. (Goodwin 1998, 271–287). Thus, the paradox in Read's vision of art and anarchism is rooted in the most traditional values of Britishness while developing an accommodating and open vision of modernity and progressive thinking.

> . . . Anarchism . . . is based on analogies derived from the simplicity and harmony of
> universal physical laws, rather than on any assumption of the natural goodness of
> human nature—and this is precisely where it begins to diverge fundamentally from

democratic socialism, which goes back to Rousseau, the real founder of state socialism. . . The tendency of modern socialism is to establish a vast system of statuary law against which there no longer exists a plea in equity. The object of anarchism, on the other hand, is to extend the principle of equity until it altogether supersedes statutory law . . . . (Read 1940, 14)

21   Since the 17th century, the word anarchist had been associated with moral disorder, absence or non-recognition of authority and order in any sphere of life. At the beginning of the 20th century, anarchism, syndicalism, socialism, communism, were often seen as the culprits of the social turmoil that developed into the two World Wars. Anarchism was paired with revolution, revolt against any institution and even terror (Goodway 2011). However, none of the above connotations applies to Read's approach, nor would his contemporaries blame him for any radical view. His character, the position as an art critic, the development of an original aesthetic thought distanced Read from any subversive idea in politics.

22   From 1922 he held a post in the Department of Ceramics at the Victoria and Albert Museum, which provided the training and background for the writing of *Art and Industry* (1934) and his defence of the abstract artists. His appreciation of Abstract art developed into a taste for pure forms that could support the aesthetic sensitivity and, more generally, the well-being of the community the artist belonged to. From this suggestion, Read formulated his thesis of abstraction as fitting the domain of industry and design, as something that could positively influence the lives of people.

23   Industrial goods could be forms of Abstract art. Industry was not to be rejected but rather welcomed as a means of giving purpose to art, even if art was to be held as separate and unique, as the purest expression of humans. In defence of a relative autonomy of aesthetics, Read refused any necessary connection between practical function and artistic quality but believed in the future development of a new aesthetic sensibility that followed from the appreciation of abstract form. This development could be supported by education:

> . . . The problem of good or bad art, of a right and wrong system of education, of a just and unjust social structure, is one and the same problem . . . it is a problem which depends on a change of heart; and now, after two world wars, and under an ever-darkening cloud of adversity and error, we are perhaps a little nearer that necessary revolution . . . .
> (Read 1934, 170)

24   Education appeared to be the right solution to develop a sense of taste that could be effective in social terms, a sort of *applied taste* that brought art into life and was nurtured by a close understanding of humans and nature—Nature, being a source of inspiration for the achievement of social balance and welfare alike (Adams 2013).

25   In *Philosophy of Anarchism,* he described Nature as being a form of equity being rooted in art:

> . . . The most general law in nature is equity, the principle of balance and symmetry, which guides the growth of forms along the lines of the greatest structural efficiency. It is the law which gives the leaf as well as the tree, the human body and the universe itself, a harmonious and functional shape, which is at the same time objective beauty . . . the principle of equity first came into evidence in Roman jurisprudence . . . nature implied symmetrical order, first in the physical world, and next in the moral, and the earliest notion of order doubtless involved straight lines, even surfaces, and measured distances . . . . (Read 1940, 13)

26   The laws that regulate the physical universe support his idea of moral principles, and order. Nature can be explained and accounted for by using numbers and geometry. Therefore, it is akin to abstraction.[6] Its self-regulating balance, *i.e.* the essence of anarchism, is to be seen in humans and can be let free as a force that governs any community. In this perspective, anarchism could be proposed as encouraging existence only by the acceptance and understanding of responsibility.

27   In the *ABC of Economics* (1933) Ezra Pound describes responsibility as follows:

> . . . 6. I assert a simple dogma: Man should have some sense of responsibility to the human congeries.
> 7. As a matter of observation, very few men have any such sense.
> 8. No social order can exist very long, unless a few, at least, a few men have such a sense . . .
> (Pound 1933, 16–17).

28   In Pound's view of democracy, man must take responsibility for choosing his/her representatives, developing the awareness of social duty, of belonging to a social group. Accepting democracy means to take responsibility for the maintenance of one's rights against the possible misconducts of a government that acts on one's behalf in public matters.

29   This idea of 'belonging' is well described by the words *citizen and citizenship* themselves, as their meaning and etymology point to the idea of living in a stable condition, to the safety of one single place, to the status of belonging to a social group.[7] The idea of being free, responsible individuals is also at the heart of Read's anarchism because responsibility is a fundamental act of will that establishes social order. The individual is responsible enough to delegate power and constantly invigilate against the abuse of power, the betrayal of his/her trust. The individual maps his/her living space and invigilate against any possible menace as a way to exert responsibility.

30   Another aspect involved in the concept of responsibility is choice, and the right to choose for the benefit of one and the advantage of many. Democracy advocates the power of the majority and the acceptance of a delegated, mediated power. We elect representatives that make choices on behalf of citizens on the bases of a shared political program. Yet, in Read's view, the word democracy is equivocal, as he foresaw the conflation between economy and democracy, *i.e.* between function and value:

> . . . Democracy is a very ambiguous word, and its meanings vary from a sentimental sympathy for the poor and oppressed such as we get in Christian Socialism, to a ruthless dogma of proletarian dictatorship such as we have seen established in Russia . . . it is an important distinction, and if in the name of democracy we are more and more inevitably compelled to commit ourselves to the political machinery of the state—to the nationalization of industry, to the bureaucratic control of all spheres of life and the doctrine of the infallibility of the People (divinely invested in a unique Party)—then it is time to renounce the democratic label and seek a less equivocal name . . . . (Read 1943, 3)

31   Read brought his point to the extreme in maintaining that both communism and fascism were forms of democracy, and in stating that democratic socialism in Britain was unjust because:

> . . . they all obtain popular assent by the manipulation of mass psychology. Parliamentary democracies like Britain hide behind the form (election, Parliament, the Law) the fact that power and responsibility is the prerogative of birth and wealth and real power lies in the hands of those who control the financial system. Capitalism is not democratic, but by manipulating the masses, it pretends to be so while being totalitarian . . . . (Read 1943, 4)

32   To Read, the plain fact about democracy was that it is 'physically' impossible. People live in an aggregation of millions of individuals called States or Nations, but the expanding role of governments in the economy, the technology serving a mass production of goods, the development of a managerial class,[8] foster an inevitable fusion of state and economy with no benefit of the people (Read 1943, 30–32).

33   The government can be of the people, for the people, but never for a moment a government by the people. Whatever government is established, it must respect the rights of the person, the right to be a person, a unique entity. The only way in which democracy has been able to assess equality is through money, but humans associate in groups that are not grounded only on wealth. The family, as much as groups based on culture, religion, ideology and language, or based on a temporary idealistic scope, are all associations that may work over and above economic interest.

34   There exists something stronger to tie individuals together beyond their material needs, such as solidarity, comradeship, and war experience. Small groups of people are motivated and efficient in collaborating, as humans work together spontaneously if they realise that their talent serves the group and that to serve the group brings advantage to the individual himself/herself. In other words, if the individual profits from working for and within the group, he/she will be motivated and rewarded, and willing to collaborate and share. Such a natural organisation of society leaves little activity to the State as such. The State remains merely as the arbiter to decide in the interests of the whole, and act when significant conflicts emerge in the parts.

35   Read encapsulates the foundations of his anarchist view of society in eight points that are

- The liberty of the person;

- The integrity of the family;
- The reward of qualifications;
- The self-government of the guilds (groups of interest);
- The abolition of parliament, and centralised government;
- The institution of arbitrament;[9]
- The delegation of authority
- The humanisation of industry

36   This view of social order is also international and conciliatory, aiming at the production of worldwide plenty, at the humanisation of work, and the eradication of all financial and economic conflicts. It stretches beyond the individual sense of nationhood and pertains to the capacity of all humans. After all,

> . . . Peace is anarchy. Government is force; force is repression, repression leads to reaction, or to a psychosis of power which in its turn involves the individual in the destruction and the nations in war. War will exist as long as the State exists. Only an anarchist society can offer these economical, ethical, and psychological condition, under which the emergence of a peaceful mentality is possible. We fight because we are too tightly swathed in bonds, because we live in a condition of economic slavery and moral inhibition. Not until these bonds are loosed will the desire to create finally triumph over the desire to destroy. We must be at peace with ourselves before we can be at peace with one another . . . . (Read 1949, 121)

37   The pain of war, the injustice of the states and their economic organisation, led him to desire a nostalgic idea of self-sufficiency. For Read, art was the cradle of political freedom and at the same time, a source of private comfort. Through the aesthetic appreciation of form, he made a political virtue out of an aesthetic one. Art was full of possibilities, and just like democracy, the modern, abstract art he supported, had to be polyphonic and open to people (Goodwin 1998, 287–308).

38   Anarchism foregrounds the individual to bring democracy to its extreme limit, the boundary beyond which it cannot exist, or it appears unnecessary as humans are independent monads, unique dynamic units, and self-concluded worlds. Read died in 1968 with a bitter feeling about the future of art, and he certainly could not envisage what market economy and the media would bring about in society. He still believed that the many voices representing art and society must exist according to an ordered system. The Constitutional Monarchy of his time, and the other more experimental forms of power that he observed, from socialism to Marxism, from Nazi-socialism to Fascism, would not admit individual liberty. For this reason, Read remained a romantic believer in the power of aesthetics, fascinated by the infinite potentialities of contemporary artistic life. He looked at art as a natural force re-designing the Human in its creative essence. In his words:

> . . . The joy of creating things of value, self-conquest (freeing the self from selfishness and its instinct), rising above the world, and finally the spontaneous creation of new forms, new norms, new ideas in the minds of the individuals–all that is the possible result of man's positive freedom . . . from the anarchist point of view, it is not sufficient to control ourselves and external nature; we must allow for spontaneous developments. Such opportunities occur only in open society; they cannot develop in a closed society such as the Marxist have established in Russia . . . what they mean by freedom is political liberty, man's relations to his economic environment; freedom is the relation of man to the total life process . . . anarchism is the only political theory that combines an inherently revolutionary and contingent attitude with a philosophy of freedom. It is the only militant libertarian doctrine left in the world, and on its diffusion depends on the progressive evolution of human consciousness and of humanity itself . . . (Read 1949, 22–23)

39   Individual freedom is meaningful to humanity as it is creative; it is liberty in doing—it is a craft—it is militant as it is performative. It allows humans to develop and progress. In Read's vision, what we now perceive as democratic freedom is an advancement of humanity that springs from the people: artisans, free, independent, self-sufficient citizen, artists in nature at their best. Nevertheless,

> . . . The modern artist in his dereliction, his isolation from the economic errors of our time, is, by maintaining his attitude of resentful independence, a tragic survivor from one mode of organic living. He is the only active survivor from the wreck of the humanist tradition; he is by the same token the pioneer of a new humanist tradition . . . . (Read 1946, 228)

40   The modern Western obsession with the nation, its territory and institutions is a vital component of the idea of Heritage as the foundation of the modern state, be it liberal, conservative, or socialist. Even in communism, the idea of joining the nation to the land was used to enforce cohesion. Art served along with the literary to create individual and collective identities as part of the national heritage. Science supported the process as well (Giddens 1991; Mitchell 2000, 1–34). In the creation of new national identities that characterised the aftermath of the Wars, democracy stimulated a different understanding of epochs, periods, and successive generations. On the other hand, this attitude supported pessimism and a dystopic view of life, something that both art and literature have exploited in modernist and post-modernist works (Bauman 1988; Hetherington 1997; Lundström 2018).

41   The strength of Herbert Read's engagement with modernity lies in this paradox of inserting fragments of Heritage in the modern style, thus fulfilling both a conservative and an entirely libertarian idea of taste that fits the self. Another remarkable aspect of his work is the trust in humans as opposed to a disillusioned view of History, a vision that seeks to redeem the dark side of modern culture by understanding art and creativity as the essence of human beings. In Read's vision, the improvement of material conditions, economic prosperity and political emancipation developed from the capacity of the individual to be. Alienation can only be fought by aesthetic pleasure and the creative excitement of novelty. Finally, his lucid style reminds us that the absence of moral constraints does not deteriorate into egotism and indulgence when art and education are disciplined self-assertions against an absurd world.

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Notes

1 The issue of the post-internet art is a case in point. https://www.zerodeux.fr/essais/de-lart-post-internet/; https://monoskop.org/Post-internet_art#Primary_references last access 27/12/2018.

2 Contemporary art conceptualises the dominance of the artist personality and, at the same time, the accessibility of art and its democratisation Participatory art is a crucial issue for curators and institutions alike and it best addresses the idea of a democratic art (Bell 2017).

3 Famous artists like Abramovic, Cattelan, and Orlan, for example, have centred their art on the self. They advocate the centrality of their personality by performing their extreme gestures and by creating narration around and about them (Jones 2013). More generally, their performances have realised freedom as irony and satire. By playing with the market, they generate aesthetic narratives that enhance their disruptive gestures, appealing for self-determination.

4 In 1959, he published the so-called '*Vocal Avowals*' in the literary magazine *The Encounter*, which were meant to highlight the artificiality of poetic language, of the arbitrariness of words as symbols. In his lines, words were removed from the object they were supposed to represent, and acquired meaning only by the imaginative free association created by onomatopoeia, alliterations, and internal rhymes. His experiments bring the well-known modernist free-form into what will be the avant-garde disruptive composite verses of the '60s and '70s and point at his merging of tradition and modernity (Ferris 2015).

5 http://standpointmag.co.uk/critique-december-14-father-son-herbert-read-piers-paul-read-art last accessed on 27/12/2018.

6 After 1934 and this first statement about the role of art in modern times, he began to pay great attention to the political and economic frameworks of art and design, moving from a discussion of art

in purely aesthetic terms to a more explicit political engagement. Read's development was in line with the rapid politicisation of life in the aftermath of the Spanish Civil War and the start of the narrative of the war that created a meta-literary imaginary around the event and a whole generation.

7 The word went into English in the 14th century *citisein* (fem. *citeseine*) "inhabitant of a city or town", (from Anglo-French *citesein*, *citezein* city-dweller, town-dweller, citizen, *i.e.* (Old French *citeien*, 12c._Modern French *citoyen*), and developed the sense of 'freeman, inhabitant of a country, member of the state or nation, not an alien' in the late 14c. Meaning private person (as opposed to a civil officer or soldier) is from c.1600 also indicating "status, rights, privileges, and responsibilities of a citizen (1610s).

8 Read refers to James Burnham's *Managerial Revolution* (1941) that discussed the future of capitalism (Frances 1984).

9 The OED defines it as "**3.a** The deciding of a dispute by an authority to whom the conflicting parties agree to refer their claims in order to effect an equitable settlement" and "**4.** The sentence pronounced by an arbitrator, or by one deciding authoritatively; decision; sentence accepted as authoritative." Read uses the word to indicate the necessity of a judge or arbiter of disputes.

Pour citer cet article

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