

Art Turning Left at the Tate Liverpool: An ambitious but problematic collection of “left-wing” art

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Art Turning Left: How Values Changed Making 1789–2013, at Tate Liverpool until February 2, 2014

The current *Art Turning Left* exhibition at Tate Liverpool is an effort to chronicle 200 years of “left-wing” art. Many memorable and significant art works from the French Revolution to the present day are on display.

The exhibition presents itself as the first ever to focus on the way artists have used ideas of “collectivism, equality and the search for alternative economies” in the production of their work. This is a groundbreaking objective, for which the organisers must be applauded. It indicates an interest in important historical questions and, implicitly, represents a criticism of much of the art work currently being done.

However, difficulties almost inevitably arise in the current political and cultural climate in conjunction with such an ambitious undertaking. The exhibition organisers declare they have refrained from exploring “the political messages behind the works and claims about the ability of art to deliver political and social change.”

That decision is mistaken, in our view. Instead of bringing to bear the history of art and society on the presentation and examination of the art works on display, the curators adopt a largely ahistorical and all too eclectic approach. Two centuries of “left” art are presented as an undifferentiated and unbroken continuum of “left-wing values”, which the works themselves demonstrate is simply a false assertion.

The oldest art work in the exhibition comes from the period of the French Revolution—Jacques-Louis David’s famed oil painting “The Death of Marat” (1793), which depicts the Jacobin leader murdered in his bath by royalists. The remarkable work is displayed alongside four prints of the same subject that David (1748-1825), a sympathiser of the revolution, dispatched across the country in mass reproductions to bolster the cause of the Republic and pay tribute to the heroic individual who sacrifices himself for a great cause.

The painting of steelworkers at the furnace by anarchist-communist Maximilien Luce (1858-1941) makes use of the new technique of pointillism, which combines individual dots of paint into a unified image. This was one of the first works to

put the working class centre stage and captures feelings of solidarity and optimism about the future.

The Arts and Crafts movement attempted to overcome the division of labour in modern class society with techniques harking back to mediaeval craftworking. On display are textiles by William Morris (1834-1896), and the “Workers’ Union” banner and *Child’s Socialist Reader* by fellow Socialist League member Walter Crane (1845-1915).

Morris’ strivings for art for the masses could not be satisfied within the existing social order and his work became the preserve of the middle and upper classes. A similar fate awaited the products of the Bauhaus movement in 1920s Germany, represented in the exhibition by the beautiful textile prints of Gunta Stolzl (1897-1983) and Anni Albers (1899-1994).

The 1917 October Revolution offered the initial means of realising such artistic and cultural strivings, although the revolutionary regime in backward Russia had limited resources at its disposal. Despite the great difficulties faced by the first workers’ state, including civil war and the heritage of immense poverty, the Bolsheviks tirelessly promoted the cultural welfare of the population and encouraged the birth of a new imaginative art. There were an explosion of creativity and a plethora of artistic movements that viewed socialist revolution as the means of transforming the situation for art and artists, as well as that of the mass of humanity.

The exhibition does not give the full flavour of the cultural ferment in revolutionary Russia, however, concentrating on works by the Productionists and Constructivists. On display are sketches for gymnast uniforms by Varvara Stepanova (1894-1958), designs for the ballet “Over the Sun” by El Lissitzky (1890-1941) and “factographic” posters of the “The History of the VKP (b) [All-Russian Communist Party (Bolshevik)]”, from 1925-26, by Alexander Rodchenko (1891-1956), which fused journalism with images to produce an ordered succession of facts. Interestingly, one of the posters has a small portrait of Leon Trotsky, probably one of the last pictures of the revolutionary leader published before his expulsion and exile.

Focussing on the Productionists, who insisted that art should

have a utilitarian, immediately useful role oriented toward industrial production, makes it easier to give the impression there was a seamless transition to the deadening art of 1930s Stalinist “socialist realism” and its insistence on banal depictions of the practical activity of workers and peasants. Of “Farmer on her bicycle” by Aleksandr Deyneka (1899-1969), the exhibition supplement states, “This kind of anti-modernist art performed a propaganda function [that] was deemed useful to the progress of socialist ideals.”

This statement exposes the danger of a lack of historical perspective and knowledge. Stalin imposed “socialist realism” in the mid-1930s and brutally crushed artistic creativity as part of the counterrevolution in the interests and aims of the bureaucracy and not in pursuit of “socialist ideals”. There is no reference to the enormous debates that raged in the Soviet Union over the role of art and of artists, and the battle led by Trotsky and the Left Opposition to defend artistic freedom as an essential component of their attempt to return the Communist Party and the Soviet regime to a revolutionary and internationalist axis.

There are works of some note from the 1930s, the period in which Stalinism became entrenched in the parties of the Third International, producing major defeats such as the victory of fascism in Germany. I was struck by the simple black-and-white woodcut prints of the little known German Expressionist artist Georg Arndt and the “photo-epigrams” in “War Primer” by Bertolt Brecht (1898-1956), which combine an official photo or news cutting with a four-line poem subverting the image’s original intention.

Serious artists of the post-war period faced an intellectually difficult situation. The relentless assaults by Stalinism and a changed mood in the erstwhile left intelligentsia had major consequences for art and culture. The prevailing view within intellectual and artistic circles held Stalinism to be the inevitable outcome of the Russian Revolution and the twin of fascism, shown in the parallels between their art and architecture. The prospect of socialism, even social progress at all, was called into question. Art was ranged against science and rationality, which supposedly had failed humanity and whose products even threatened its continued existence.

In the United States the anticommunist witch-hunts also had a serious impact on cultural life—purging left-wing and socialist individuals and ideas from the mainstream. Specific ills—racism, poverty and materialism—could be condemned, but not US capitalist social relations or “democracy.”

The disorientation and demoralization combined with the accommodation of a section of the intellectuals to the postwar conditions produced various retrograde trends: structuralism, post-structuralism, postmodernism, which have dominated the academic and art worlds for the past several decades. The ideological attack on Marxism and materialism has been accompanied by identity and lifestyle politics. “Radicalism” and “leftism” have come to be identified with gender and

ethnic politics, misanthropic views of humanity and a general hostility to the working class.

It is telling that the revolutionary strivings of the French working class in May-June 1968 produced almost no art in France or Europe that endures. The example in the Tate Liverpool exhibition of work from the general strike that rocked global capitalism is a piece of agitation echoing images from the early twentieth century—the anonymous Popular Workshop posters produced at the Ecole des Beaux Arts .

The collapse of the Soviet Union in 1989, the abandonment of reformism by the social democratic parties and the decay of the trade unions gave added impetus to the focus on personal identity issues, epitomised by the Guerrilla Girls—whose obsession centres on securing gender equality in the lucrative New York art world. The notion that there is some continuity between David, Rodchenko and Stepanova, on the one hand, and the Guerrilla Girls, on the other, is ludicrous, but that sort of comparison is commonly made in contemporary exhibitions.

Many of the more recent works on display appear to have lost all connection to “left-wing” values, including Belgian artist Francis Alÿs’s 2002 video “When Faith Moves Mountains”, involving several hundred people attempting to shovel a huge Peruvian sand dune a few metres, or British artists Alan Kane and Jeremy Deller’s quirky Folk Art display . These works, more than anything else, underscore the immense, objective crisis in social and historical perspective that dominates the art world.

The 2008 financial crisis and the outbreak of mass struggles since 2011, in Egypt and elsewhere, have shattered claims about the final triumph of “free market” capitalism, the end of the working class and the failure of revolution. A new era of upheavals has opened up, which will change the atmosphere in art and dramatically alter the conditions under which artists will operate. The continuity with the French and Russian Revolutions of the new work that emerges will establish itself without straining or false analogies.



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