

Art & The Political Seminar: Part 1

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I made a series of works called *Food Shelter Clothing Food*. I made them as paintings first, but they were all to billboard proportions and I imagined that one day I'd get to make them as billboards, and some of them did get shown on billboards in Hungary with the text translated. They were also shown on Adshels in Newcastle and Gateshead. They were idealistic proposals. I'm interested in the fact that political propaganda doesn't have strong images anymore, and that you don't see a lot of strong, single images in political propaganda, or maybe photographically you sometimes do or you're more likely to, but not as fictional images.

Actually, I don't think of them as propaganda. There's a discontinuity between the text and the image that you don't get in propaganda. They were supposed to represent ideals. I mean, I'm not a utopian, but I think that people do need to have ideals and it's worth visualising them.

People can't live without ideals. People may claim not to be idealistic but insofar as a plan is an ideal we use them all the time. However the texts that ran under these pictures suggested radical ideas. Not new ideas but ideas from the radical tradition.

I'm interested in the work of Wilhelm Reich. Reich worked in the early part of the last century. In *The Mass Psychology of Fascism* (1946), Reich tried to understand the appeal of fascism and the submissive desire for authoritarian leadership. He was interested in obedience and apathy and how conformity is maintained.

Reich was a psychoanalyst who studied with Freud. In 1922 he became a clinical assistant in a free psychoanalytic clinic in Vienna. The clinic was set up for people who couldn't afford treatment. It was mobbed. It became apparent that neurosis was a mass sickness, that psychoanalysis was not a mass therapy, that the idea of prevention did not exist and that difficult material conditions exacerbated people's illnesses. Reich became aware that neurosis ruined people's ability to assert themselves successfully, to organise politically and to respond to exploitation. These people were opaque to themselves. They didn't understand what was driving their feelings and their behavior. How could they collaborate closely with one another? He pointed out that while the wealth and power of the bourgeoisie allowed them to compensate for and indulge their neurotic symptoms, for working people those symptoms were immediately destructive and debilitating.

It became clear that the inability to take pleasure in sex was by far the most common reason for attendance at the clinic. So Reich asked patients for precise descriptions of feelings and sensations during lovemaking. He found that people felt little pleasure and warmth toward their lovers even if they were able to complete the sex-act and that the sex-act was usually maintained by abusive sadistic or masochistic fantasies.

He became aware that in the pleasurable sex-act a period of voluntary movement is succeeded by involuntary spasms, which is the point when people give themselves up to the experience, to each other, to the whole thing... and that for patients the involuntary, climactic part of the experience was the most problematic. He concluded that pleasure was conditioned by the extent to which people can give themselves to the experience and that this ability was the root of any strong, loving relationship.

Reich suggested that sexual tension builds and dissolves in orgasm when the whole body is overtaken by involuntary movements. He suggested that if that process couldn't occur, that if tension built up but was not fully discharged - if the person was unable to let go and give themselves up to the involuntary phase - then tension was left over which provided the energy for the neurosis to feed on. If sex was satisfying and pleasurable, neurotic symptoms were not apparent.

Reich already knew from Freud's work that when a natural, libidinal, core impulse is not permitted expression and is punished if it shows itself, it will be inhibited and repressed but will eventually find expression as a neurotic symptom. Reich suggested that in that process energy is diverted to repress the impulse, that this occurs physiologically, that you actually have to tighten the muscles around the genital to stop the warmth spreading upward. He understood that the mental block is accompanied by a muscular block and that with successive and continual repression of core impulses these blocks build up in the musculature. Reich called this body-armour. The muscular block defends and armours the body against the expression of the recurrent, prohibited impulse. This muscular block contains the prohibited impulse but it also contains the anger at having to hold back the impulse. Because, of course, you don't want to hold it back because it's pleasant and exciting, so the anger has to be repressed and swallowed too.

So, as further inhibitions gather, a rigid exoskeleton forms, which contains the angry and frustrated history of the personality and expresses the way it has had to adapt. Bodies become deadened and exist in a state of perpetual rigid anxiety and tension. Reich called this phenomena armouring and he suggested that people in whom such a condition is developed have a fear and hatred of pleasure and that their frustrated desire for pleasure, their bitterness and resentment at being unable to take pleasure, is expressed in acts of violence and abuse. They develop a loathing for the living, fluid, changing, unarmoured world and, at the same time, a sentimental, idealised view of love as a non-physical, sublime, ethereal, transcendental experience.

Reich argued that this neurotic, rigid, reflexively competitive and aggressively destructive personality type dominates, sees itself as a distinct superior and

spiritual form and legalizes and institutionalizes its view of the world. He argues that sexual repression destroys self-confidence by making people opaque to themselves, erodes their ability to form relationships, makes people competitive rather than cooperative and consequently isolates people from one another so that people are easily manipulated, obedient and unwilling and unable to take responsibility for themselves.

I tried to put these ideas into a work I made later called *Snake* which used the figure of a snake as a symbol for desire. It was a big work that took a long time to make and organize. I was trying to show Reich's idea of armouring. It had two sections. The first part tried to suggest the important stages a child goes through in the process of becoming a mature adult. The second half talked about how people develop in an anti-sexual, hierarchical world. In this second part there was a three-tiered system of working-class zombies, middle-class robots and upper-class wealthy parasites. I tried to show the phenomena of repression using the snake so that when the characters have to block some core impulse the snake binds around them to form a restrictive ring, which is supposed to represent something close to Reich's idea of armour.

Ross Sinclair: How was it actually shown, Chad? It's hard to sort of gauge from this, 'cause there's an amazing amount of detail in some of it. Is it as big panels?

CMcC: The panels were 8 feet high. Some were displayed singly and others as triptychs. The second triptych was a comic version of Genesis 2 and 3, The Fall, which is our patriarchal origin myth. It ends with the woman being cursed and told that she'll be subject to the man but will still have to love him. It puts her beneath the man in the hierarchy.

So in this section the zombies are working in the factory and the robot comes along and tells them the new situation and her snake rebels, and so they get taken off and he gets given a kicking because she's his responsibility now and she's made to watch and then she feels guilty about it and he's furious that she opened her mouth. So then she starts to do all these things for him. She cooks his tea and washes up and she tries to make him feel better and then she says: 'Do you want a wee shag?' and he's not really interested. He's still sulking. So she says 'Do you want a kind of power shag, where you get to hold my snake and be in charge and do what you like?' And he fancies that. So they have this weird shag where he fantasizes that he's in control of the situation, and she fantasizes that he's in control of the situation too, because that assuages her guilt for opening her mouth and causing him to get a kicking. So after he's fallen asleep she's still sitting there awake and her snake says: 'Look, these wealthy parasites, they're making a fortune out of you. But in fact there are millions like you and you could have him if you all got together. He knows that and that's what that story and these curses are all about. That's why he creates this order and this myth - to mess you two up so you can't get anything together because you're at each other's throats all the time.' And then the snake suggests she might have some responsibility. But, of course, she doesn't want to hear that, and so she ties her snake up again. I could go on right through it, but I think you've got the idea.