

the parallels of counterculture

by Bennett Foster & Michael Perry

Memphis Art Brigade is a guerilla arts group in Memphis, Tennessee formed in 2011. Michael Perry, a working poet and musician, helped organize the group. Michael is between extensive tours with the Memphis band Ex-Cult, but we found a moment for conversation to explore the role that counterculture plays within society today, more specifically their role as poets, artists, etc. and how effectively does it shape or subvert mainstream values.

In a speech James Baldwin gave in 1966 titled "The artists struggle for integrity," he said:

"Something awful is happening to a civilization that no longer produces poets. And what is even more crucial is when it ceases to believe the report that only poets can make."

MP: I wanted to ask you, what do you see as the role of what would be called the counterculture in society today, or in Baldwin's terms, the poets (all artists, writers, etc.)? And whether that culture is effective in subverting the values of mainstream capitalist culture ... or has it been integrated into that culture, homogenizing it in a way?

BF: It is like an insidious disease how the market dictates culture. There is always counterculture trying to subvert that, but there is always the parallel force that feeds off the ideas of that culture and tries to translate it into the logic of capital. When we talk about counterculture, it is important to define what norms are market driven and what needs to be subverted in order to resist the culture of capital.

MP: I think you bring up a good point ... that mainstream culture or capitalist culture has this capacity to integrate what was once considered subversive into its logic, even strengthening itself through that process. Slavoj Zizek points out that is one of the strengths of capitalism -- this ability to adapt its logic to these movements, strengthening itself. His example was the initial protests to the Iraq War; George Bush stated that this was great -- that's why we are fighting this war, to protect the freedoms of Americans to protest. While that protest was a subversive mass movement, counter to mainstream culture, it

was also integrated into the mainstream culture it was resisting. And this is one of the dangers I think.

BF: So, what are the choices artists have in terms of avenues to get their work out while trying maintaining their integrity? For instance, there are artist collectives, and then there are fake grassroots organizations funded by million-dollar corporations.

MP: Yeah, like the Memphis public library hosting photo exhibitions funded by Wal-Mart about the problems facing of the black community in Memphis. This is another danger.

What's going on in Arizona today is a good example of a counter cultural shift, where there is the ruling culture in Arizona that says they are not allowed to teach these courses that deal with radical artists, not allowed to teach racial identity ... where the subversive writers and poets that do make it into the curriculum are looked at as an enemy who is fueling an antagonistic relationship, which we know already exists. But there are organizations that are setting up libraries with all the books that have been banned. I went to one in Tucson called "Revolutionary Grounds," which had an entire "banned book" shelf, and people who smuggle these books in to these kids. I think this is a good example of a culture subverting and acting against the state apparatus.

There are plenty of collectives working ... the beehive collective, remember we saw them?

BF: Yeah.

MP: We saw that lecture regarding coal mountain removal in Appalachia and the struggle of folks living there. They worked with the residents to create work that they all felt adequately represented the struggles around this issue. Which is a resistance, I feel, to the mainstream logic of capitalism ... creating artwork from a place of solidarity among workers, their families, and the artists of the collective.

I think guerrilla arts groups are one effective avenue. They typically work anonymously. They put their artwork directly in the public sphere, on walls, trestles, etc.,

around a city, which goes outside the logic of the market, outside the logic of capital, outside the logic of even the art market. It also demystifies the artwork (artist) in a way, and I think that is a relevant area of cultural/political struggle.

BF: Memphis has had a recent surge in mural work, which seems to be the opposite of artists creating their own art in public without the sanction from the city. We have these businesses commissioning murals that perpetuate ideas about the locality of the business and creating an identity around mid town, for instance, a sort of centric-ism ...

MP: "Midtown is Memphis" ...

BF: Yeah, exactly. So these kinds of messages come out of corporate-funded art that tell people there is something geographically and culturally exceptional about a certain part of town, which is really unscientific in that it ignores the material conditions and how the value of a community is measured by city government when TIF zones are drawn, etc. They help businesses in an area create a self-serving myth. I think this is meant to attract what the neo-liberal urban "regeneration" theorist Richard Florida coined "the creative class" or "high-bohemians."

MP: Yes, the liberal notion that art and artists by virtue of being artists somehow makes them feel like they are participating in some kind of uniqueness or maybe even counter-culture. And it's a way to equalize and homogenize everything to where the businesses are the ones who dictate what goes up, and they are the ones whose interests are served by art not taking a subversive stand.

To me, this is why the murals are typically these bland, very abstract or playful pieces whose content is simply a depiction of the neighborhood -- mainly the businesses in the neighborhood. It's a way to keep out the threat of genuine subversive voices from within the city. These typically come about through gentrification, displacing those who already live there, driving out lower-class and black folks in Memphis to develop this culture. And it comes from this very liberal notion of "community" to tag something with "We" such as "We Are (insert city)" when there really isn't a "we" at all. Liberalism functions through a particular group thinking they stand for the whole.

A good example of this is about a year and a half ago MAB was working to create a public arts gallery beneath a bridge in Memphis ... we went out, put up 20 or so primarily radical pieces as a group, and then more pieces started showing up, so there was a brief moment where this public space was functioning. But then it was torn down, and the Cooper-Young Association released some statement talking about the "hotbed" of urban art and how they were going to get in on it, which they did by planning a mural to cover the entire area and squash the potential for more art to be placed there. They did this through private donations -- so they privatized the walls essentially -- to protect them against public use.

Baldwin says in the speech that "what is even more crucial is when a civilization no longer listens to the report made by poets," meaning poets having a sort of critical distance to criticize the world to change it. This was during the time of the dwindling of the Beat generation and the rise of the hippie generation and the middle of the Civil Rights movement. But also, just before a rise of massive popular struggles in America with the Black Panthers, and revolutionary groups becoming openly antagonistic to the system itself. And there were plenty of poets, musicians, and artists who had dedicated themselves to these struggles.

The Beat generation program was in a way, to subvert the concepts of American values and attack a system of morality. It came from the surrealist movement in France but with different tactics and a different viewpoint. I don't want to be overly nostalgic like "it was just the 60's" ... I think it's been happening ever since. But I do think that it was much more popular in the counterculture to engage politically.

BF: And there were venues to support this work and artists with the ability and leisure time to create. Many of the Beat poets came from very wealthy families. But even as the easily marketable hippie movement arose, there was still this undercurrent of radical feminism, militancy and radical art coming out of the Black Power movement, like Gylan Kain and Last Poets and Elaine Brown.

MP: Yeah, look at the 70s, with the Black Arts movement in New York, led in part by Amiri Baraka and the Last Poets ... bringing Sun Ra in and performing these plays in neighborhoods. I think that's a really good example of a genuine counterculture because they created

their own venues independent of already established networks by performing revolutionary plays in the back of trucks in Harlem ... all the poetry and activism and political struggle that was coming out of that was much more revolutionary than the Beat poets. But an interesting connection between the Beat poets and the Black Arts movement is the story of Amiri Baraka reading Howl while he was in the military, and he found Allen Ginsberg and they kind of had an artistic relationship. But as the 60's progressed and Ginsberg started shifting away from revolutionary themes of his earlier poetry, they kind of had a split. Amiri Baraka, growing more radical over the years, says that Ginsberg wanted to make peace and universal love while he wanted to make war, which illustrates a shift in culture there.

But coming full circle, today the development of capitalism is taking a position of strangle holding and creating cultural hegemony more and more. In my experience with counterculture today, being marketed by VICE magazine and so on, is that the statement became more of an individualised expression rather than an expression of collective struggle.

With popular movements such as the Arab Spring, what do you see as the potential for counterculture to act in a revolutionary way?

BF: I think we need more public spaces for that to be possible. The market cannot continue to be the only place where artists are welcome... as the public spaces for art and criticism are defunded, if they still exist at all.

MP: Yeah, they've taken the ethical duty of people to be critical artists, taken away the space for art to be anything but a commodity, thus downplaying its significance and by authoritarian means preventing its threat, which is actually a much smarter way to eliminate the threat because the mainstream culture projects capitalism as ultimate freedom. That's why I think it's necessary for artists to try to act autonomously from the state because it increases the pressure to create new possibilities and new spaces that don't have to rely upon what the state says is possible. And while we have organizations in Memphis, such as Urban Arts Commission and other nonprofits like this, their donors have their own class interests.

BF: And if the donors are being criticised by the art ...

MP: That's not gonna fly. That's a good lesson for culture.

BF: Have you seen Memphis College of Art's new ad campaign? It's really humiliating. They have pictures of graduates on billboards that say "Never had to wait tables" or "Never had to fold clothes at the mall" and then lists the artist's name and occupation as a designer.

MP: Yeah! It's also completely false because I know so many people who work food service who are students or graduates from MCA. It's insulting because it's saying that food service industry workers are below artists. In fact many artists, including myself, work in the food service industry so that we can make the art we want to make. The whole thing points to MCA shifting its curriculum to get rid of critical art and just crank out people to get jobs in design or marketing. It also creates a gap separating an artist's work from other forms of labor.

Outside of these institutions, art and poetry have become superfluous activities but when you look back in history you see art has shaped material struggle and political spheres. A lot of people think there should be a division between politics and art. I personally believe there is no such thing as being neutral or apolitical. You are either against the ruling class or you are complicit in it. I know that seems kind of black and white, or cut and dry or whatever, but it is like that. So reconciling that fact might be what is necessary. I think if we can bring class consciousness to a higher level, our culture will become more subversive. And it's not just a responsibility of artists; it's a civic responsibility. It's a responsibility of society and communities and of everyone.

Bennett is Co-Chair of the Memphis Socialist Party and a working musician.