

Opinion /



BY JENNIFER HIGGIE
01 NOV 2009

Take Courage

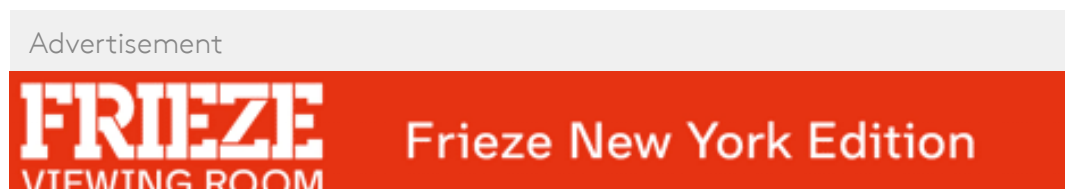
Serendipity, politics and the timely return of Bertolt Brecht

Around 2002, in almost every issue of *frieze* at least one or two writers would co-incidentally quote from, or allude to, J.K. Huysmans' 1884 novel *À rebours* (Against Nature). A hymn to decadence that revolves around a wealthy aesthete who, immersed in 'studious decrepitude', loathes modern life, elevates artificiality to an art and attempts to retreat into a perfect, unrealizable world of his own creation, the novel concludes with the exhausted protagonist realizing that 'his pleasures are finite, his needs infinite'. You can draw your own conclusions about why Huysmans' sensuous, satirical novel was so popular in the pages of *frieze*; we have our theories but serendipity is a mysterious beast and I have no room to analyze it here. Time, however, is relentless and ruthless, and the French novelist was suddenly and without explanation ignored by our writers and forced to shuffle away in his monogrammed slippers as quickly as he had appeared. His replacement – a younger, more vigorous and vocal artist – was Lawrence Weiner, an 'American Socialist' whose famous 1968 *Declaration of Intent* was delivered with all the pragmatic passion of a man sharpening a pencil: '1. The artist may construct the piece. 2. The piece may be fabricated. 3. The piece need not be built. Each being equal and consistent with the intent of the artist, the decision as to condition rests with the receiver upon the occasion of receivership.' Huysmans – a writer for whom the languid composure of a bejewelled tortoise was the pinnacle of artistic perfection – would, I am sure, have been appalled at Weiner's conceptual bluntness. Sadly, however, Weiner's moment in the limelight, too, has come to pass, and the serendipitous mystery continues: suddenly, seemingly scores of writers are submitting their copy to the magazine peppered with references to the writer whose observation more than 60 years ago that 'it's easier to rob by setting up a bank than by holding up a bank clerk' was eerily prescient: the great German writer and director Bertolt Brecht.

There's obviously something in the air: London's National Theatre is currently playing host to a brilliant new production of *Mother Courage and Her Children*, Brecht's 1939 epic play about the complicated relationship between religion, commerce and war, and the title of the 11th Istanbul Biennial, 'What Keeps Mankind Alive?', is named after the song that closes the second act of *The Threepenny Opera* (1928), written by Brecht in collaboration with Elisabeth Hauptmann and Kurt Weill. Explaining their title choice, the curators of the Biennial, the Croatian all-female collective, What, How & for Whom, ask: 'Is it not true that we live haunted by the fears of approaching global changes, consequences of which could have lasting disastrous effects, not unlike those that transformed the world after the economic collapse of 1929?' Ah, yes.

Despite their stylistic differences and the disparate cultural moods they embody, something very clear links the work of Huysmans, Weiner and Brecht. Their decision to take up weapons – fiction, art or theatre – was in response to a particular moment in time and made in order to resist the threatening behaviour of an outside force whose power is visible only in its effects. Weiner's statement, 'All art is made from anger', is apt here – obviously, anger can be expressed as clearly in the dismissive curl of rouged lip, or the declarative crispness of a new typeface as in the flailing of fists. The work of all three artists reacts to – from fiercely divergent positions – systems they abhorred: Huysmans, to a world in which beauty and sensuousness are castrated by convention and commerce; Weiner to a moribund, imitative visual language divorced from the reality of its context; and Brecht to a culture of capitalism that, at its very core, promotes and celebrates militarism, individualism and economic profit over social justice. (Sound familiar?)

'Art', declared Brecht, 'is not a mirror held up to reality, but a hammer with which to shape it.' This oft-quoted maxim and its implication that art and politics are inextricably entwined is as relevant today as it was 70 years ago – especially because the playwright was vague about exactly how hard (or soft) the impact of the hammer should be and what shape it might, or should, create. 'Political' is a word used to describe much contemporary art but is often rendered meaningless through banal and reductive overuse. Despite the assumptions that swirl around it, there is no – and can be no – consensus about what 'political' now fundamentally means in relation to art; it has too many meanings, applications and repercussions in too many different cultures and social contexts to be reduced to a neat one-word-fits-all formula. Yet, this leaves us in a quandary: how can we assess art's political efficacy without a party policy? What's the use of 'political art' if it constantly preaches to the converted? How can we talk about it as if it's a genre when its intentions are so unfocussed, and its manifestations so varied?



Perhaps there are better, more precise, questions to ask of a work of art: is it a reflection of its time? Does it turn a cool eye on the crumbling structures we assume are carved in stone? Does it pose questions or suggest answers in a language that is original, inventive or vital? Is it new, in the best sense of the word – urgent and innovative – or, if it employs old forms, is it doing something relevant with them? Does it respond to a complex world with an equal complexity? Does it know how to communicate? Is it aware that, although the personal may be political, unless you're a very good artist, the personal isn't always that interesting to anyone but yourself? If the answer is yes to all of the above then you don't just have art that is possessed of a political dimension – you have good art.

Brecht was a writer whose practice often flew high above the coal-face of his theory – which makes him, perhaps, an apt artist for our times. The character of *Mother Courage*, for example, a woman who both profits from war and whose family is destroyed by it, is a study in depth, compassion and contradiction – not the detached, Marxist mouthpiece some of Brecht's writing might lead you to assume he would create. She spouts poetry and practicalities, is cast down and lifted up, sings wildly, both deceives and knows herself; she crackles with vitality, bravery and cowardice in equal measure. She is, in other words, all too human. To my mind, a play like *Mother Courage* ... and a novel such as *À rebours*, or Weiner's *Declaration of Intent* are all, in their own ways, political art par excellence – which means, quite simply, that they respond, in the most vital way possible, to what it means to be alive.

JENNIFER HIGGIE

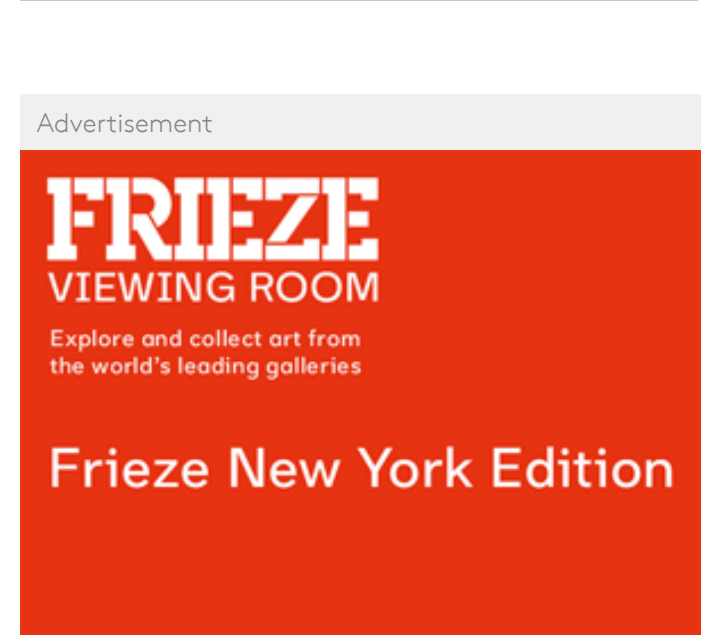
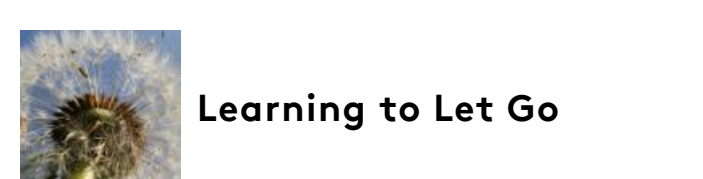
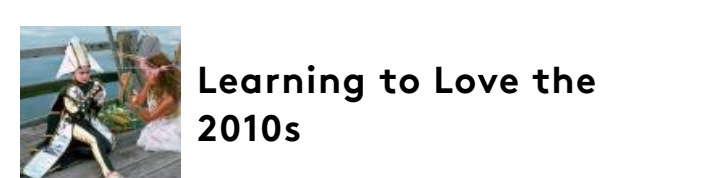
Jennifer Higgie is editor-at-large of *frieze*, based in London, UK. She is the host of *frieze*'s first podcast, *Bow Down: Women in Art History*. Her book *The Mirror and the Palette* is forthcoming from Weidenfeld & Nicolson.

First published in Issue 127
Nov - Dec 2009

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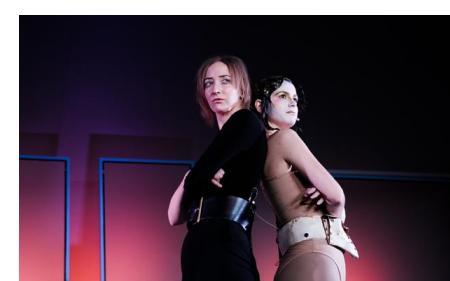
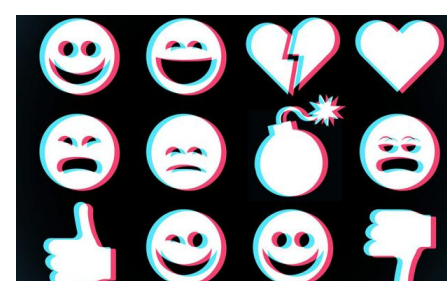
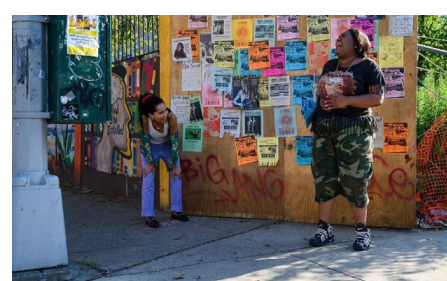
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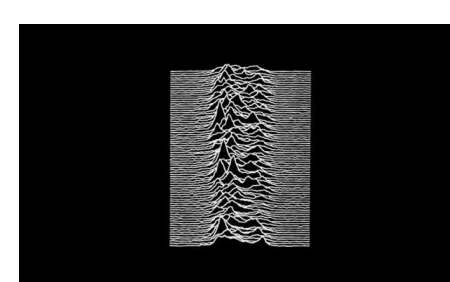
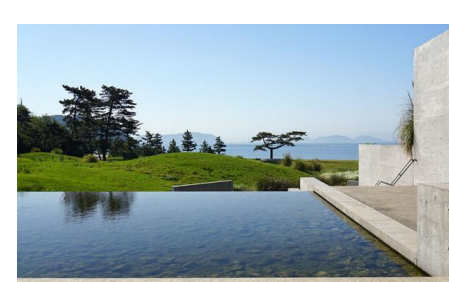
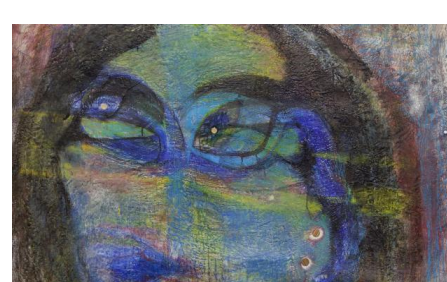
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