

Franco Berardi Bifo and Marco
Magagnoli
**Blu's
Iconoclasm and
the End of the
Dada Century**

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On November 26, 2016, the fortieth anniversary of the release of the Sex Pistols' "Anarchy in the UK," Joe Corr  will burn his  5 million collection of punk memorabilia. This gesture by the son of Malcom McLaren and Vivian Westwood – two icons of punk's first wave – is a response to Punk London, a year-long slate of concerts, films, talks, and exhibitions organized by the British tourism board. As Corr  explained to *NME Magazine*:

You talk to people about it these days and it's almost like *Antiques Roadshow*. "I wish I kept those bondage trousers, they'd be worth a fortune now." What's that got to do with anything? That's why I think it's appropriate [to burn the collection], to say punk rock is extinct. Otherwise, it's all going to end up in some tourist shop, in a glass case, like the Hard Rock Caf  or something, and they'll be selling "God Save The Queen" mugs with a safety pin through her nose at Buckingham Palace ... To see punk ideas appropriated by the establishment ... punk rock was never that ... The point is that we don't pray on that altar, we don't pray at the altar of money.

As inspiration for his own conflagration, Corr  cites The KLF's decision to burn a million pounds sterling in 1992, as documented in the film *Watch The K Foundation Burn A Million Quid*. The bonfire of punk-historical assets in November won't only be a refusal of value, however; it will also be a destruction of artifacts, and for Corr , a certain erasure of self. Blu, a street artist, recently performed a similar gesture of consistent iconoclasm, nine hundred miles away, in Bologna – a city very different from London.

London is a huge metropolis; Bologna is a small city. London is frantically busy; Bologna is lazier. London is gargantuan and neuropathic; Bologna is more polluted but less monstrous. There was a moment, however, when Bologna and London played a similar role in the zeitgeist. This was 1977, when two similar yet contrasting insurrections took place in the two cities, paving the way for a new imagination of the future. The London punk insurrection was dressed predominantly in black, while the Bologna autonomous insurrection was full of color; but the insurgents were part of the same precarious life. The London punks shouted *no future!*, while the Bologna autonomists shouted *the future is now!*

Bologna is an interesting city. At the end of the Middle Ages, *clerici vagantes* (wandering artists) from the south and the north gathered there and founded what is said to have been the first university of the modern world, the

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One example shows the punk movement's use of T-shirts as a surface for graffiti.

University of Bologna.

For generations new waves of scientists and artists, poets, and social rebels have traversed the streets of Bologna: they have been a nomadic minority in a city where the majority of the population is busy with commerce and industry.

Over the centuries the local authorities have dealt in different ways with this nomadic intellectual minority. Many times they have tried to repress, marginalize, and sometimes expel these innovators – these enemies of the established order. At other times the local bourgeoisie has tried to take advantage of the ebullience and creativity of the nomadic outlaws.

But the richness of the city rests upon the nomadic brain that gathers and disperses, leaving traces of its passage: artworks, inventions, technical and political innovations. So it happens that in certain periods the city is ebullient and inventive. In other periods, however, the nomadic brilliance vanishes, and butchers, bureaucrats, and bankers occupy the whole scene, exploiting the products of the nomadic innovators and transforming work into money, creation into value, and art into the Museum.

In the late twentieth century a wave of

cultural unrest and political rebellion swept Bologna: poets and activists and technological experimenters revived the early-twentieth-century art vanguard, and mixed it with a freshly imagined social autonomy. Dadaism had a presence in the streets of Bologna in the '70s, when thousands of students, young workers, and women decided to refuse their destiny of exploitation and sadness, and tried to transform daily life into an artwork.

Mao-Dadaism detonated in the '70s as a double ironic prank. It was a way to declare that Maoism and the entire Communist legacy of the twentieth century was a funny remnant of an epoch that was fading away. But it was also a way to marry the tragic thread of Communist revolution to the crazy thread of art ambiguousness. The ironic Mao-Dada rebellion exploded in 1977: for three days police tanks tried to remove thousand of young rebels from the university quarter in Bologna. At the end they succeeded, after killing a student, arresting more than three hundred people, and shutting down the radio station that was promulgating the schizo-utopian art-transformation of daily life.

This was the last proletarian insurgency of the Communist century, but it was simultaneously the first insurrection of the

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Protesters from the self-denominated *indiani metropolitani* march toward the camera, Bologna circa 1977.



This space-age projection of a future workspace is commonly used today to celebrate the less glamorous administrative assistant day.

precarious cognitariat, based on the intuition that the modern imagination of the future was dissolving.

The separation of art and daily life was the enemy of the Mao-Dada rebels. We – for I was one – did not care much about politics, governments, and power. Our mission was to break the separation between art and daily life, in the spirit of Tristan Tzara, the Romanian-French poet who was later accused of being a purveyor of odalisques, narcotics, and scandalous literature. In the spring of 1916, while war raged all over Europe, Tzara launched the Dada project at the Cabaret Voltaire: “Abolish art, abolish daily life, abolish the separation between art and daily life.”

Lenin was sitting somewhere in the same cabaret, sipping tea or vodka; I don’t remember which. What would the history of the century have been if the poet and the communist became friends, and shared a common ironic style? Would the century have been lighter? Maybe. Dadaist irony might have been a useful antidote to Bolshevik severity.

Rhetorically at least, the two shared an attachment to immanence, or at the very least a suspicion of traditional forms of representation. Writing, one year later, in *State and Revolution*, Lenin used language not so different from Tzara’s to insist on “the *smashing*, the *destruction*” of bourgeois parliamentarianism, which also separated everyday life from what claimed to represent it.

“We cannot imagine democracy, even proletarian democracy, without representative institutions, but we can and must imagine democracy without parliamentarism,” wrote Lenin. Such a vision of democracy shares with the Cabaret Voltaire the refusal of separation, and the destruction of the distinction between audience and performer, whether that be understood as spectator/artist or citizen/representative.

The distinction between the Dada and Leninist vanguards lay not in the goal but in the method – in the difference, finally, between an amateur cabaret and a vanguard party of professional revolutionaries. In the first case, it is the space of art as a distinct professional realm that is invaded by the unskilled forces of everyday life. In the second, it is the space of everyday life that is occupied by the imperatives of the professional revolutionary. Lenin’s phrase “Everything within the party, nothing without” is the Dada gesture in reverse. Rather than letting everyday life into the theater to crush the division between the audience and the performer, the vanguard party expands outwards to include the audience among its ranks.

Both theories seek the destruction of the

professional/amateur distinction, but Dada strategy pursues this goal by championing amateurism and enacting a certain *classlessness*, while Leninism seeks the triumph of the revolutionary professional.

Naturally, the precarious classes that composed the Mao-Dadaists of ’77 tried to change the course of history by returning to the immanent co-participation of art and everyday life promised by Dada. But this required acting *autonomously* from the leadership of the Communist Party, whose existence as an institutionalized, professional vanguard placed it in conflict with a movement of the precarious who were, like Dada, aligned against professionalism as the force separating art and life. But it was too late, as the planet in those years was already running out of a future.

At the beginning of the twenty-first century, when the storm of ’77 was already a fading memory, Blu came to Bologna as a nomadic artist. He went to the Museum of Natural History and saw those prehistoric fish with long teeth and reptilian scales. He went to anarchist meetings in squatted houses like XM24. At night he painted on the walls of suburban buildings, abandoned factories, ghosts of extinguished industrial capitalism. The paintings were full of primordial aggressive animals and late-modern warriors, and squatters living in moonless cavities. On the walls of derelict dwellings he painted skyscrapers and armies of menacing tanks, shy elephants and aggressive turtles.

In the last ten years Blu has painted graffiti on the walls of Berlin, Los Angeles, and Rome, but in Bologna his paintings are visible in so many places that his style marks the cityscape.

However, life in the city of Bologna is not easy for people like Blu. Local authorities and the racist local newspaper *Il Resto del Carlino* have repeatedly denounced street artists as vandals, subverters, and allies of the anarcho-autonomous squatters. Time and again squads of cleaners have walked around the city to erase the graffiti on the walls.

Then finally something happened, and now all of Blu’s pieces in Bologna are gone. They have been covered up with grey paint. Not because of an act of repression, not because of the bigotry of good citizens who love order and clean walls, but because of an act of self-erasure by the artist himself.

On the night of March 11, on the thirty-ninth anniversary of the massive riots that followed the killing of the student Francesco Lorusso by the police, Blu, helped by a group of activists, covered over his own works with grey paint.

Why did he do this?

A week later, on March 18, an exhibition called “Street Art: Banksy & Co” was scheduled

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to open. The exhibition was organized by the Fondazione Carisbo, a local bank-owned foundation whose president is Fabio Roversi Monaco, the former rector of the University of Bologna, as well as the former president of BolognaFiere, a public-private partnership that organizes exhibitions. In Bologna, the name Roversi Monaco evokes power, money, and banks. The exhibition was expected to display works of art removed from walls with the stated intention of “salvaging them from demolition and preserving them from the injuries of time,” which means turning them into museum pieces, and eventually transforming them into value.

The situation perfectly epitomized the old story of separating art from daily life, of the museification of art separated from life.

After his action of self-erasure, Blu wrote on his blog:

After having denounced and criminalized graffiti as vandalism, after having oppressed the youth culture that created them, after having evacuated the places which functioned as laboratories for those artists, now Bologna’s powers-that-be pose as the saviors of street art.

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Street artists have been repeatedly denounced and arrested in Bologna. Two have been jailed, and many more have been fined. Recently, the mayor of Bologna welcomed to the town hall a delegation of volunteers who had taken part in a “no tag” clean-up project against “graphic vandalism,” organized by the Bologna government. The municipality even pays building owners who remove graffiti from the walls of their properties.

Then the Museum comes to the rescue of what is left of street art, with the Bank supporting the expropriation.

Is Roversi Monaco’s act of expropriation legal? Yes, he claims: “We’ve asked permission from the legitimate owners of the derelict buildings these murals were on.”

But Roversi Monaco has also conceded: “The artist remains the author, but the owner is whoever owns the building.”

Thus Blu decided not to take part in the show.

Blu’s action was performed almost exactly one hundred years after the birth of Dada, so I read it as the final self-erasure of the historical vanguard. The long-standing attempt to translate art into life, and to transform life into art, is over. It was an ambiguous, dangerous project. The will



This work by street artist Blu was visible before he made a decision to erase his work with grey paint.

for art-life cross-contamination produced contradictory effects throughout the past century. It fuelled countless collective and individual insurrections that traversed the existence of millions of rebellious bodies, millions of workers refusing to work. But it also nourished advertising, the ceaseless flow of semiotic pollution in the infosphere. Aesthetic innovation and the market have played a game of reciprocal plundering, with the Museum and the Bank-Museum swallowing life and transforming it into abstraction.

Blu's act is a sort of self-deleting of a dynamic century, while the world sinks into dementia. It is not the museum but the grey wall that will reactivate the depressed imagination of our times. A grey wall, like a bonfire, is a sacrifice that leaves behind a suggestion: do not continue the game, start a new one. Do not build on the ruins of past "modern" values. Abandon illusions, get prepared for the perfect storm. And in the storm – if I may conclude with Bob Marley – emancipate yourself from mental slavery, none but yourself can free your mind.

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Franco Berardi, aka "Bifo," founder of the famous Radio Alice in Bologna and an important figure in the Italian Autonomia movement, is a writer, media theorist, and media activist. His most recent book is *And: Phenomenology of the End* (Semiotext(e), 2015).

Marco Magagnoli is president of the Cultural Association Menomale, which is dedicated to the theory and technology of immersive media. He is the coauthor of *System Error* (Feltrinelli, 2002) and the creator of The Look of Life, a video website for people who live in contexts of isolation.