

Essay 3: Art

The last year with its lockdowns and losses, its fear and its hopes, its heroism and incompetence, has been a challenge to us all, taking us to the edge of our ability to cope and sometimes beyond. At countless moments, I have been shattered by the sudden transformation of the familiar into the unfamiliar. A friend half-recognised in a mask; a socially-distanced queue through a shopping precinct; a tube train seemingly become a ghost train; a partitioned beach. With the closure of theatres, galleries, concert halls and museums, I also feel deprived of the ways culture can show us back to ourselves, tell us multiple stories about what is happening to us and give us the thrill of recognising something entirely new.

I'm a writer and I know a lot of writers and a conversation I've had frequently through this year of pandemic is, what kind of art will come out of this? It's a difficult question to answer for two reasons. First, when you are right in the middle of a situation, it takes enormous effort to find the larger patterns, the deeper feelings, the true outline of what you're living through. But second, it's difficult to imagine what art might emerge from this crisis because none of us knows what kind of world we will find on the other side. Will we return gladly to the life we once knew? Or will we find ourselves quite changed? What world might we write our poems

for, paint our pictures for, make our movies for, sing our songs for? So far, it seems to me at least, that no very significant Covid artwork has emerged to seize our experience such that we might say: *yes, that's what it was like in the plague year of 2020-21.*

Something of the kind seems to some historians to have afflicted the Paris Commune. A highly influential study of art and the Commune by Bertrand Tillier is subtitled 'révolution sans images' – The Paris Commune – revolution without pictures. In fact, he gives it a question mark – *revolution without pictures?* – as if he can't quite bring himself to draw the conclusion. How can that be? Could art really have disappeared in those ten weeks of 1871? Art has been an irreducible part of human expression for 10s of 1000s of years; could a mere revolution undo all that?

Yet the Commune's relationship to art is complex and contradictory, marked as much by absence as presence. Perhaps, in some ways, the Commune might help us know where to look for art in a time of crisis and change and what might come after.

Rimbaud

On 15 May 1871, sixteen-year-old Arthur Rimbaud wrote to his friend, the journalist and poet Paul Demeny, enclosing a new poem, 'The Battle Song of Paris', a ferocious and bitter

commentary on the French Government's attempt to bombard the Commune into submission. Rimbaud's anger is unmistakable; he names Adolphe Thiers, head of the Versailles government, as well as finance minister Ernest Picard and foreign minister Jules Favre. He names the suburbs of Paris shelled by the Versaillais. He vividly evokes the 'schako, sabre et tam-tam' – the plumed military helmet, sabre and drum of the advancing French army, and Rimbaud observes grimly that 'with petrol bombs they paint dark red'. Elsewhere in the letter, Rimbaud announces that he is to make himself a 'voyant', a seer, and he will do this by a profound disordering of all the senses, seeking out extremes of experience: madness and love, sickness and criminality, to arrive at something unknown. It seems – though Rimbaud doesn't say this explicitly – that there may be a connection between his personal experience of violent renewal and Paris's.

But Rimbaud wasn't in Paris. He was back home in Charleville. He would later claim to have visited Paris many times and to have taken part in the fighting to defend the city, though there seems little evidence to confirm that and a fair bit of evidence to contradict it, including the testimony of his sister. In his determination to become a seer, his poems sees things that the author did not see. As Rimbaud writes in the letter, 'Je est un autre' – I is an other. It is as though Rimbaud in Charleville is conjuring a second Rimbaud, fighting

with the fédérés, being beaten back by the Versaillais invaders.

Many Parisian writers absented themselves from the capital during the Commune, Zola, Flaubert and others, waiting it out in Bordeaux or Marseilles, and their perceptions of the Communards were at second or third hand. Rimbaud's absence is spectral and intense in its imagination. His engagement with the idea of the Commune seems genuinely to have precipitated a transformation in his attitude to poetry, but his art was elsewhere.

Maximilien Luce

Maximilien Luce's painting *A Street in Paris, May 1871* depicts a moment in the Bloody Week that brought the Commune to a violent end. The painting shows five Communards, including one woman, lying dead in a Paris street, the buildings shuttered mournfully behind them, a pile of torn-up cobblestones suggesting a failed attempt at resistance.

The painting has some oddities: the long perspective of the street that sweeps diagonally from bottom right to top left, the bright blue sky, the mutedly colourful shops suggest a deep ordinariness that clashes with the corpses in the foreground, and Luce's neo-impressionist use of intricate colour patterns adds shimmering brightness to the composition

that suggests the joyful warmth of a spring day that is tonally at odds with the murderous scene. Maximilien Luce may well have painted the picture from personal experience and observation, witnessing the massacres from his family home in the working-class district of Montparnasse. But if he did, he did so from memory. Luce had just turned thirteen when the Commune was declared. He completed the painting in 1904 or 5, when he was in his mid-forties. In other words, the painting was made at a great distance from those events.

The unreal, hallucinatory quality of the painting suggests an effect of memory. It is perhaps a painting that asks, did all of that really happen? Or did we imagine it? The shimmering smears of the surface colour prevent the eye quite focusing on the reality of the image, the brushstrokes deflecting the eye from detail.

Or perhaps the pale warmth of the painting is meant to convey the scene with a certain immediacy. Luce was a committed anarchist and they may be something in the serenity of the image, the bodies seemingly in repose that suggests that, as art historian Albert Boime put it, the figures are but sleeping and are 'ready to awake from their temporary state of immobility and rise again to take their place behind the barricade'.

Or, a third reading: perhaps we are meant to find a contrast between the warm spring sun flooding the scene and these five corpses with their coronas of spilled blood.

If so, it recalls Honoré Daumier's famous lithograph, *Rue Transnonain 15 April 1834*, which depicts an interior scene with a series of figures in their nightclothes slumped on the floor. At first glance, one might think the central figure, a rotund man perhaps in his 40s, has passed out drunk, until you notice that he has a motionless child trapped under him and the man to the right is lying with his eyes open. The image commemorated a brutal response by the French army to an uprising against the July Monarchy and, in the way the eye creates a narrative that takes us from the peace of sleep to the anger of butchery, it may have contributed to Luce's conception of the painting.

A closer relation is Ernest Meissonnier's *The Barricade* painted in 1850 depicting the aftermath of the 1848 revolution. This also features a number of dead insurgents below a row of shuttered shops, with a long diagonal reaching from cobblestones to sky.

...But already the Commune seems to be slipping out of the picture, deferred in a series of influences and substitutions that reach from 1905, skimming past the Commune back to 1850,

1848 and 1834. The shimmering ambiguity of Luce's picture and its slippery chains of artistic reference seem once again to suggest that the Commune has evaded the clutches of art.

The Federation

Of course, the Commune lasted only a few weeks. It is asking a lot to expect that very much art would have poured from it in that time. There are a few hints in various places about kinds of cultural expression, high and low, that emerged from the Commune: a mocking parody of the Communion here, a savage satire at the Gaîté there, a hymn to a working-class uprising over there. But also, it might be that we're expecting the wrong thing from the Commune. It did concern itself with art but it did so in a very Communal way.

On 6 April, painter Gustave Courbet issued a call for a meeting of artists the following week and, on 14 April, in the amphitheatre of the Sorbonne's medical school around 400 painters, sculptors, industrial artists, illustrators, and critics met to form an Commune Artist's Federation and issue a Manifesto. This was a pretty comprehensive document outlining the ways that this collective of artists would administer the existing artistic heritage of Paris and support the development of new work.

In preserving the past, it would maintain catalogues of holdings, inspect and, where necessary, carry out maintenance and repair of major collections, appointing suitable administrators and archivists to ensure the safety of the work.

In stimulating future work, it would hold exhibitions, share new work and information about new artists, and support new projects in whatever way is deemed appropriate. It would also offer education and training for young artists.

Where the manifesto is strikingly silent, though, is about what constitutes art and certainly about what constitutes good art. The composition of the initial federation makes it clear that industrial design is on an equal footing with, say, painting. At one point they insist that 'the Committee will only accept works signed by their authors'. This might lead us to think that only traditionally 'authored' artworks qualify for the Federation's support and not the anonymous, corporate creations of industrial design. But, the opposite seems to be true. The Federation is demanding that industrial design be signed, its creators known and feted, and that the division between creative genius and mass culture, between art and craft be abolished. 'the Committee is strongly opposed,' the Manifesto declares, 'to purely commercial exhibitions where the name of the printer or manufacturer is given more

prominence than that of the genuine creator'. We perhaps do not find art in the Commune, because we are looking in the wrong places.

Cultural historian Kristin Ross gives the barricades as an example of the art we might fail to see, citing the instance of Napoléon Gaillard, successful shoemaker, and supposedly the inventor of the galosh, who became director of Barricades for the 1st, 16th, 17th, and 20th arrondissements, and who was so proud of his greatest creation – a barricade informally known as Château Gaillard – that he insisted on being photographed standing on top of it, effectively, as Ross says, signing it.

Photography

One of the newer art forms that flourished in the Commune was photography. It was in some ways a perfect form for the Commune; unflinching in its unromanticised grasp of the everyday, not differentiating between classes, genders, locating people in their real material contexts. The Commune images of extraordinary photographers like Hippolyte Blancard or Bruno Braquehais do not showily insist on the exquisiteness of their compositions, the drama of their framing, the play of their textures. Though sometimes all of these things are present, as in Braquehais's images of the Vendôme Column or Blancard's breathtaking but bathetically titled *The Police Headquarters on Fire at 5pm on 24 May 1871*, they refuse to

takes sides as either composition or document, art or craft, and it is perhaps in that very ambiguity that they express the art of the Commune.

It was, in some ways, with the ruins of the Commune that traditional art had its revenge, reimposing its values in defiance of the Commune and the Federation of Artists. The ruins themselves were the subject of numerous photographs sold commercially in the form of the *carte de visite*, small pocket-size photographs that could be bought individually or in large albums that allowed visitors to ruined Paris to take a little piece of the ruin home with them. These represent a gaze that beautified and aestheticised the destruction as if reasserting a traditional notion of art as transcendence, turning suffering into sublimity. Meissonnier's painting The Ruins of the Tuileries turns those ruins into an elaborate and frankly rather incoherent allegory: in his composition, the ruins provide four concentric frames to show the quadriga atop the Arc de Triomphe, an inscription below reading 'the glory of the ancients remains beyond the flames', though since Victory has her back to us, she appears less to be saying 'You shall yet prevail' and more something like 'so long, suckers'.

Traditional art did not survive intact. The Academie – gatekeeper of official art for most of the century – already tottering under the twin impacts of Courbet and Manet, never

regained the status it had even a decade before. As the century drew to its close, art's modernist turn may have, in France, been a fed by a kind of post-traumatic reaction to the convulsions of the Siege, the Commune and the Commune's end. But the Commune invites us now to ask afresh and with new imagination and openness, where should we look for art in a time of crisis?

Those aestheticized ruins have remained to this day one of the key visual signifiers of the Commune, an index, so it is said, of the Communards' glorying in destruction. In tomorrow's essay, I'll be considering the complexity of the Commune's attitude to destruction, asking, what's so bad about tearing down a statue?