

*The Signs in the Street: a response  
to Perry Anderson*

Perry Anderson's discussion of my book, *All that is Solid Melts into Air*, is both welcome and perplexing. He is so appreciative and generous at the beginning, so dismissive and scornful at the end—not merely toward my book, but toward contemporary life itself. What happens in the middle? I can't figure it out. There is an interesting historical analysis, building on Arno Mayer's work, of the political and social conditions that underlay the great modernist breakthroughs of 1890 to 1920. This analysis makes fascinating reading, but Anderson loads his history with far more weight that it can bear. He argues that 'the intersection between a semi-aristocratic ruling order, a semi-industrialized capitalist economy, and a semi-emergent or insurgent labour movement' nourished the creative triumphs of cubism, relativity, psychoanalysis, the *Rites of Spring*, *Ulysses*, etc. This is perfectly plausible, though there are a number of other equally plausible ways to tell this story. (My own would place more emphasis on the experience of marginal groups like Jews and homosexuals.) Anderson then makes a bizarre leap: he seems to say that the absence of *these*

conditions since the end of World War Two must lead to the absence of *any* creative triumphs. But why shouldn't other conditions inspire other triumphs, today, tomorrow, or any other day?

This pretzel logic gets another perverse twist toward the paper's end, where Anderson claims that the current disappointment of our hopes for socialist revolution in the West means the doom of all Western spiritual and cultural life: 'What marks the situation of the Western artist is ... the closure of horizons: without an appropriable past, or an imaginable future, in an interminably recurrent present.' Doesn't he realize how much human creativity grows, and always has grown, out of disappointment? Disappointment with democratic Athens led to *The Trojan Women* and Plato's *Republic*; disappointment in Jesus of Nazareth (who, remember, was supposed to bring about the end of the world) led to most of what's morally creative in Christianity—specifically, the revaluation of values that glorified suffering, lowliness and defeat; disappointment with the French Revolution led to the creative breakthroughs of Romanticism, which nourished (and continue to nourish) a legion of new revolutions. So it goes. When people are faced with the closing of familiar horizons, we open up new horizons; when we are disappointed in some of our hopes, we discover or create new visions that inspire new hopes. That's how our species has survived so much sadness and ruin through the ages. If humanity had ever accepted *a priori* foreclosures of history, our history would have ended long ago.

Does Anderson really believe the Sex Pistols' verdict of 'NO FUTURE!?' (Even Johnny Rotten, as he screamed it, was trying in his way to change it.) If Anderson's horizon really looks closed, maybe he should think of this as a problem, rather than as the human condition. Maybe his theoretical framework has pressed him into a corner, and he needs to turn around and look the other way, where there may be plenty of trouble but at least there's light and space.

*All that is Solid Melts into Air* unfolds a dialectic of modernization and modernism. 'To be modern', as I define it at the book's beginning and end, 'is to experience personal and social life as a maelstrom, to find one's world in perpetual disintegration and renewal, trouble and anguish, ambiguity and contradiction: to be part of a universe in which all that is solid melts into air. To be a modernist is to make oneself somehow at home in this maelstrom, . . . to grasp and confront the world that modernization makes, and to strive to make it our own.' Modernism aims 'to give modern men and women the power to change the world that is changing them, to make them the subjects as well as the objects of modernization.' Anderson is willing to accept this as a vision of 19th-century culture and politics, but he thinks that it is irrelevant to our century, let alone to our day. When he criticizes my failure to 'periodize', his point is that the liberating force of modernism is confined to an earlier period. It isn't quite clear when that period ended (World War I? World War II?), but the main point is that it ended long ago. The hope of making ourselves at home in the maelstrom, of becoming subjects as well as objects, of making the modern

world our own—these hopes have forever melted into air, at least for Anderson, and he thinks it's futile for me to try to recreate them.

I could assail Anderson's reading of modern and contemporary history in plenty of ways, but it wouldn't do anything to advance our common understanding. I want to try something different. Anderson's view of the current horizon is that it's empty, closed; mine is that it's open and crowded with creative possibilities. The best way to defend my vision might be to show what this horizon looks like, what's actually out there as I see it. For the next few pages, I want to present a few scenes from everyday life, and from an art and culture that are part of this life, as it is going on right now. These scenes do not lead logically to one another; nevertheless, they are connected, as figures in a collage. My point in introducing them is to show how modernism is still happening, both in our streets and in our souls, and how it still has the imaginative power to help us make this world our own.

Modernism has its traditions, and they are there to be used and developed. Baudelaire tells us how to see the present: 'All centuries and all peoples have their beauty, so inevitably we have ours. That's the order of things. . . . The life of our city is rich in poetic and marvellous subjects. The marvellous envelops and soaks us like an atmosphere, only we don't see it. . . . We need only open our eyes to recognize our heroism.' He wrote this in 1846, in an essay entitled, *The Heroism of Modern Life*.

### Faces in The Crowd

A CUNY (City University of New York) graduate student comes to see me about his dissertation and his life: Larry, a big, muscular redhead, usually jovial, occasionally menacing, looking a little like the Wild Man in medieval art. He comes from the steel mills near Pittsburgh. After a dreadful childhood, abandoned by alcoholic parents, brought up by a series of indifferent and impoverished relatives, he escaped to a big state university on a football scholarship. Quite by accident, as he tells it, he discovered that he loved to read, think, dream. Now he dreams vast, epic, neo-Idealist visions, communing with Fichte and Schelling and Hegel as he drives a taxi all night to make the rent. I ask him what he wants to do with his life; he says he wants to become a thinker so he can search for the ultimate truth and, if he finds it, proclaim it to the world.

I am moved by his ambition, which I shared at his age—and still do share, though I wouldn't be likely to put it as directly and honestly as he. But I tell him that part of the truth about life in Reagan's America is that it contains no job openings for independent, humanistic thought. I say that if he wants to pursue the truth, he's going to have to use all his intelligence to learn to lie, to disguise his enterprise as something else that he can get a job doing. The question then becomes, what is the best disguise? I feel like hell as I say this, but I see no way around it.

I suggest he do an ethnographic and political study of his steel town.

He recoils in horror, and tells me that world is crumbling. Mills are closing down; more than half the jobs in his town have recently disappeared and the others could go at any moment; men are running away or disintegrating, families are breaking up, complex social networks are ripping apart at the seams. He visits his old local bars, and men who used to taunt him for loving books and hanging out with kikes, niggers, fags and commies in New York now envy him for having a lifeline to a world outside. Larry grew up hating this town, and the hate helped him learn who he was. Now he pities it and he's got to learn about himself all over again.

As I write this, they're playing a song on the radio that comes straight from Larry's world, 'Making Thunderbirds,' by Bob Seger, a hard rocker from Detroit. It has a slashing guitar attack, a driving beat, and it's sung with an intensity that doesn't come through on the radio very often these days. The narrator is a middle-aged, unemployed (or about-to-be-unemployed) auto worker, who pines for his youth. 'Back in '55 we were making Thunderbirds':

'We were making Thunderbirds, we were making Thunderbirds,  
They were long and low and sleek and fast and all you've ever  
heard. We were young and strong, we were making Thunder-  
birds.'

The car, a splendid new model of the fifties, is a symbol of the world we have lost: when a worker could identify himself, his youth and sexual energy, with the thing he produced; when 'the big line moved' and it was a thrill to be part of its momentum; when the young workers of Detroit could feel like the vanguard of America and America could feel like Number One in the world. The symbolic power rides on the music as much as the text; the beat and tempo and guitar echo the music of 1955, when Rock-and-Roll was young and the world was all before it. *Thunderbirds'* connects especially to Chuck Berry, whose 'Maybelline' defined a classic American myth—that the workingman could be really manly, manlier than his social superiors, in and through his car—and tried to create a music that would be the moral equivalent of that car.

Seger takes us back to those songs and those cars, to make us feel the depths of what we have lost. For the world those workers were building, or thought they were building, is gone with the wind; no longer young or strong or proud, no longer even working, they are junked, along with their old cars, along with Detroit—'maybe even along with America itself. The song's text seems to say 'NO FUTURE', but the music pulls against the text with desperate urgency. The narrator may well feel he's got nothing left; the singer-songwriter knows and shows that he's got more than he thinks. What he's got above all is the passion and depth and guts to rock and rage against the dying of the light.

It is a frozen Saturday afternoon just before Christmas. I am walking across Houston Street on Manhattan's Lower East Side, blinded by the low sun in my face. This is a poor neighbourhood, full of abandoned tenements, small workshops, lumberyards, auto supply and body shops, junkyards and storage dumps. Near the East River, gathering

around small bonfires, winos and junkies are almost the only people on the street; not even the kids are out, it's too cold to play. As I get further west, a few young families emerge—hispanic, white-bohemian, inter-racial—heading across town on weekend shopping expeditions.

On a particularly desolate block, between an abandoned factory and a gas station, I walk into a jarring scene. In front of a yard full of broken furniture, old refrigerators and sinks, up against a cyclone fence, ten figures are chained in a row. Up close, I see that they are sculpted, in plaster or papier-maché, but their proportions are eerily real. The figures are covered with plastic trash bags; the bags are slit or torn in places, and rags, orange peels, old newspapers, packaging for food, drink, diapers, appliances, are beginning to leak out. Although the faces are covered up, the figures are subtly detailed and differentiated, and amazingly lifelike, and it is dreadful to see them facing me just inches away, slumping over or caving in, pressing against their ropes as they rot.

What is this, anyway? It is a work of environmental art, created for this particular space and time, for this site and this neighbourhood and this public, by a young sculptor named David Finn who lives a few blocks away. He will dismantle and remove it in a few days, if it has not already decomposed, or if some lover or hater of art has not removed it first. It has special resonance for this neighbourhood and its people, whose fate it may symbolize. (One of its strongest undertones is a bitter meditation on the meaning of 'junk'.) I ask a couple of local derelicts who are hovering about what they think of it, and one shakes his head sadly and says, 'Somebody's got to pay. We know it.' But it has wider reverberations as well. We've met these figures before. Was it in El Salvador, or Lebanon, or, or . . . ? This piece fulfils brilliantly one of the Left's chief aims in the Vietnam era: *Bring the War Home!* Only which war is this, so close to home? The artist doesn't tell us; we've got to work it out for ourselves. But whatever we do with it, this work of art has put us, the spectators, into the picture, implicated us a lot more deeply than we may like. The figures will disappear from our street, but they won't be so easy to evict from our minds. They'll haunt us like ghosts, at least till we recognize them as *our* ghosts and deal with them face to face.

Another student comes by: Lena, 17 years old, built like Marilyn Horne. Lena grew up in her family's Puerto Rican *bodega*, the adored only girl in an overwhelmingly male household, and in their storefront Pentecostal church, where she sang solos at an early age. She says her existence was untroubled until she entered college, when her mind came to life and her world split open; Suddenly she was alive to poetry, philosophy, psychology, politics, to sexuality, romance, feminism, the peace movement, socialism. Impulses, insights, ideas, all came pouring out of her torrentially; at first her family thought she might be under a spell. Before long, however, for her ideas on abortion, sexuality, and equal rights for women, she was excommunicated from the church. After that, her family was put up against the wall by their fellow-believers, who were a large portion of their customers: how long were they going to tolerate a damned soul who wore the mark of the beast

in their house and in their store? Her family resisted the pressure, and bravely stood by her: they would die for her—but they couldn't even begin to understand her. In the midst of this crisis, her father was shot by robbers and almost killed. The family has had to pull together closer than ever around the store, and Lena may have to go on leave from school, at least for a few months, and work there full time. She would rather die than desert her family in an emergency. But she knows that when normal life returns, if it ever does, for their sake as well as her own, she's going to have to go. But go where? In the hispanic immigrant working-class world that is the only world she knows and loves—a world that gave her much of the strength she has, though it turned on her as soon as she tried to use it—the only alternative to the family is the gutter. There are plenty of deviants in that world, but few rebels, and very, very few intellectual rebel girls. Moreover, she knows that in many ways she's still only a kid, far more frail and vulnerable than she looks, just beginning to figure out what she wants from life. I try to tell her that her fight for liberty and autonomy has a long and honourable history, that she can find many kindred spirits and comrades in books, and many more all over the city and the country, probably closer to home than she thinks, fighting battles like her own, creating and sustaining institutions for mutual support. She believes me, but says she isn't ready to meet them yet: she's got to cross that lonesome valley by herself, got to get over, before she can join hands with anyone else.

Carolee Schneeman is a painter, sculptor, dancer, collagist, film-maker and performance artist in New York; she has been active and innovative in many realms since the heyday of the Judson Dance Group twenty years ago. She is best known for her 'body art' and performance pieces, which have shown her body, her sexuality and her inner life in daring and fruitful ways, transforming autobiography into iconography. There was a moment, near the end of the sixties, when her sort of radical imagination was chic; she is still as free a spirit as ever, but in the Reagan era it feels lonelier and more exposed out there than it used to be. In the spring of 1982 Schneeman began a series of sexy and intimate collages that would be called 'Domestic Souvenirs'. The work was going along smoothly when suddenly, that June, Israel invaded Lebanon, and, as she later described it, 'Lebanon invaded me.' Work she eventually did that summer and fall, and showed in New York a year later, looks radically different from anything she has done before. Within these collages, images of sexuality in an ambience of domestic tranquility and sweet communion are intercut with frightful Expressionist visions of the disasters of war. Schneeman's 'Lebanon' incorporates many of the images that she has been elaborating for years, but gives them darker and deeper meaning. There is plenty of naked flesh, as always, but now many of the arms, legs, breasts, etc., seem to be contorted in terror or twisted and maimed. Nakedness, once (and still) a symbol of sexual joy and energy and personal authenticity, now expresses human frailty and vulnerability—'Is man no more than this?'—as bodies sexually tense or post-coitally relaxed are mounted among bodies tensed in fright or relaxed in death. Blood, whose menstrual flow Schneeman once used to express both a woman's fertility and a self's inner depths, now suggests the blasting away of body

and soul alike. Diaphanous garments, earlier images of erotic play, now evoke shreds and shrouds. A central, obsessive image is a triangular tableau of a woman rushing forward while two men move with her and hold her from behind: reproduced in many different textures and tonalities, it suggests both a romantic sexual dream and a political nightmare of wounds, terror and hopeless flight. Throughout these works, the two modes of meaning interpenetrate and deepen each other. In the midst of our domestic bliss, their homes are being blown away. On the other hand, the maiming and murdering over there are so dreadful precisely because their victims are men and women whose bodies are made to twine around each other and whose imaginations are made for love, just like our own.

In Schneeman's 'Lebanon', politics invades the most intimate spaces of the self, envelops our bodies, thrusts into our dreams. From this intercourse, a terrible beauty is born. The artist started out to talk personally, not politically; she ended up showing that the political is personal, and that is why politics matters so much. Alas, her public doesn't seem to want to see what she has to show: this show has so far attracted no reviews and made no sales. Ironically, a fairly large public (for the art public) has been happy, over the years, to look into her most private spaces; but as soon as her vision opened outward and spilled over into public space, as soon as her art penetrated a political space that everybody shared, much of this public was quick to look away. One of the perennial romances of modern times is the fusion of personal with political life. We all dream of this, at least sometimes; but when it actually happens, as it happened to Schneeman last summer, it may be too much for most people to bear, too much even to look at, like looking directly into the sun. So just then—and probably just because—she has worked harder than ever to create dialogue, she is left talking to herself. Still, the works are there, and she and we can hope the dialogue will go on.

Every year or so I go back to the part of the Bronx where I was born. It's not an easy trip to make, though it's only about five miles northeast of where I live now. The South Bronx of my youth, a ghetto with fresh air and trees for second-generation immigrants, celebrated as an ultra-modern environment in the 1920s and 1930s, was written off as obsolete by capital in the 1960s. Abandoned by the banks, the insurance underwriters, the real estate industry, the federal government, and bulldozed and blasted by a superhighway through its heart, the Bronx wasted away fast. (I talk about this in the last chapter of *All that is Solid Melts into Air*; living through it is one of the things that led me to think about the ambiguities of modernity in the first place.) Through the 1970s, its primary industry was probably arson for profit; for awhile it seemed that the very word 'Bronx' had become a cultural symbol for urban blight and death. Every time I heard or read about the destruction of a building I had known, or saw it burn on the Local News, I felt like a piece of my flesh was being ripped away.

I've always turned the old corner with dread: What if, when I reach the apartment house where I grew up, there's nothing there? It wouldn't be surprising: so many of the buildings in these parts have been sealed

up or torn down; streets that were busy and noisy and too narrow for the crowds twenty years ago are as open and empty as deserts today. But it hasn't happened, at least not yet; the building looks surprisingly good, a little Art Deco jewel in the midst of devastation. A heroic superintendent and organized tenants have held it together; and its present landlord appears to have some interest in keeping it up rather than tearing it down. I feel a sense of metaphysical relief. As I explore further, I see that some of the buildings that were burnt-out hulks a few years ago have been, or are being, very nicely rehabbed today. It's very, very slow and fragile; under the Carter administration there was little money for rehabilitation, under Reagan there's even less, and private capital wrote off the Bronx more than twenty years ago. But it's happening, a little here, a little there, the beat and pulse of life beginning again.

I climb the steep hill on East 170th Street, our old shopping centre. The quarter-mile stretch alongside our block is utterly lifeless, but the next quarter-mile has been kept up and partially rehabbed, and although dirty and gritty, is bursting with life. The street is jammed with black and hispanic families—and now some Oriental ones as well (where do they come from? when did they get here? who can I ask?)—loading themselves up with food, clothes, appliances, fabrics, toys, and everything else they can carry away from the post-Christmas sales.

I board a bus heading south toward Manhattan. Just behind me, a massive black woman gets on, bent under numerous parcels; I give her my seat. Just behind her, her fifteen-or-so-year-old daughter undulates up the aisle, radiant, stunning in the skin-tight pink pants she has just bought. The mother won't look, buries her head in her shopping bags. They continue an argument that has clearly been going on since they left the store. The daughter says that, after all, she bought this with her own money that she made working; the mother replies that if this is all she can think of to buy, she isn't grown up enough to be trusted with her own money or to be out working. 'Come on, Mama,' the girl says, turning herself around and turning the heads of everybody in the bus, 'look at that pink, ain't it beautiful, won't it be nice for spring?' It's January, and spring is a long way off. The mother still won't look, but after awhile she lifts her eyes slowly, then shakes her head. 'With that ass,' she says, 'you'll never get out of high school without a baby. And I ain't taking care of no more babies. You're my last baby.' The girl squeezes her mother's arm: 'Don't worry, Mama. We're modern. We know how to take care of ourselves.' The mother sighs, and addresses her packages: 'Modern? Just you take care you don't bring me no modern babies.' Soon I get off, feeling as happy and whole as the girl in the bus. Life is rough in the South Bronx, but the people aren't giving up: modernity is alive and well.

### **The Loss of a Halo**

These are some of the people on my horizon. It's wider and more open than the one Perry Anderson sees, and it's crowded with human passion, intelligence, yearning, imagination, spiritual complexity and

depth. It's also crowded with oppression, misery, everyday brutality, and a threat of total annihilation. But the people in the crowd are using and stretching their vital powers, their vision and brains and guts, to face and fight the horrors; many of the things they do, just to get through the day and night, reveal what Baudelaire called 'the heroism of modern life'. The faces in the crowd today may be different from those in Baudelaire's age; but the forces that propel them haven't changed since modern times began.

Some of these people, in my book and in the vignettes above, are artists. They are caught up in the same chaos as the rest of us; they are special in their ability to give it expressive form, to light it up, to help us navigate and collect ourselves and find each other, so that we can survive and sometimes even thrive in the maelstrom's midst. These artists are like the poet in Baudelaire's prose poem, 'The Loss of a Halo':

My friend, you know how terrified I am of horses and vehicles? Well, just now as I was crossing the boulevard in a great hurry, splashing through the mud, in the midst of a moving chaos, with death galloping at me from every side, I made a sudden move, and my halo slipped off my head, and fell into the mire of the macadam. I was much too scared to pick it up. I thought it was better to lose my insignia than to get my bones broken. Besides, I said to myself, every cloud has a silver lining. Now I can walk around incognito, do low things, throw myself into every kind of filth, just like ordinary mortals. So here I am, just as you see me, just like yourself. . . .

For artists and writers today, as much as for Baudelaire, this loss of a halo can be a step in the liberation of art; the reduction of the modern artist to an ordinary mortal can open up new lifelines and force fields through which both artists and their public can grow.

I am grateful to Perry Anderson for remembering *The Politics of Authenticity*, and for pointing out the continuities between that work and what I'm doing now. Then as now, I've been trying to develop a theoretical vision of the unifying forces in modern life. I still believe that it's possible for modern men and women who share the desire to 'be themselves' to come together, first to fight against the forms of class, sexual and racial oppression that force everyone's identity into rigid moulds and keep anyone's self from unfolding; and next, to create Marx's 'association in which the free development of each is the condition for the free development of all.' Nevertheless, *All that is Solid*, and what I've written here, have a much thicker density and a richer atmosphere than my earlier work. This is because I've tried increasingly to situate my exploration of the modern self within the social contexts in which all modern selves come to be. I'm writing more about the environments and public spaces that are available to modern people, and the ones that they create, and the ways they act and interact in these spaces in the attempt to make themselves at home. I'm emphasizing those modes of modernism that seek to take over or to remake public space, to appropriate and transform it in the name of the people who are its public. This is why so much of *All that is*

*Solid* is taken up with public struggles and encounters, dialogues and confrontations in the streets; and why I've come to see the street and the demonstration as primary symbols of modern life.

Another reason that I've written so much about ordinary people and everyday life in the street, in the context of this controversy, is that Anderson's vision is so remote from them. He only has eyes for world-historical Revolutions in politics and world-class Masterpieces in culture; he stakes out his claim on heights of metaphysical perfection, and won't deign to notice anything less. This would be all right, I guess, except that he's so clearly miserable over the lack of company up there. It might be more fruitful if, instead of demanding whether modernity can still produce masterpieces and revolutions, we were to ask whether it can generate sources and spaces of meaning, of freedom, dignity, beauty, joy, solidarity. Then we would have to confront the messy actuality in which modern men and women and children live. The air might be less pure, but the atmosphere would be a lot more nourishing; we would find, in Gertrude Stein's phrase, a lot more *there* there. Who knows—it's impossible to know in advance—we might even find some masterpieces or revolutions in the making.

This isn't Anderson's problem alone. I think it's an occupational hazard for intellectuals, regardless of their politics, to lose touch with the stuff and flow of everyday life. But this is a special problem for intellectuals on the Left, because we, among all political movements, take special pride in noticing people, respecting them, listening to their voices, caring about their needs, bringing them together, fighting for their freedom and happiness. (This is how we differ—or try to differ—from the world's assorted ruling classes and their ideologues, who treat the people they rule as animals or machines or numbers or pieces on a chessboard, or who ignore their existence completely, or who dominate them all by playing them against each other, teaching them that they can be free and happy only at each other's expense.) Intellectuals can make a special contribution to this ongoing project. If our years of study have taught us anything, we should be able to reach out further, to look and listen more closely, to see and feel beneath surfaces, to make comparisons over a wider range of space and time, to grasp hidden patterns and forces and connections, in order to show people who look and speak and think and feel differently from each other—who are oblivious to each other, or fearful of each other—that they have more in common than they think. We can contribute visions and ideas that will give people a shock of recognition, recognition of themselves and each other, that will bring their lives together. That is what we can do for solidarity and class-consciousness. But we can't do it, we can't generate ideas that will bind people's lives together, if we lose contact with what those lives are like. Unless we know how to recognize people, as they look and feel and experience the world, we'll never be able to help them recognize themselves or change the world. Reading *Capital* won't help us if we don't also know how to read the signs in the street.