

# **Manifest Politics:**

**Adorno's Commitment and Aesthetics in Contemporary Practices**

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It is certainly a clichéd notion that great art facilitates an experience of losing oneself. Forty years ago, at the time of Theodor Adorno's exploration of this notion in *Aesthetic Theory*, however, it may not have been a sentiment as pervasively expressed as it is today.<sup>1</sup> As is the case with most clichés that wheedle their way into popular culture, there is justifiable veracity to this statement due to its resonance in lived experience.<sup>2</sup> The irony that phrases such as 'lose yourself in a good book' or 'lose yourself in the music' pervade the commodified popular culture spurned by Adorno is evident in the revelation that, in Adorno's view, the subject-object relationship found in commodity masquerading as art in the "lower arts" reverses the subject-object relationship found in what he views as legitimate art. The subject expects to 'get something' from commodity whereas art absorbs the subject and creates an "aesthetic sublimation". In support of this, Adorno cites Hegel, who "named this comportment freedom to the object. He thus paid homage to the subject that becomes subject in spiritual experience through self-relinquishment, the opposite of the philistine demand that the artwork give him something."<sup>3</sup> Although Adorno's definition of art is quite prescriptive in that the boundaries between art and commodity that he defines are strict and impermeable, his views on aesthetics provide a solid base for his discussion of politics and art.<sup>4</sup> It is evident that, while experiences of losing oneself may not be an exclusive criterion in separating artwork from commodity, this relationship is an important consideration in unlocking what, of the glut of artwork being made today, has the capacity to be socially and politically compelling. One might suppose, in light of Adorno's advocacy of "extinguishing" oneself in art, that his views on aesthetics would lean toward a formalist sensibility. However, in his essay "Commitment", Adorno makes a case against "committed" works, which demand a change of attitude rather than compel it. This demanding stance seems to arise from the combination of a single-minded agenda taken up by the artist (or a "message") and, often, a format which clearly presents this "message" as true, right, moral, or just although it may be, at best, arguable or, at worst, manipulative or

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<sup>1</sup> Theodor W. Adorno, *Aesthetic Theory*, 1970, ed. Gretel Adorno and Rolf Tiedemann, trans., ed. Robert Hullot-Kentor (London: Continuum, 2004) 23.

<sup>2</sup> The term "lived experience" here is used in the same function as Adorno utilises the term "empirical reality". Adorno, *Aesthetic Theory* 6.

<sup>3</sup> Adorno, *Aesthetic Theory* 22-23.

<sup>4</sup> See: Theodor W. Adorno, "Commitment", *Aesthetics and Politics*, trans. Francis McDonagh. (London: Verso, 2007) 177-195.

misleading (as in propaganda). The demanding work leaves no room for debate and no doubt as to “what it’s saying”. On the other hand, compelling artwork may have many political and social implications which spring off in various directions, all of which the artist has created, though perhaps not premeditated, through the form the work takes. This leads to a more nuanced change of attitude which arises in response or reaction to contemplation of the work. Compelling works “show” through their form rather than “tell” a particular agenda, leaving room for the viewer to react, interact, and participate in the meanings created by the work. While Adorno argues against “committed” art, he simultaneously argues against “art for arts sake” which, through its denial of connection to reality creates an ideology of this denial.<sup>5</sup> Adorno’s proposed optimal place for art between these two poles presents an illustrative and incredibly relevant point of departure for analysis of art with political connotations today. Through this lens, “committed” art not only fails in regards to Adorno’s view that it dissolves into impotence or propaganda but that, through this dissolution, in today’s jaded hypercapitalist post-postmodernist times, it is happily gobbled up as commodity and easily absorbed into Adorno’s much deprecated “culture industry”. Examining three artists/collectives with implications of the political, I will argue that seen through Adorno’s aesthetic criteria, including his views on art and commodity, Bob and Roberta Smith uselessly beats the dead horse of commodity and pretentiousness within the art world, MediaShed/Mongrel are demandingly “committed” dissolving potentially powerful materials into propaganda, and Katie Paterson seems to hit the mark of utilising form/materials to subtly connect to the reality of the world today, unleashing a whole host of compelling connotations.<sup>6</sup>

The term ‘form’ calls to mind the privileging of medium and abstraction in Modernist art theory that culminated in the ideological reign of Clement Greenberg’s notions of purist abstraction.<sup>7</sup> While both Adorno and Greenberg’s discussions around form have their roots in leftist politics, Adorno’s argument against formalism and the possibility of autonomy within art sets his ideas

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<sup>5</sup> Adorno, *Aesthetics and Politics* 191.

<sup>6</sup> Bob and Roberta Smith is the alias for the work of the artist Patrick Brill (formerly) and will be referred to as a singular artist

<sup>7</sup> Stephen C. Foster, “Clement Greenberg: Formalism in the 40s and 50s,” *Art Journal* 35:1 (1975): 22.

apart from Greenberg. The presence of this differentiation, as seen from a contemporary point of view, provides an opportunity for reinterpretation of Adorno's use of the term 'form'. In *Aesthetic Theory*, Adorno writes:

It is easy to imagine that art's autonomous realm has nothing in common with the external world other than borrowed elements that have entered into a fully changed context.... Even the most sublime artwork takes up a determinate attitude to empirical reality by stepping outside of the constraining spell it casts, not once and for all, but rather ever and again, concretely, unconsciously polemical toward this spell at each historical moment... It is by virtue of this relation to the empirical that artworks recuperate, neutralized, what once was literally and directly experienced in life and what was expelled by spirit... The unsolved antagonisms of reality return in artworks as imminent problems of form. This, not the insertion of objective elements, defines the relation of art to society <sup>8</sup>

While Adorno's notion of 'form' may have been limited to the media he was familiar with during his lifetime, one could insert the term 'manifestation' in place of the problematic term 'form' for contemporary art practice, especially regarding usage of newer media such as the internet, digital video, computer programming, etc. When applying 'how the work was conceived' or 'how the work was manifested' in place of Adorno's 'form', it becomes clear that form provides a deeper and more complex resonance with empirical reality than simply spelling out a political agenda does, shutting out any directly perceived truth content by expressing a single, determinate point of view. In his essay "Commitment", Adorno outlines this distinction:

As eminently constructed and produced objects, works of art, including literary ones, point to a practice from which they abstain: the creation of a just life. This mediation is not a compromise between commitment and autonomy, nor a sort of mixture of advanced formal elements with an intellectual content inspired by genuinely or supposedly progressive politics. The content of works of art is never the amount of intellect pumped into them: if anything, it is the opposite.<sup>9</sup>

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<sup>8</sup> Adorno, *Aesthetic Theory* 6-7.

<sup>9</sup> Adorno, *Aesthetics and Politics* 194.

Putting to one side Adorno's view that works of art point to "the creation of a just life," the mediation Adorno describes can be similarly applied to *anything* that art may point to in lived experience. This complex gesture within the manifestation of the work can only be achieved when art makes no claim to autonomy within its form and when it abstains from ramming a political agenda down the viewer's throat.

### **Bob and Roberta Smith**

The artist Bob and Roberta Smith has build a "committed" body of work which seems to oscillate between earnestly antagonistic attacks on self-indulgence and superficiality in art and a kind of Warholian embrace and willing assimilation into the spectacle of commodity. In an interview in his catalogue *Make Your Own Damn Art*, Smith says:

I fantasize about smashing the art world up and starting again. One of the things that really annoys me about the art world, which is also the world in general – and I'm using the art world as a foil for this – is a kind of class war thing. I think middle class artists should be locked up for a short period, maybe six months.<sup>10</sup>

It is obvious in these comments and the art he makes that he places importance on a prominent political message within his work. In *Art Amnesty* [Illus. 1] which was staged at the Deptford X festival and elsewhere, Smith invited artists to decommission their art materials and sign a contract vowing never to make art again. He uses slogans such as "ARTISTS RUIN IT FOR EVERYONE" in gleeful provocation, seemingly under the auspices of garnering media attention (press clippings abound in the *Make Your Own Damn Art* catalogue) and inciting the indignation of fellow artists (anecdotes of which he also relates in the catalogue).<sup>11</sup> Smith's purposefully puerile text pieces, such as *Watteau Is A Shyster* [Illus. 2] and *Chuck Close Is Crap*, are simplistic negations which suggest that the artist seems to relish inciting controversy rather than affecting any attitudinal change. His political agenda is further confused by Smith's ambivalence about whether his work is part of a lineage of anti-art, Marxist, anti-capitalist, or anti-consumer artwork

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<sup>10</sup> Bob and Roberta Smith, *Make Your Own Damn Art* (London: Black Dog Publishing Limited, 2005) 25.

<sup>11</sup> Smith, *Make Your Own Damn Art* 78.

or part of the consumer spectacle itself. Smith states, “Art is a branch of the entertainment industry. Artists try to dress in Adorno cloaks to shun crowd pleasing, but lots of art is simply corporate wallpaper. You could call me an old Marxist, but certainly the Art Market is just super duper rich people expressing themselves.”<sup>12</sup> Additionally, referencing the Situationist International, Smith seems to deride the trendiness of Guy Debord and the hypocrisy of young artists without really addressing where his work sits in relation to art world hypocrisy, bearing in mind that he seems comfortable relegating art, including his own, to a branch of the entertainment industry:

That is an interesting thing about the Situationists and the Goldsmiths College thing, where lots of artists grabbed hold of Guy Debord and read all his stuff – he’s the king of aphorisms – and they see he’s always attacking the spectacle of this wonderful moment and saying we ought to be thinking about the ‘walk home’. But actually the artists are all sayings, ‘We want flashy art, groovy private views and success’, which is all about the kinds of things Debord’s attacking.

Although the “committed” nature of the work is, according to Adorno, enough to render it powerless in the political arena, Smith’s obvious lack of clarity of political agenda further discredits any claims to political relevance. As Adorno states, “Bad politics becomes bad art, and vice-versa,” and, as much as Smith revels in or even purposely cultivates an ambivalent political stance, it does not translate into work capable of compelling a change of attitude in the viewer.<sup>13</sup> While wavering between a political stance and a perhaps ambivalent political stance, Smith demonstrates a lack of clarity which shuts the viewer out of the work and prohibits it from compelling a reaction.

Not only does Smith’s “committed” work demand that its viewer take up its point of view but, rather than going against the grain of commodity in the hopes that artwork can ‘extinguish’ the subject or, through the form it takes, express truth in relation to today’s empirical reality, Smith sets his sights on critiquing the art world and its shallow, self-centered, and elitist nature (a

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<sup>12</sup> Smith, *Make Your Own Damn Art* 70.

<sup>13</sup> Adorno, *Aesthetic and Politics* 187.

revelation which is more truism than truth). Smith merely proclaims his views without offering any substantial alternative or demonstrating through his work the power or transcendence of art which he, self-admittedly, subscribes to: “Talking about doing good and not doing good is a diversion of mine, so as not to have to talk about how making art is actually liberating. I believe that. It’s embarrassingly evangelical, but I do think art is really powerful and transcendent...”<sup>14</sup> If Bob and Roberta Smith feels that “art has a value beyond commerce,” as a recent show’s press release states, this value is not evident in Smith’s work, which is an endless regurgitation of trite outrage which demands a change of attitude from the viewer yet has little or no effect, as evidenced by its helplessness to avoid its own commodification and integration into the mechanics of the Art Market, which it depends upon for survival and visibility.<sup>15</sup> Although the instigating political views are mostly genuine on Smith’s part, the work’s fatal flaw – its obvious impotence in the arena of attitudinal change – is not lost on Smith, he contradicts himself by arguing that “the only art worth doing is political art” while admitting that “by constructing a socially engaged art you’re not actually helping.” Rather confusingly, he states:

It negates real politics because it substitutes hand wringing and accusation for activity....  
The absolutist mindset in any political situation where you really believe in your cause and ram it down people’s throats – there is something admirable about that, yes, but there’s also something blinkered in ignoring the wider picture. You need people like that because in the end they’re the ones who are energized to put ideals into action. But the problem with this for art is that art doesn’t really have any agency in that kind of world.

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<sup>14</sup> Smith, *Make Your Own Damn Art* 127

<sup>15</sup> In *Art U Need*, Smith relates how a painting he made about failure has been sold by Hales Gallery, a commercial gallery he is represented by, and bemoans his financial situation (11). He also relates his acceptance of his role as lead artist for the Commissions East project in the Thames Gateway, stating he doesn’t quite know what a lead artist does and implying his acceptance was heavily influenced by the fact that he is offered a sum of money close to his previous year’s earning (12). This tongue in cheek, mock-astonished ‘everyman’ attitude disguises just how much these two events integrate Smith into the Art Market and the art world. *Art U Need* specifically starts from the premise that “*Art U Need* is going to give a voice to people...” (56) – Bob and Roberta Smith. *Art U Need: My Part In The Public Art Revolution* (London: Black Dog Publishing Limited, 2007).

The thought of visiting an art show in the West and coming away thinking, 'Wow, that really addressed some issues' is stupid.<sup>16</sup>

Smith's art, as evidenced by his own statements, is particularly politically irrelevant precisely because of its forcefully "committed" stance. In this case, it seems that the louder and brasher the demands, the more the possibility of affecting political change disintegrates, effectively rendering the critique hollow.

### **Mongrel/MediaShed**

In the past few years, there has been an explosion of artists, filmmakers, actors, activists and hackers devising creative uses of the vast amount of CCTV video footage being shot by Britain's 4.2 million security cameras as well as cameras in other heavily surveilled parts of the world. Many CCTV cameras operate wirelessly, therefore people engaged in "video sniffing" can intercept these signals to watch and even record the video for their own purposes.<sup>17</sup> The legality of this practice is questionable, however, and, as an alternative way to acquire CCTV footage for personal use, The Data Protection Act (DPA) 1998 mandates that anyone caught on CCTV footage is legally entitled to obtain a copy of that footage and many practitioners are exercising this right in the construction of their CCTV videos.<sup>18</sup> The art collective Mongrel and, specifically, their offshoot organisation MediaShed, are active in video sniffing artistic practices. MediaShed's mission statement is that they are "the first 'free-media' space to open in the east of England. It's a place where members can come hang out, learn, propose some training, create and propose new projects using free-media or show things they have made on one of our screening nights. The MediaShed is designed to be as open and accessible as possible, welcoming all."<sup>19</sup> Mongrel/MediaShed is an interesting example of an artist collective acting as facilitator of art-making by "non-artists" in order to bring a greater sense of democracy and freedom to the art world, attempting to avoid (and subvert) the art market while hanging out on the fringes of the art

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<sup>16</sup> Smith, *Make Your Own Damn Art* 181-3.

<sup>17</sup> Christopher Werth, "To Watch the Watchers," *Newsweek* October 20, 2008: E4.

<sup>18</sup> Regine, "Manifesto for CCTV filmmakers," *We Make Money Not Art*. 11 Sept. 2007. 1 May 2009. <<http://www.we-make-money-not-art.com/archives/2007/09/a-uk-first-impl.php>>.

<sup>19</sup> "about", *MediaShed*. 7 Mar. 2006. 1 May 2009. <<http://mediashed.org/about>>.



world. The use of CCTV as a medium is loaded with enough political connotations in and of itself that the content of the work itself need not even have a “message”. In many ways, this media holds true to McLuhan’s famous quote “the medium is the message” in that, the connotations of the medium overpower the content of the work itself.<sup>20</sup> This does not mean that the manifestation of CCTV video and the content of what is produced via it is irrelevant, but, due to the inherent political connotations of CCTV, the content itself need not be a reiteration of these politics – and therefore a conceptual redundancy – but rather something which gestures towards the power of the medium without directly rehearsing the politics already contained simply in its usage. It is within this that the “committed” works stand out in their inefficacy against more subtle and powerful usage of CCTV.

Two projects MediaShed has orchestrated, *the commercial* (2006) and *minä olen* (2006), are examples of “committed” works that are much less potent than other work utilising the same medium. In *the commercial* [Illus. 3], which was basically a commercial for MediaShed itself, video sniffing was used by “young people from the local YMCA and others” to collect the footage from various CCTV cameras of shops in the area where they held up signs which read ‘I don’t pay’, ‘Won’t pay’, ‘Don’t Pay’, ‘Why pay?’ etc, accompanied by a electronic instrumental backing track.<sup>21</sup> Another very similar project, *minä olen* (‘I am’ in Finnish), students in the immigrant class at a school in the town of Kokkola, Finland held up signs both in their own languages and Finnish which said things like ‘I can not use my mother tongue’, ‘I am not’, ‘Kokkola doesn’t know me’, ‘My name is Monika’, ‘My name is Rezan’, etc.<sup>22</sup> While the manifestation of the videos – or their “form” – could have potentially spoken very powerfully, its multivalent potential was shouted down by the demands of a “committed” collective which ultimately chose to push an agenda which was unmistakable and without nuance. In regards to *minä olen*, MediaShed states:

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<sup>20</sup> Mark Federman, “What is the Meaning of the Medium is the Message?” 23 July 2004. 1 May 2009. <[http://individual.utoronto.ca/markfederman/article\\_mediumisthemessage.htm](http://individual.utoronto.ca/markfederman/article_mediumisthemessage.htm)>.

<sup>21</sup> “the commercial,” *MediaShed*. 6 Nov. 2006. 1 May 2009. <<http://mediashed.org/videosniffincom>>.

<sup>22</sup> “minä olen,” *MediaShed*. 6 Nov. 2006. 1 May 2009. <<http://mediashed.org/node/3901>>.

The young people, some of whom had only been in the country a matter of weeks, positively enjoyed the opportunity to invade 'government' buildings and felt an increased confidence within their surroundings. Additionally the film was used to encourage local ministers to continue to provide regular classes in the young peoples' own language and culture.<sup>23</sup>

In regards to *the commercial*, MediaShed's website states:

These kinds of projects allow people to see how a common technology that is normally used for the surveillance of the same young people can be repurposed by them for creative activities. The project created great interest from the local council and local businesses who positively engaged with the project.<sup>24</sup>

Given that both projects utilise very similar tactics in their engagement of young people in creative activities for political ends, the impact of the sign-holding seems to fall short in a similar way to Bob and Roberta Smith's sign-making. Merely proclaiming a political view in this way leads one to wonder, despite MediaShed's claims to vague community impact, how much projects like this actually affect any sort of positive change in either the young people or the community.

An example of a far more nuanced work in CCTV footage is Manu Luksch's *FACELESS* [Illus. 5] which plays on the legal mandate that, although anyone is entitled to obtain CCTV footage taken of themselves, they must black out the faces of others if they want to show or publish the footage. The film is set in a dystopian future where the only person with a face is the artist herself. Although this film has very direct political connotations, its use of a minor legal property of using CCTV footage creates a very multilayered and poetic video suggesting a whole range of readings – including anonymity and displacement in urban environments, technological facilitation of voyeurism, and security/freedom in relation to global terrorist threats – which all stem from the manifestation of the work and utilisation of the medium's limitations rather than any overt demands.<sup>25</sup>

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<sup>23</sup> "minä olen," *MediaShed*. 6 Nov. 2006. 1 May 2009. <<http://mediashed.org/node/3901>>.

<sup>24</sup> "the commercial," *MediaShed*. 6 Nov. 2006. 1 May 2009. <<http://mediashed.org/videosniffincom>>.

<sup>25</sup> "Faceless the movie," *AmbientTV.net*. 1 May 2009. <<http://www.ambienttv.net/content/?q=facelessthemovie>>

## Katie Paterson

Despite Adorno's fear that art as he defined it was dying out in favour of mere commodity, some artists today do succeed in simultaneously avoiding making demanding "committed" work as well as avoiding making formalist work or "art for arts sake" in favour of something more compelling and resonant. One such artist is Katie Paterson, whose work *Vatnajökull (the sound of)* [Illus. 6] provides a good example of art which communicates through the form it takes and therefore has a greater resonance with reality and the issues which face contemporary life. The piece was present in the gallery only through a neon light with a phone number which provided a direct link to the Vatnajökull glacier in Iceland. Callers could hear the sounds of the dying glacier melting when they phoned up to the number. Paterson has been called an "eco-artist" by the press, and has garnered quite a lot of attention regarding the environmental implications of her work.<sup>26</sup> It's quite telling that, in an interview with *The Independent*, Paterson said, "I got invited to talk at environmental events, but that wasn't my main intention."<sup>27</sup> Although it was not a direct intention in the work or an outward proclamation pontificated from the artist, the resonance with empirical reality, including the environmental reality of the changes occurring on our planet, is multi-faceted and far-reaching. In fact, this subtle resonance, communicated via the manifestation or form of the work, allows for this range of interpretations. As Adorno notes in *Aesthetic Theory*, "Art is related to its other as is a magnet to a field of iron filings."<sup>28</sup> Not only is Paterson's piece, intentionally or not, related to its other in this way, it is truly absorbing in its execution. Through enabling gallery visitors to phone up the glacier, Paterson allows for an interaction that is not self-gratifying or self-indulgent for the participant but rather compulsive in its reticence to give too much away. It is an abstract gesture towards the physical reality of the melting ice, fittingly

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<sup>26</sup> Jessica Lack, "Exhibition Preview: Contemporary Eye/WOKmedia, Chichester," *Guardian Online*. 25 Apr. 2009. 1 May 2009.  
<<http://www.guardian.co.uk/artanddesign/2009/apr/25/contemporary-eye-wokmedia-chichester>>.

<sup>27</sup> Mike Higgins, "Close-up: Katie Paterson," *Independent*. 12 October 2008. 1 May 2009.  
<<http://www.independent.co.uk/arts-entertainment/art/features/closeup-katie-paterson-958239.html>>.

<sup>28</sup> Adorno, *Aesthetic Theory* 8.

mediated by modern technology so that anyone around the world could similarly experience and imagine this phenomenon.

### **Resistance Through Form**

Although the nature of art-making has changed quite a lot since Adorno's writings on commitment and aesthetics, there is still room for their application in discussion of contemporary art practice.

One might say that the resistance of art against commodification is no longer possible and that all works of art rely on capitalist systems for their conception, existence and survival. While it may be true that no work of art today can fully and purely separate itself from its commodification in some form, works such as those by Katie Paterson and Manu Luksch demonstrate that there is still room for works which resist through their form terminating in mere commodity as well as falling into impotency through commitment.

## ILLUSTRATIONS

Illus. 1

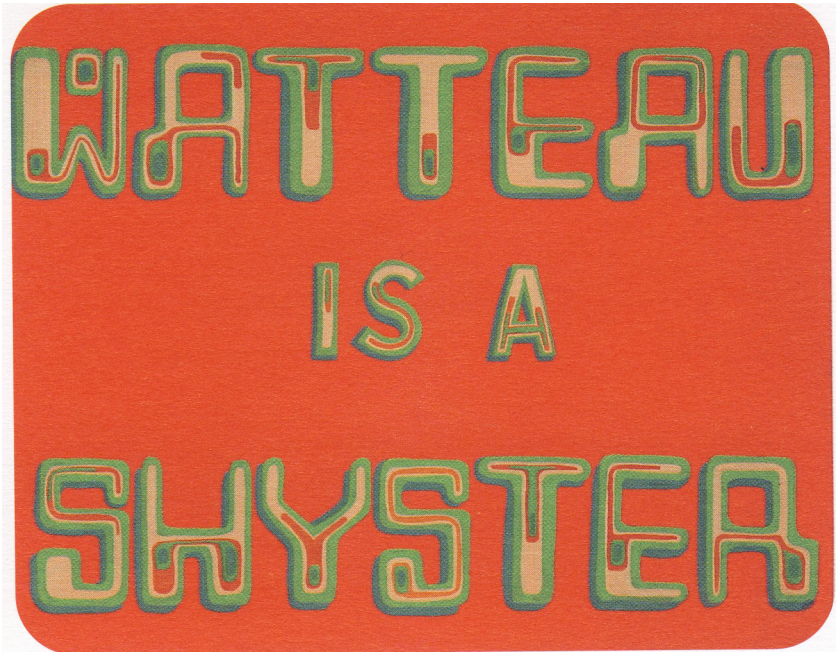


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(1,2) Smith, Bob and Roberta. *Make Your Own Damn Art*. London: Black Dog Publishing Limited, 2005.

(3) May 1 2009. <http://www.contempart.org.uk/media/uploads/2008/11/321/19-bobrobertasmitheconomist1-jpg.jpg>

Illus. 2



Source:  
Smith, Bob and Roberta. *Make Your Own Damn Art*. London: Black Dog Publishing Limited, 2005.

Illus. 3



Source: May 1 2009. [http://mediashed.org/files/sniffin/VidSniff%20\(0-00-23-23\).jpg](http://mediashed.org/files/sniffin/VidSniff%20(0-00-23-23).jpg)

Illus. 4



Source: May 1 2009. <http://mediashed.org/node/3901>



Illus. 5



Source: May 1 2009. <http://www.we-make-money-not-art.com/archives/2007/09/a-uk-first-impl.php>

Illus. 6



Source: May 1 2009. [http://images.artnet.com/artwork\\_images\\_424243398\\_356273\\_katie-paterson.jpg](http://images.artnet.com/artwork_images_424243398_356273_katie-paterson.jpg)

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