

CONDÉ AND BEVERIDGE: CLASS WORKS

Edited by Bruce Barber



The Press of the Nova Scotia College
of Art and Design

Published in association with the
Agnes Etherington Art Centre



The Press of the Nova Scotia College of Art and Design
5163 Duke Street
Halifax Nova Scotia Canada B3J 3J6

Published in association with the Agnes Etherington Art Centre
Queen's University
Kingston Ontario Canada K7L 3N6

The Agnes Etherington Art Centre gratefully acknowledges the support of The Canada Council for the Arts, the Ontario Arts Council, the City of Kingston Arts Fund, and the Kingston Arts Council.

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Editorial Director: Susan McEachern
Manager: Christopher McFarlane
Graphic Design: Co. & Co.
Printed and bound in Canada

Available through D.A.P./ Distributed Art Publishers
155 Sixth Avenue, 2nd Floor, New York, N.Y. 10013
Tel (212) 627-1999 Fax (212) 627-9484

Library and Archives Canada Cataloguing in Publication
PENDING...

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...THE RED GUARDS COME AND GO, TALKING OF MICHELANGELO

Allan Sekula

1.

Carole Condé and Karl Beveridge and I did not meet until 1976, more or less a generation ago. We met through mutual friendship with the Australian Conceptual artist Ian Burn, in the tempestuous teapot of one segment of the New York art-world left of that period. The New York branch of Art & Language was splitting into two warring factions. Suffice it to say that Joseph Kosuth and Sarah Charlesworth and their acolytes were on the proverbial “other side.” A strategic retreat was in the works. Ian and his wife, Avril, were planning to return to Sydney after more than ten years living on the Bowery, where they shared a divided loft with Mel Ramsden, who was planning to return with his wife and son to England. Carole and Karl were beginning to plan a similar return to their native Toronto from their space on East First Street. This collective but dispersed exodus, this shared renunciation of the centre of the art world, could easily be taken as the starting point for a novel.

The consensus was that the New York art scene was impossible, opportunistic, impacted, clownish in its rituals of affiliation and opposition. We all talked a lot about imperialism, and of New York as the fiscally challenged urban centre of the imperialist cultural project, which had just taken a drubbing in Viet Nam. Talking to these Canadians and Australians, I began to discover the shared mythologies of what the Scottish historian V.G. Kiernan referred to as the “white settler states.” I remember discussing Samir Amin’s *Imperialism and Unequal Development* (1977) and Harry Braverman’s *Labor and Monopoly Capital* (1974) over endless cups of milky tea at Ian’s place. These are books that are unlikely to be read today, even if they have a lot to say about the origins of a now truly global system of scientifically managed production: “bloody Taylorism” on a world scale, to which today even Viet Nam has volunteered a new generation of labouring bodies.

One anecdote gives a small feel for that time, in that neigh-

borhood, which was both local and cosmopolitan, and still a long way from the bubble-bloated, luxury-goods demand-centre lower Manhattan of today. The French Conceptual artist Bernard Venet, having just flown in from Paris, was visiting Mel Ramsden. “These will work in the subway,” he said, handing me a stack of ten-centime coins. An hour or so later, I rushed out to catch the train at Grand Central, running late for a lecture in Rhode Island that promised to pay me a slice of my four-figure annual income. As I pushed against a suddenly jammed turnstile at Lafayette Street, I felt two oversize hands clamp onto my shoulders, yanking me back into a utility closet next to the toll booth, shared by a frightened Puerto Rican teenager, whose fare-reduction method had been more gymnastic than mine. One of two big Irish plainclothesmen scrutinized the coin fished from the slot: “We seem to be getting a lot of these around here.” Were a scene like this to be filmed today, it would no doubt have to be shot in Toronto, or, given the falling US dollar, in my inner-city neighborhood in Los Angeles.

But another anecdote from that time brings me closer to the challenge posed by the art that Carole Condé and Karl Beveridge would develop once they left New York for Toronto. Two years earlier, aged twenty-three, I had moved to the Lower East Side from California, a first sojourn that lasted less than a year. I was writing for *Artforum*, whose offices were on Madison Avenue at the time, not far from the Whitney Museum, allowing me to visit both that museum and cross over to the Modern and the public library on my trips uptown on the IRT, which rattled dangerously, as if every trip was a scene from *The Taking of Pelham One Two Three*, a movie I had relished at the Saint Mark’s Cinema even as ushers badgered snoozing junkies with their flashlights. It was warm in the theater, which is more than could be said



Robert Koehler (1850-1917), *The Strike*, 1886. Oil on canvas, 184.47 × 281.31 cm. Collection: Deutsches Historisches Museum, Berlin

for many of the apartments in the neighborhood.

One rainy November afternoon, I visited *The Painter's America*, Patricia Hill's Whitney exhibition of nineteenth-century American "pictures of everyday life," which ranged from early genre painting to Impressionism.¹ I remember well two distinguished gentlemen in their seventies, denizens of the Upper East Side, sitting together on a gallery bench among the Sargents, Cassats, and Whistlers, chatting about their investment portfolios, rather as if the museum were their private club. Their exchange, worthy of Brecht, impressed me greatly, being so unlike anything I had encountered at the Los Angeles County Museum of Art with its crowds of schoolchildren. Only later did I discover, thanks to Martha Rosler, that the Brooklyn Museum had a Nathan's Hot Dogs in its basement, and nearly as many visiting schoolchildren. I wanted to make a picture of these elderly friends, so comfortable in an environment that was so profoundly theirs, but my cheap rangefinder camera had been stolen a few days before, perhaps by one of the Saint Mark's junkies in a more active and desperate mood. I eavesdropped for a while, then walked on to the next gallery and encountered there a large painting, perhaps the largest in the exhibition.

An arresting painting it was: Robert Koehler's *The Strike* (1886), which had been rescued from Minnesota obscurity by the Marxist literary historian Lee Baxandall. The painting shares a time of becoming with Winslow Homer's paintings of the fishermen of the Grand Banks, with Constantine Meunier's sculptures of Belgian miners and metal workers, with a post-Courbet realism depicting the world of a proletariat that was emerging as an historical agent in its own right, a class seen as existing not merely "in itself," but "for itself."

Koehler's painting is unusual in that it depicts, like Courbet's *Funeral at Ornans*, a moment of defiance, although it does so in more exaggerated, theatrical terms. Here, class

struggle is not incipient but acute, exploding upon the scene. Workers, having dropped their tools in the factory sheds in the background, stride downhill at different paces, men only coming into formation as a class, having abandoned the organized productive rhythm of the factory, but not yet fused into a self-acting group. One worker is posed momentarily as leader of this assembly-in-becoming, gesturing backwards as if bearing witness to the grievance on the factory floor, the reason for this collective exodus, this dropping of tools. The group-that-is-not-yet-a-group confronts a solitary top-hatted capitalist and his frightened young clerk on steps flanking the neoclassical portico of the brick company offices. A woman with two children tenses in the foreground, to the side of the headquarters, as one worker reaches for a stone, Paleolithic substitute for the tools that have been dropped. And here, of course, a sophisticated viewer of liberal or even social democratic persuasion might say, "how primitive," and indeed they would be right in a subjective sense, for in that sense violence is always primitive. Indeed, one of the two women who mingle with the men appears to be appealing for caution or restraint. The other may well be urging her reluctant husband or brother to join his comrades. The "objective" violence of the militia and hired police has not yet been dispatched, and so the struggle seems, for the moment, to be weighted on the side of the workers.

The two gentlemen amble in from the adjoining gallery. They would have been born around 1900, completing their studies at Harvard or Princeton or Yale, just at the end of the First World War, entering business life during the early 1920s, a decade of acute reaction, of the Palmer Raids and the American System of Manufacturing in which class struggle was weighted much the other way, much as it has been over the last thirty years in the United States. In the thirties, they would almost certainly have despised Roosevelt; and if they had they lived into the eighties, they would have welcomed Reagan's reversal of Roosevelt. And it could be one of their fathers or uncles confronting the proletarian mob in that scene painted in the year of Haymarket. The unflinching capitalist could even be taken for the hero of the scene, the underdog man of enterprise and initiative facing the truculent collectivist menace, standing up to all that is backward, all that must be moulded into obedient, productive energy. But this recuperation, worthy perhaps of Allan Pinkerton, Ivy Lee, Ayn Rand, or any number of today's art history graduate students and junior professors looking to make a mark, is unavailable on that cold November afternoon thirty-some years ago. Instead, one of two gentlemen turns to the other as they glance quickly

at the painting, without breaking their leisurely stroll toward the Whitney elevators, uttering a mildly ironic variation of an indignant snort: "Working-class art!" In other words: an oxymoron, no more or less remarkable than a dancing pig.

Koehler based his painting on reports of the 1877 Pittsburg strike, the most violent of the pitched battles that swept American railway towns in the severe depression that followed the Panic of 1873. He himself was a German immigrant "bird-of-passage," born to the Hamburg working class. His father was a freethinker and a machinist, his mother the daughter of a mason. At fifteen, Koehler started his working life in Milwaukee as an apprentice engraver, moving on to New York to work as a lithographer and continue art studies at night. He returned to Germany to study in Munich, and continued to paint there, with occasional sojourns to America. He traveled to English factory districts to make sketches for *The Strike*. At the age of forty-two in 1892, he returned to New York, and then back to Minneapolis, where he served as director of the Minneapolis School of Fine Arts for the later years of his life.² He had moved upward from the skilled working class into the company of the provincial bourgeoisie, which he endeavored to make less provincial and more cosmopolitan in taste and sentiment. He retired in 1913, the year of the Armory Show, and died four years later. His portrait commissions could have hung comfortably alongside paintings by William Merritt Chase, a friend from his Munich art student days, who was well represented among the more genteel pictures in *The Painter's America*.

But, for the two gentlemen on their way to the elevator, there was no continuity between the room they had just left and the one they had entered, nor did the bench in that second gallery offer the same sort of comfort. And *The Strike*, having resurfaced at the Whitney in 1974, was of course never destined to enter the collection of that museum, or, to pick another example, that of the Lenbachhaus in Munich, where it would have made a certain kind of art historical sense. Rather, it resides today in the Deutsches Historisches Museum in Berlin, where it can be assumed, for institutional reasons, to be valued more as an "historical document" than as an autonomous work of art.

So *The Strike*, just like a strike, can be said to represent a break, a rupture in normal functional arrangements. This break, or rupture, can only be repaired through a reclassification that sequesters, which is its own sort of objective violence. The radical demand—enacted over time by Koehler himself, by Baxandall and Hills—was that the painting should be taken seriously as an artwork among artworks, just as the

strikers in the picture gather before the classical portico to be taken seriously as men with nothing and everything to lose. The outcome was a defeat in both cases; both the workers and the painting are beaten back, back to the factory, back to the "appropriate" museum, back to the "normal" workings of labour and capital, back to the academic separation of history and art history.

And yet *The Strike* is recovered from time to time, brought back to the brink of a radical synthesis: history and art history reformulated from below. (I make no such claims for my recovery of it here.) In the first volume of his novel of anti-Nazi, working-class youth, *The Aesthetics of Resistance*, Peter Weiss weaves readings of artworks into his narrative of clandestine class struggle in the Hitler years, beginning with the Pergamon Altar, taking up *The Raft of the Medusa* and *Guernica*, and ending with Koehler's *The Strike*, recalled from a printed reproduction from *Harper's Weekly* hanging in the narrator's boyhood home: "Some day, said my father, we will discover that there always existed an underground art depicting the life of the working person."³

2.

Carole Condé and Karl Beveridge include *The Strike* in a work from 1987-1988, roughly ten years into their return to Toronto and collaborative work with Canadian labour unions. *Class Work*, like almost all of their projects from the early 1980s onward, is a series of pictures combining studio staging with photomontage. That is to say, it deliberately fuses, or confuses, the space of the page and the space of the stage. This goes back, on one side, to the staging techniques of Erwin Piscator and Bertolt Brecht. On the other side it, goes back to fewer of John Heartfield's photomontages than one might expect. A specific and rare example of this staged page and paged stage is Heartfield's *Hurrah, die Butter ist Alle!* (1935), with its hungry family feasting on hatchets and bolts in a room decked out with swastika designer wallpaper and Hindenburg throw pillows.

The fact that Condé and Beveridge produce their works in multi-image sequences, based either on historical narrative or on thematic development, gives each of their staged and montaged "rooms" the aspect of a scene-setting within a multi-act play. Their sequential way of working also lends credence to my perhaps rather dubious rhyming use of the word "page" here, rather than "print" or "picture," for the viewer is meant to turn from one scene to the next as in an illustrated book. In a bound volume, every *recto* has its *verso*. And as any reader

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MAYBE WENDY'S RIGHT

Maybe Wendy's Right, 1978-1979. 20-part photo-narrative: booklet 7.6 x 10.2 cm; C-colour prints 27.9 x 35.6 cm. Collection: Canadian Museum Contemporary Photography.



IMAGE 08



IMAGE 16

WORK IN PROGRESS

Work in Progress, 1980–2006. 13-part photo series.
Azo dye print (Cibachrome), 40.6 x 50.8 cm.
Collection: National Archives Canada; CameraWork,
London.



IMAGE 02 (1895)



IMAGE 03 (1908)