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### Interview: Pil and Galia Kollektiv

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Pil and Galia Kollektiv's exhibition *Radical Conservatism* explores the vexed relationship between those two seemingly antithetical political positions across three-quarters of a century of art practice. At its centre is the figure of Oscar Nemon, a Croatian sculptor who settled in England at the outbreak of the Second World War, and whose diverse portfolio includes a never-realised design for a "Temple of Universal Ethics", to be built in central London, alongside monumental representations of Tory luminaries Margaret Thatcher and Winston Churchill. Both sides of Nemon's complex persona are represented in this show, accompanied by works from veteran Slovenian art collective IRWIN and contemporary practitioners including Public Movement, Chris Evans and Pil & Galia themselves. Luke Healey spoke to Pil and Galia in their Hackney studio about the show and its forthcoming accompanying symposium.

LH: You've stated elsewhere that you came across Oscar Nemon by accident while trawling through the archives of the Henry Moore Institute, but how much of the groundwork was already there to allow Nemon to take on this kind of meaning?

Galia: We've been very interested in the legacy of modernism for a long time, and particularly the special relationship Britain has with modernism. Unlike on the continent, you don't find a lot of modernist architecture here, and I think there's always been a lot of suspicion around modernism, a lot of criticism of Brutalism and so on. So we were intrigued to find this plan for a really striking modernist building that would have been in central London. We began to wonder why it had never happened, and started reading all the correspondence around the project.

Pil: It was a very brief project, he came to Britain as a refugee just before the war started and frantically attempted to make something happen, because he was very poor. He approached all kinds of extraordinary figures who demonstrate the link in Britain between the avant-garde and rightist politics; there were brown-shirt supporters, an avionics pioneer, all kinds of weird figures.

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LH: So this isn't a straightforward, cliched tale of a failed leftist-modernist project?

G: Exactly, that's what intrigued us about this, that it is more complicated. Because in art history you do get taught that narrative about the defeat of the avant-garde by the forces of reaction, but if you look more closely you can see that there were quite conservative elements within the avant-garde, and quite vanguardist elements within the right. When we found Nemon's busts of Thatcher and Churchill we thought initially that we were dealing with somebody who had become conservative in later life, but on speaking with his daughter-in-law, we found that they weren't at all in agreement about what his views might have been; there were suggestions that these were just commissions that he did for money, or maybe that there were even subversive elements within the way that he had sculpted them...

P:...I think it's very evident in the works themselves. He had an interesting dialectical idea about how sculpture works and it's very much about matter; it's about finding truth in materials but it's figurative not abstract. I guess his most famous sculpture in the UK is his sculpture of Churchill, the one that's in the Houses of Parliament, the one that the MPs touch for good luck before an important vote. I kind of think about it as a big potato, leaning forward, burdened by history and self-doubt. It's a really moody sculpture. And the Thatcher bust is dead cold, it looks like it's chiselled from marble. I don't think he liked what they stood for, particularly.

G: There is an ambivalence in the work which is interesting, but we weren't approaching it as an art historical exercise: we were more interested in the problem of radicalism and conservatism as it relates to the present political map, and how artists orientate themselves around that. The main problem that we were trying to tackle was this paradox that artists who want to be radical end up aligning themselves with quite dated notions of welfare state socialism.

LH: In IRWIN's work it's easy to locate a kind of struggle between the current "iconic" status of the historic avant-garde, or the symbolism of welfare state socialism you mention, and that sense of flux that seems an essential part of radical cultural politics. I took it as a comment on the left's occasional over-reliance on iconicity, on the kind of stasis that is really more associated with the right.

P: IRWIN have put forward this idea of "retro-garde", which suggests that to overcome the trauma of that narrative of the avant-garde becoming subsumed into its opposite and becoming conservative or hegemonic, you should look at history backwards, go back to the source of trauma, and try to split it up differently. This comes into play when they make work about Hugo Ball: the narrative goes that from pretty much inventing performance art in the chaos of the Cabaret Voltaire, towards the end of his life he became a really serious and convinced Catholic, he wrote a bunch of books on Catholicism and went to mass three or five times a day. It's this traditional move from the folly of youth to the conservatism of people in their 50s. But IRWIN suggest reading Dada differently: they read Dada as this kind of weird, messianic, extreme Catholicism. They relocate Dada as a movement holding on to extreme fundamentalist religious ideas.

LH: That seems to chime interestingly with this whole structure of feeling that has built up again around the idea of the historical uncanny in recent years: the idea that one can find disturbing, disruptive effects by looking backwards rather than forwards. You definitely see this in the works by Joseph Lewis that you've included in the show.

G: I think a lot of the folk traditions that Joseph is interested in were actually proto-socialist, but that gets overlooked in the image we have of folk now. So it's interesting, instead of just moving on, to look at the erased origins of things. Connecting up these historical threads in the present in new ways can actually be far more radical than simply looking to the future. And holding on to the past can be a radical thing against the infinite drive to the new that we associate with late capitalism. We wanted to show the way that radicality can be latent in what appears conservative: this is played up in Chris Evans's film, for instance, which demonstrates that property developers use a language of revolution and progressivism similar to that used by artists to describe their projects. But we weren't trying to approach the show with the agenda of just showing right-wing art - we were quite surprised when somebody described Tate Liverpool's Art Turning Left show as being focused on left-wing art and our show as being focused on right-wing art!

LH: Your own contribution to the exhibition picks up on that sense of late capital's appropriation of modernist tendencies - what in current architectural criticism is being referred to as neo-modernism or pseudo-modernism. The Shard is a good example - it's like Tatlin, but with all the social content stripped out. Your pictures of fantasy architecture made out of yachts seem different from other works in the show - they're not trying to locate subversive potential in the past, but seem rather accelerationist. Is that how you would describe them?

G: I think they still have a sense of temporal displacement but it's future-orientated, they're based on thinking around what happens after capitalism, what do we do with its remains, how do they become useful in a society where their original purpose has been erased? You're saying that The Shard is avant-garde architecture stripped of avant-garde social content, but what happens after capitalism, does it regain social meaning? Can we re-use or reappropriate these things? We're doing a similar thing to those other works, just from a different temporal perspective.

The question about accelerationism would be a question of agency: where do we see the artist in that? I think the danger of accelerationism is this sense that capitalism will eventually just undo itself and we just need to stand by and wait for it to happen. I'm not entirely convinced by that, I think it requires more agency. Sometimes I think that fiction can be quite an effective tool of activism. I don't think activism is just taking to the streets and demonstrating; merely proposing this idea of an after-capitalism can be quite powerful. In the same way that the imagery of after- man was incredibly powerful for green politics. The fact that we have all these fictions of the end of the world and that people can imagine a world without people - all these television programs showing what happens after humans - I think that has had a significant effect in the present.

LH: Finally, could you say something about the upcoming events which tie in with the exhibition?

G: Public Movement, who were particularly important to us in the show in terms of their appropriation of state-political discourse and aesthetics, will be performing a work called 'Debriefing Session' on 31 January and 1 February in the lobby of a hotel in central Manchester. Then on 2 February we're bringing Alun Rowlands and Robert Garnett to talk about the themes of the exhibition. Alun Rowlands curated an exhibition called *The Dark Monarch* at Tate St. Ives which explored the relationship between occultism and modernism and the strange British relationship between modernity and magic and folklore. You see this particularly in the St. Ives artists - the way they were looking at organic shapes but also prehistoric themes. Robert Garnett is an art critic, writer and Deleuze scholar who we work with at Reading University, and he says he will be talking about why he hates Roxy Music. I suppose we know that Bryan Ferry is supportive of the Tories, but at the same time they were quite progressive musically, or at least they were affiliated to a progressive tendency in British popular music...

LH: ...It suggests that the ambivalence you identify with the figurehead of Oscar Nemon is more widespread than might first appear...

G: ...yeah, I guess. It maybe means that if we're interested in certain social results we need to question the aesthetics that we associate with those results, and the historical contingencies of certain alliances. There's an Israeli historian called Zeev Sternhell who wrote a book called *Neither Right Nor Left*, and in this book he contends that there were a lot of possible configurations, and that what we ended up with - Communism and Fascism being associated with right and left - is what happened but it's not what had to happen. Originally these movements met at their extremes - Syndicalism was something of a meeting point for extreme lefty anarchists and Fascists, and Mussolini was a member of that group for a while, so he could easily have gone the other way. People also forget that National Socialism contained socialism - and I think that's a genuine thing, they were speaking to the disenfranchised. If we forget that, if we don't learn that lesson, then we don't understand the appeal of things like the EDL now. And that's really dangerous, as often they're expressing a critical diagnosis that's correct - you *are* being screwed - but their prognosis, that it's the immigrants' fault and they need to be kicked out, is wrong. Often it's actually easier for us to speak to fascists than it is to speak to Tories, because at least the fascists are dissatisfied.

Symposium: *Radical Conservatism* will take place on February 1 at Castlefield Gallery, and will also feature a performance from participating artist Chris Evans. Tickets are free and can be ordered at the Castlefield website.

Public Movement's 'Debriefing Session' takes place from 7-9pm on Friday 31 Jan and from 10am-1pm on Saturday 1 February. To take part in the performance email Castlefield Gallery Programme Manager Matthew Pendergast at [Matthew@castlefieldgallery.co.uk](mailto:Matthew@castlefieldgallery.co.uk)

Pil and Galia Kollektiv: *Radical Conservatism* continues at Castlefield Gallery until 2 February 2014.

*Luke Healey is a writer and Phd candidate in Art History at The University of Manchester.*

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