

Competing futures, precarious community: realism in post-war Britain

In 1953, a short documentary film called *The Elephant Will Never Forget*, directed by John Krish, premiered at the Odeon Leicester Square and met with enormous success.¹ It recorded the last night of London's tram service. In the opening sequences the camera frames an elderly couple seated on the top deck of a tram, and the soundtrack alternates commentary with a Victorian music-hall song about the romantic appeal of »riding on top of the car«. Trams mainly served South and South-East London, predominantly working class districts, the statue of the elephant at the Elephant and Castle being a South London landmark (hence the title). The commentary associates the tram with rainy streets and with dereliction: it mentions bomb damage remaining from the war.

Allusions to the war could at that time evoke nostalgia, in recollections of national solidarity, and the film's final sequences, in which the last tram is cheered at night on its way to the depot at New Cross, recall the celebrations of victory in 1945. Yet here was no victory, and as far as progressive politics was concerned, the present moment was one of defeat. The Labour government, elected overwhelmingly in 1945, lost to the Conservatives in 1951. It had already planned a national celebration, the Festival of Britain, held in the same year.² The Labour manifesto of 1945 had borne the title *Let Us Face the Future*, and the Festival's principal site, on the south bank of the Thames, featured architecture of intentionally futuristic design, notably the Skylon, a vertical structure suspended in mid-air by cables under tension. The displays inside the pavilions were meant to show the nation's natural and human resources and to signal progress through innovation in science, technology, art and design. While the Festival was popular, it constituted for most visitors a good day out

rather than an inducement to participate in building the future. For the Conservatives, however, it was decidedly a symbol of socialism, and the incoming Conservative government demolished it, leaving only the Festival Hall standing.³ The Conservative policy document, *The Right Road for Britain*, first published in 1949, declared that the British electorate faced two »roads«: »One leads downwards to the socialist state and inevitably into communism«, the other opening towards »the property-owning democracy.«⁴ At the beginning of Krish's film, as the elderly couple travel in the tram along the embankment, there is a glimpse of the Festival Hall across the river – a bright contrast to the dark tones pervading the film, and the drab streets. Later, the back of a tram is seen through the windscreen of a private car; the narrator says »The motorist, who every day cursed every time he had to stop, cursed but little and looked forward to tomorrow.« In this contrast of symbols, the future as object of collective aspiration is supplanted by the eager anticipation of the motorist, the property-owning individual.

Despite Conservative rhetoric, there was not the least chance of Britain's becoming a socialist state. Unlike France and Italy, Britain did not have a large Communist Party, and while Trades Unions were relatively strong, their political role was subsidiary, expressed only through affiliation to the Labour Party. Left politics, in Labour or in other groups, was largely directed from above, Labour in particular being led by middle-class intellectuals and technocrats.⁵ It was this class of people too who directed and largely participated in the cultural institutions regulating and funding art and culture in the post-war period. Principal among these was the Arts Council of Great Britain, established by royal charter in 1946. It evolved in parallel to the institutions of the welfare state, with preparations made during wartime in both cases. It was no less a figure than John Maynard Keynes who finally drafted the

charter. He designed the council as operating independently of the state, though state-funded, as a patron of the arts.⁶

The fact that working-class people would be unlikely to benefit from such patronage or to regard art as of relevance to them was an abiding concern of the critic most closely identified with realism in the period, namely John Berger. Of all the emergent British art critics writing as advocates for the generation born in the 1920s – including most notably David Sylvester, Patrick Heron and Lawrence Alloway – Berger was the only one to tie his criticism explicitly to politics. Indeed, during the period in the 1950s when he wrote on current exhibitions for the *New Statesman*, his was a socialist voice rare in British journalism.⁷ Berger was himself a painter, and one of his paintings, *Scaffolding – Festival of Britain*, is in the Arts Council collection, having been bought from the artist in the year he painted it, 1950. With its spindly and angular drawing and sensitively adjusted tones, it is recognizably in a British – or rather English – tradition.⁸ The scaffolding is tall and narrow, the builders on platforms at a precarious height, working in the sky. In content and meaning, though not in form, it is akin to Léger's *Les Constructeurs* of the same year. What art can do for the people, in this case, is to elicit such promise as the Festival's buildings might hold for a future collectivity.

Yet there was an exception to the exclusion of working class individuals from high culture and it was a notable one: they might enter art school and become practitioners. While a working class child might only rarely enter university, he or she could perhaps gain a training in art, although it was perhaps only in the 1960s and 70s that this possibility was fully realized, with the maturing of generations that benefited from educational reforms of the 1940s.⁹ Working-class experience, and the ambition of the working-class individual to advance in society became a salient cultural theme

in the artistic, literary and critical culture of the 1950s, a key text being Richard Hoggart's *The Uses of Literacy*.¹⁰ The collective endeavour for self-education that had been a notable feature of nineteenth-century working class and labour movements was by now only a memory; Hoggart's strictures regarding what he called mass culture pointed to the loss of the possibility for popular collective self-definition, grounded in common experience. Culture was received rather than attained, as through the newspaper proprietor's policy of 'giving the people what they want.'

It was John Berger's contention that art might have a countervailing influence, and he found the possibility realized in the work of the Italian painter and Communist, Renato Guttuso, whose paintings, he wrote in the catalogue for an exhibition held in London in 1955, have 'the energy, the directness and sometimes the rawness of those who dance, march, walk arm-in-arm or bicycle to work along the street.'¹¹ Such an image of the people, energetic and militant, though it might be found in Guttuso's paintings and in Italian neo-realist cinema, had no real equivalent in British painting, and in organizing his *Looking Forward* exhibitions in 1952 and 1956, Berger drew on the work of painters whose work showed an abiding British concern with the local, the immediate and the particular.¹² One of the younger painters he included in 1952 was Derrick Greaves, who came from a working class background in Sheffield, having served an apprenticeship as a sign-writer before studying at the Royal College of Art. James Hyman has shown that, with such paintings as *Sheffield* (fig. 1), Greaves shared with teachers and fellow-students at the College the aim of continuing and renewing a national tradition of landscape painting.¹³ The air of romantic desolation and melancholy in *Sheffield* is characteristic of work in this vein, though it is harsher and more uningratiating than the neo-romanticism of John Piper, Graham Sutherland and others, which Kenneth Clark had promoted during the war as

distinctively national.¹⁴ Besides, the scene is urban, industrial and northern, hence working class in connotation. Greaves and three former fellow-students, John Bratby, Edward Middleditch and Jack Smith (the latter also from Sheffield), came to be known in the 1950s as »the Beaux Arts Quartet« through exhibiting at Helen Lessore's Beaux Arts Gallery. Their work was realist only in the sense of treating concrete and mundane subject matter with vigour and directness, and the fact that this prompted Berger's support for a time testifies to the scarcity of more evidently political art. One rare politically-oriented work was *The Bombing of Sakiel*, painted in 1959 by Berger's friend Peter de Francia in response to an event the year before, when French forces bombed civilians in a Tunisian village bordering Algeria during the Algerian war of independence.¹⁵

De Francia's work was an exception to the rule: in Britain of the period, the conditions for nurturing a politically-oriented practice were lacking. Berger soon found that the Artists' International Association, with which he involved himself for a time, had lost the political radicalism that had inspired its foundation in the 1930s.¹⁶ Some of the older painters he included in *Looking Forward*, now teaching at the Royal College and the Slade School of Fine Art, had shown with the AIA before the war. A debate at the AIA in 1938 between advocates of realism and surrealism took place on shared political ground, on the left. One of those speaking for realism was William Coldstream, who became Principal at the Slade School in 1949. A close friend and associate before the war of W.H. Auden, also on the cultural left, he had, he said later, »sort of social realist ideas« but as a portraitist had limited means to »carry out a programme of painting which should be more popular«.¹⁷ His work as a director of documentary films for the GPO (Post Office) film unit gave him more

scope in this direction; playful and whimsical, they are devoid of the rigorous objectivism that typifies his portraiture (Fig. 2).

As often with Coldstream's portraits, his sitter, Havildar Ajmer Singh, looks away rather than outward to the viewer, held in a matrix of eye-measured marks, his gaze the more remote by virtue of the fact that the painter's fine strokes have not reached final resolution in that area (the sitter had to leave on duty while the painting was in progress). Coldstream painted the portrait as an official war artist, the Havildar (Sargeant) being one of many young men from India recruited to fight for the British. In India itself, opposition to British colonial rule led to the formation of an Indian National Army, in alliance with Japan. India was the first part of the British Empire to gain independence, in 1948, and a twofold process of change bearing on the British sense of nationhood took place over successive decades: decolonization on the one hand, and immigration from ex-colonies on the other. In working-class communities, immigration gave rise – as it still does – to feelings of loss of identity, with racism as a frequent consequence. Already in 1947, an anthropologist, Kenneth Little, published a study of race relations in Cardiff, giving evidence of segregation.¹⁸ The term 'white working class', current – and topical – today reflects an outcome of these changes and implies an orientation not to the future but to an imagined past. The progressive photo-illustrated magazine *Picture Post*, which at the peak of its circulation in 1941 published a »Plan for Britain«, brought out an issue on the question »Is there a British Colour bar?« in 1949, by which time its circulation had much declined, as if with a shrinkage in expectation.

Where might hope be found? Perhaps in technological advance and cultural innovation. William Coldstream, a progressive in art education, set up a film school at the Slade. Some of the more technically adventurous young British artists studied at

the Slade in the late 1940s, among them Eduardo Paolozzi, Richard Hamilton and Nigel Henderson, who were to become leading participants in the Independent Group, inaugurated in 1952 at the Institute of Contemporary Art, itself of recent foundation. The work of the group falls outside the scope of the present discussion, but it is worth noting the title of one of the several exhibitions it organized, *This is Tomorrow*, held at the Whitechapel Gallery in 1956. Organised, created and constructed by the participants themselves, it was collective as an endeavour and collectivist in its proffered invitation to a public participation in the future. It had kinship with only the livelier and more outward-looking aspects of the Festival of Britain and made no reference to nation.

Of the artists, architects and writers in this group, it is Nigel Henderson whose work shows some affinities with realism. In the late 1940s he took up photography and photographed children playing in streets near to where he lived in the East End of London, a project ostensibly in the documentarist tradition. It was not the poverty of the streets, however, but children's playful exploitation of street space that was his subject, and in the spirit of Dadaist experiment he freely distorted his images of children cycling, associating their play with his.¹⁹ The boy in his *Stressed Photograph* (Fig. 3) stands on the pedals of his bicycle and looks down in concentration, for he is not cycling to go somewhere but instead is playing a kind of balancing game. Printing his photographs in his bathroom, Henderson saw that he could distort them by tilting the paper under the enlarger, thereby, as he said later, »giving a slightly »intoxicated« version which suggested to me a certain delirium in which a boy may fantasize and divert himself with a bike for hours on end.«²⁰ The delirious play and the poverty evident in the surroundings and in the string tying the boy's trousers are inseparable elements of the image and of its expressive and social meaning. While Henderson

shared with his associates an appetite for technical experiment, for the ludic, his work retained contact with mundane urban reality as that of the more mass-culture oriented members of the group, such as Hamilton, did not. The use of coarse textured surfaces in the section he, Paolozzi and the Smithsons put together preserved, within *This is Tomorrow's* future-oriented frame of reference, the physical grain and resistance of an urban reality not to be simply overridden, but to be engaged with and transformed.

For both the Independent Group and for John Berger, if in quite different terms, looking forward meant looking outward from British parochialism. A new and significant factor in this connection was the growing cultural dominance of the United States. New American painting was being shown in London during these years and both Patrick Heron and David Sylvester were initially unresponsive, while Berger found in Pollock's work manifest evidence of »the disintegration of our culture«²¹ Lawrence Alloway took a different view and, among the Independent Group, he, Hamilton and Reyner Banham were those most evidently stimulated by American technological and visual culture. All the contemporary artists and critics referred to thus far were international in outlook, though their sympathies were divided between Europe and the USA. Sylvester, Henderson and Paolozzi all spent time in Paris; Greaves had a scholarship to Italy, and in 1957 participated in an exhibition of British art in Moscow. In 1961, Lawrence Alloway moved to New York, and the following year John Berger moved to a rural village in France, as if to more congenial homes for their writing and ideas in either case.

The USA of course embodied at the time one side in the Cold War, a circumstance of polarization that, as Berger recalled in 1960, was inescapable: »In the early 1950s the USSR represented, despite all its deformations, a great part of the force of the socialist challenge to capitalism. It no longer does.«²² In Britain, even

under the Labour government, American pressure or, the anticipation of it, affected cultural life whenever Communism was involved. When Picasso travelled to Sheffield to attend the Communist-organized peace congress, the British government cancelled so many visas (including that of Renato Guttuso) that the congress had to be relocated to Warsaw.²³ Perhaps it was such [U.S.-inspired paranoia](#) that prompted Berger's self-exile.

The artist whose work was least obviously British in character, and decidedly not parochial, was Francis Bacon, the outstanding British painter of the period. While standing apart from any of the tendencies and traditions evoked thus far, his painting touched on themes of common concern, including the re-imagining, in a modern and modernist context, of the human figure. For Helen Lessore, Bacon was pre-eminent among the British figurative painters whose work she showed at the Beaux Arts Gallery, a number of whom, including Bacon, appear in a painting she made in the 1970s of painters seated at an imaginary symposium.²⁴ John Berger – though he changed his opinion later – thought Bacon's painted screams merely »sentimental«.²⁵ Bacon's paintings certainly had no political content in the social realist sense, but by virtue of their radical rendering of sexuality they were decidedly of social and political implication. Bacon's radicalism in a different sense was of interest to artists associated with the Independent Group and the ICA, where he was the first painter to have a one-man show, in 1955. This exhibition was organized by Lawrence Alloway, who cited Bacon's use of photographic source material as one reason for his being the only British painter of an earlier generation whom younger artists held in high regard.²⁶

Bacon's well-known appropriation of Eadweard Muybridge's images of human and animal movement is manifested in *Study of a Dog* (Fig. 4). No other

British painter could show such radical innovation in depictive method as is evident here – indeed it finds its match only in American abstract painting of the same period. The painting is essentially representational in its concerns, however, even if Bacon finds ways, here as elsewhere, to push representation to a limit. One method he uses is radical reduction, taken to an extreme that has a touch of comedy, in, for example, the solitary palm tree that marks the boundary between what appears as a kind of corniche and the sea, denoted by a halting horizontal stroke of variegated pale blue, with a black line above to mark the horizon. It is at this latter boundary that the bare canvas defining the ground plane on which the dog turns, cars race and sea recedes, begins to figure instead as rising atmospheric space, with the same light blue rubbed across the top to denote sky. Why must cars race by while the dog turns, as if on some red-bounded carpet in a room with no rear wall? It is, surely, the better that one might feel the turning motion of the dog, visually caught and held somehow, as the cars trailing paint smears indicative of motion are not. It is in being so trapped by the gaze that the dog is a typical Baconian protagonist.

A quality of entrapment, in the sense of being held for inspection, is what must have drawn Bacon to clinical and observational photographic imagery; that, and the objectivity of the detached, descriptive photographic record. His dog retains, from such origins, a connotation of the veridical, of independent reality. By enacting its motion in smears of paint – the rigid pivoting legs, the arched back, the dark head with red tongue hanging – Bacon effects a disturbing identification with that twisting, compulsive action, and a communication thereby with the viewer's own animal, bodily awareness, alongside the apprehension of distance, separation and a kind of threat. Yet the dog may also appear pathetic, as if shaking itself into its penumbra of

shadow, and so the viewer may summon unbidden a primitive, conflictual response to the bodily other.

Bacon had only one solo exhibition with Helen Lessore at the Beaux Arts Gallery, in 1953, as he had been represented since 1949 by the other leading dealer in contemporary art, Erica Brausen, who directed the Hanover Gallery. Helen Lessore's enthusiasm for the painter's work, which she had been buying from him, reflected her particular interest in innovative depictions of the human body, an interest that was of long standing. In the 1920s, Lessore studied at the Slade School under Henry Tonks, who was a precursor to William Coldstream in the practice of scrupulously observed delineation from the model, and she later wrote articles on the more painterly practice of Walter Richard Sickert, to whom she was connected by her marriage to the dealer Frederick Lessore. Among the artists seated at her painting *Symposium I*, there are some who, between them, represent these two twentieth-century British traditions in depictive method. On the one hand, Euan Uglow and Myles Murphy followed their teacher Coldstream in setting the posed model within a matrix of rigorously observed measurements. On the other, Francis Bacon, Lucian Freud, Frank Auerbach and Leon Kossoff all effected painterly realizations of the human figure, hence broadly and sometimes demonstrably showing affinity with Sickert.²⁷

Leon Kossoff's immediate contact with the painterly figurative tradition came by way of his friendship with Frank Auerbach, a fellow-student at St Martin's, where he enrolled in 1949. Auerbach introduced him to the teaching of David Bomberg at the Borough Polytechnic in South London, and both of them attended classes there for two evenings a week during 1950-52.²⁸ A leading figure in the London avant-garde before the First World War, Bomberg was taught by Sickert at the Westminster School of Art, then went to the Slade, from which he was expelled in 1913 due to his

embrace of French modernism. By the 1950s he had fallen into obscurity, but the undiminished intensity of his commitment to painting attracted a dedicated group of students. His method of drawing, adopted with varying degrees of independence by his pupils, accorded with the expressionist painterly practice he had evolved over preceding decades. Pupils, Kossoff included, drew in charcoal, neither delineating nor modelling but rather feeling towards a realization of the subject. What was to be searched for was, in Bomberg's celebrated expression »the spirit in the mass«. Here he particularly had Cézanne in mind; but rather than inviting his pupils to follow a particular stylistic precedent, he based his teaching on the principle – derived from his reading of Bishop Berkeley - that touch has primacy over vision.

What Bomberg most importantly conveyed to his pupils, beyond his particular technical practice – or rather through and informing that practice - was what one of them, Leslie Marr, recalled as a sense of mission: »Bomberg was a great teacher, because he realized his work through his students. Bomberg thought he was saving the world.« Roy Oxlade, who quotes this remark, observes »Bomberg was convinced that the only salvation from industrial insanity lay in a new and balanced relationship with nature and he believed that the artist could offer a counter-direction to technological alienation through a fundamental »gestural language« of form.«³⁰ The risk of a cult forming around such a practice is evident, yet Kossoff and Auerbach evidently maintained their creative independence, as indeed did Oxlade, also a pupil at Borough.

Kossoff's post-Bombergian method, in his paintings and drawings of the 1950s and early 1960s, was to convert the salient features of a subject into a kind of material hieroglyph. In the case of *Woman Ill in Bed, Surrounded by Family* (Fig. 5) of 1965, his decision to centralize the composition, after having looked at a woodcut

by Dürer of the death of the Virgin, where the bedbound figure is centrally placed, enabled him to achieve a simple coherence of image that is instantly grasped, the greys of the window horizontal above those of the bed's vertical rectangle below, within the surrounding brick reds and ochres of the setting, the pinks, blacks and reds of the figures. Paintings such as this do not lend themselves to analysis, since the painter's strategy is such as to prevent any constitutive element from separating definitively from the others and from the whole. But that is to put the matter negatively; the positive principle is to enact in paint the emotional bond between the figures who, as a family, are members of a common affective substance. The upper figures lean inward, the seated figure on the left reaching across, like St John in the Dürer engraving; three heads on that side, those of the mother and two by the bed, lie close together, while those to the right are more apart and the small child at the bottom has turned away. What the painting enacts, more than depicts, is the pathos of attachment and potential separation. The density of the paint surface, the breadth and urgent pace of the broad brushstrokes, afford the viewer a quasi-tactile contact with the image, it is a felt scene.

Informing this painterly practice, inherent in it, is an ontology of the flesh that is Christian in origin, while its technical and expressive antecedents lie in the post-sixteenth century European painterly tradition.³¹ A drawing by Kossoff after the Dürer woodcut has stylistic affinity with Rembrandt,³² and Kossoff manifestly re-enacts in his practice the Rembrandtian affective alliance of flesh and paint. It is worth comparing Bacon's rather different reinterpretation, both of the painterly rendering of embodiment and of the Christian imagery and thematics with which it is associated. Bacon took the Crucifixion as a subject, both directly and by allusion, in a number of key works including *Three Studies for Figures at the Base of a Crucifixion*

(c. 1944) and *Painting* (1946).³³ The former introduced his motif of the gaping mouth with bared teeth, the mouth of each sightless body appearing as the rapacious opening of the digestive tract. In *Painting*, the lower half of a human face appears, the mouth open, the eyes hidden under the shadow of an umbrella, above which appears a variant of Rembrandt's *Slaughtered Ox*, a crucified carcass. Bacon's strategy is to negate the transcendental connotations of the subject, with the end of asserting by contrast the animality of human flesh in conjunction with the gaping and voracious mouth. By isolating, as he does, the painterly, fleshly content of his paintings within a more flatly painted setting, he achieves a disjunction between the tactile and the optical, or perhaps a paradoxical synthesis, a tactile focus, whereby the viewer is at once drawn in and repelled, engaged in an affective projection felt to be repugnant. This apprehension of the human animal too has a Christian inheritance, descending from Augustine's »inter faeces et urinam nascimo« and taken up in Sweeney's refrain in T.S. Eliot's *Sweeney Agonistes*, another source of inspiration for Bacon: »Birth, and copulation and death/ that's all, that's all, that's all, that's all/ Birth, and copulation, and death.«³⁴

While the theme of pathos, the suffering body and the Judaeo-Christian inheritance might seem to take us rather far from the social and political concerns associated with realism, there is a significant connection with the politics of the post-war period. Kossoff's rendering of a patient in a hospital bed and his affective treatment of the subject has a particular contemporary resonance. The reason that the establishment of a National Health service left a more lasting impression than any of the 1945 Labour government's other measures is that, in a context of weakening and fracturing communal bonds, it came to serve as a unique focus of collective concern. The egalitarian principle that health provision should be free to all at the point of

delivery became so deeply integrated into British political culture that not even Margaret Thatcher was able to violate it.

The symbolic and affective – and political - meaning of communal health was defined most compellingly by Richard Titmuss, an academic expert in social administration who had been closely involved with research into provision for social needs, with consequent influence on policy, through the war years and during the Labour administration. Himself a member of the Labour party, he was Professor of Social Administration at the London School of Economics, an institution tied from its foundation to Fabian socialism.³⁵ A believer in the use of social research to guide policy, and in effective administration, he was however no bureaucrat in outlook: according to his friend and colleague Brian Abel-Smith, he agreed to the use of the term »Welfare State« in the title of a book of his essays on social policy only reluctantly and on condition that it be set within quotation marks. The term seemed to him to imply state patronage, finality, and the state's exclusive competence in providing for social needs.³⁶ In a postscript to the third edition of this book, he wrote of his experience in hospital, suffering from what was to be his final illness, and of the friendship he formed with a man who had been severely injured in the war and was continuously in need of treatment in multiple ways. »He was an example«.

Titmuss writes, »in practice, of what a compassionate society can achieve when a philosophy of social justice and public accountability is translated into a hundred and one detailed acts of imagination and tolerance.«³⁷ His emotion did not blind him to reality: a page before, he had written, »You know, as well as I know, that not all wards are like the one that I was in.«³⁸ This note of realism – in the sense of taking an undecieved view of the facts – is a vital accompaniment to Titmuss's visionary ideas, most notably his famous reflections on the altruism inherent in blood donation.³⁹

John Berger too took up the theme of medicine and its social significance.

Medical practice is, he wrote in 1967, »the most idealized of all the professions«. He was reflecting at the conclusion of a book about a country doctor, John Sassall, made in collaboration with the photographer Jean Mohr.⁴⁰ Sassall, whom he knew personally, permitted Berger and Mohr to sit in on his medical consultations, with the permission of his patients. Through his account of the doctor's persistent efforts at diagnosis and care, the difficulties he faced, his personality, his proneness to depression, Berger reflects on the insights such direct contact with social reality affords as to the condition of society itself. If doctors, he writes, often become disillusioned, it is because »when abstract idealism has worn thin, they are uncertain about the actual value of the lives of the patients they are treating. This is not because they are callous or personally inhuman: it is because they live in and accept a society which is incapable of knowing what a human life is worth.«⁴¹

These words of Berger's help in accounting for what might seem an anomaly in the scope of his critical advocacy. For a writer unambiguously dedicated to the cause of socialism, who saw art as potentially furthering that cause, he was surprisingly disinclined to discuss explicitly political kinds of practice. Of the painters whose work he supports in the essays in *Permanent Red*, only one, Josef Herman, might be counted a social realist. Similarly, in the book's section on »Twentieth-century masters«, only with Léger and Picasso is there a question of political affiliation. The formal innovations of Cubism, held, he felt, an unrealized potential: their radicalism did not gain lasting social purchase. For Berger, neither formal experiment nor explicitly political purpose could by themselves assist in a socialist transformation of society, for such change demanded conditions in which the sense of collectivity might be rediscovered and nurtured. Berger associated art made with the

hand, painting in particular, with the project of retrieving a sense of human community and solidarity; hence his analogous interest in the work of Dr Sassall, shown in Jean Mohr's photographs leaning close to his patients, listening to them, touching them, a familiar and trusted figure. Berger himself chose, on leaving Britain, to go to live in a small peasant community. Of David Bomberg's late landscapes he writes, »the artist has laid his hand on these mountains as one can lay one's hands on a blanket.« While this may owe something the ideas of Berkeley, he writes, »I prefer to believe that it is the result of a man's passionate imaginative identification with the promise or the threat of a place he has discovered.«⁴²

The painter of the period in whose work such a passionate attachment to place may most readily be recognized is Joan Eardley. Born in London, she spent her short career as a painter in Scotland, after graduating from Glasgow School of art in 1943. She painted in two localities, among the tenements of Townhead, a poor district of Glasgow, and in Catterline, a coastal village with a diminishing fishing industry. She had a studio in the Townhead neighbourhood and rented or bought a series of deserted cottages in the fishing village. These were places at the edge of organized, modern society, their communities impermanent (the slum tenements in Townhead were scheduled for demolition). Yet it was precisely here, at the margins, that she found life and energy. *Children and Chalked Wall 3* (Fig. 6), completed in the last year of her life, 1963, is typical of her urban paintings, the small girls being members of a large family in the locality she had come to know well. Through her rough handling of the surface, her collage of newspaper cuttings, sweet wrappers – like gutter trash in the street scenes she photographed - and stencilled letters, she embeds the children in the texture of their surroundings. By now successful, selling her paintings through a London dealer, she shows an awareness in her practice of international developments

in painting, in France and in America. It is as if she makes the children, close together, hands clasped, smiling, participants in the painting's experimental fusion of roughness and jaunty venture. There is a parallel with Nigel Henderson's *Stressed Photograph*: the street children are in buoyant possession of their own ground. These works touch on the period's central themes: community of feeling, progress, and the tension between them. Like Dr Sassall, the artists lean in close towards their subject, taking the pulse of the time.

1. *The Elephant Will Never Forget* (1953), director John Krish, British Transport Films.
2. On the Festival, see Barry Turner: *Beacon for Change: how the 1951 Festival of Britain shaped the modern age*. London 2011. Also Becky E. Conekin: *»Autobiography of a Nation«: the 1951 Festival of Britain*. Manchester 2003.
3. On Anne Massey's analysis, the Festival was itself a conservative and nationalistic enterprise: see Massey, *The Independent Group*, Manchester 1995, pp. 9-10.
4. Quoted Nicholas Timmins: *The Five Giants: a biography of the welfare state*. London 1995, p. 167. The wording echoes the title of Friedrich von Hayek's influential *The Road to Serfdom*, London 1945.
5. On the mixed ideological make-up of the Labour Party, viewed from a left perspective, see Ralph Milliband, *Parliamentary Socialism: A Study in the Politics of Labour*. London 1961.
6. See Andrew Sinclair, *Arts and Cultures: the history of the 50 years of the Arts Council of Great Britain*. London, 1995, and [Raymond Williams, »The Arts Council«, in Raymond Williams, The Resources of Hope](#). London 1989, pp. 41-55.
7. His [selected](#) reviews are in John Berger, *Permanent Red*. London 1960.
8. James Hyman illustrates the painting, and discusses its British antecedents, in Hyman: *The Battle for Realism: figurative art in Britain during the Cold War*. New Haven and London, 2001. His is now the definitive study on this subject, but see also Julian Spalding: *The Forgotten Fifties*. Sheffield 1988; Margaret Garlake: *New Art, New World: British Art in Postwar Society*. New Haven and London 1998; Brendan Prendeville: *Realism in 20th Century Painting*. London 2000, pp. 136 – 151.
9. Reforms set in place by the Education Act of 1944 (»the Butler Act«) made free secondary education available to working-class children. The hidebound aspects of art education are criticized by Berger 1960 (as note 7), pp. 51-3, but the system was radically reformed in the early 1960s.
10. Richard Hoggart: *The Uses of Literacy: aspects of working-class life with special reference to publications and entertainments*. London 1957.
11. Quoted Hyman 2001 (as note 8), p. 79.
12. The exhibitions took place at the Whitechapel Gallery in 1952 (touring 1953) and at the South London Art Gallery in 1956.
13. Hyman 2001 (as note 8), p. 53.
14. See Brian Foss, »Message and Medium: government patronage, national identity and national culture in Britain, 1939-45«. In: *Oxford Art Journal* 14, no. 2, 1991, pp. 52-72.
15. Tate Gallery, on long-term loan from the Tunisian Embassy. Berger was also able to find both a socialist-oriented practice, and a link with the left art politics of the 1930s in the work of illustrators and caricaturists including Paul Hogarth and James Boswell. See Hyman, p. 48 ff. [See also Melinda Kelly Johnston: Protest prints: satire and social and political commentary in the prints of James Boswell, 1906-1971. UCL PhD thesis, 2010.](#)
16. See Robert Radford: *Art for a Purpose: The Artists' International Association 1933-1953*. Winchester 1987.
17. Quoted in Lawrence Gowing & David Sylvester: *The Paintings of William Coldstream 1908-1987*. London 1990, p. 29.
18. Kenneth Little: *Negroes in Britain: a study of race relations in English society*.

London 1948.

19. Coincidentally, Iona and Peter Opie were beginning their study of children's play at this time.
20. Quoted in *Nigel Henderson: Photographs of Bethnal Green 1949-1952*, Nottingham 1978, p. 5.
21. Berger 1960 (as note 7), p. 69.
22. *Ibid.*, p. 8.
23. Hyman 2001 (as note 8), pp. 160 ff.
24. See her painting *Symposium I*, 1974-77 (Tate Gallery).
25. Berger (as note 7), p. 56.
26. Anne Massey & Gregor Muir: *Institute of Contemporary Arts 1946-1968*. London 2014, p. 105.
27. See Hyman 2001 (as note 8), p. 56 ff.; also Martin Hammer, »After Camden Town: Sickert's legacy since 1930«, in Helena Bonett, Ysanne Holt, Jennifer Mundy (eds.): *The Camden Town Group in Context*. Tate Research Publication, May 2012, <https://www.tate.org.uk/art/research-publications/camden-town-group/martin-hammer-after-camden-town-sickerts-legacy-since-1930-r1104349>, accessed 26 July 2017.
28. Kossoff's career is summarised in Paul Moorhouse: *Leon Kossoff*. London 1996.
29. See Richard Cork: *David Bomberg*. London 1987. See also Bomberg's statement in *Exhibition of Drawings and Paintings by the Borough Bottega*, Berkeley galleries, London, 16 Nov. – 4 Dec. 1953.
30. Roy Oxlade: »David Bomberg 1890-1957«, In *RCA Papers* No. 3. 1977, p. 15.
31. On this ontology, see Michel Henry: *Incarnation: A Philosophy of the Flesh*, tr. Karl Hefty. Evanston 2015.
32. Reproduced in Moorhouse 1996 (as note 28), p. 58.
33. Tate Gallery and Museum of Modern Art, New York, respectively.
34. *Sweeney Agonistes, Fragments of an Aristophanic Melodrama*, in T.S. Eliot: *Collected Poems 1909-1962*. London 1974. These lines are on p. 131.
35. On Titmuss's remarkable life and career, see Brian Abel-Smith's introduction to Richard M. Titmuss: *Essays on »The Welfare State«*, 3rd edition. London 1976.
36. Titmuss 1976 (as note 35), Introduction by Able-Smith, no pagination.
37. Titmuss 1976 (as note 35), p. 150.
38. *Ibid.*, p. 149.
39. Richard M. Titmuss, *The Gift Relationship: From Human Blood to Social Policy*. London, 1970.
40. John Berger, Jean Mohr: *A Fortunate Man*. London 1967, p. 165.
41. *Ibid.*, p. 166.
42. Berger 1960 (as note 7), p. 96.
43. Patrick Elliott, Anne Galastro: *Joan Eardley, A Sense of Place*. Edinburgh, 2016.

