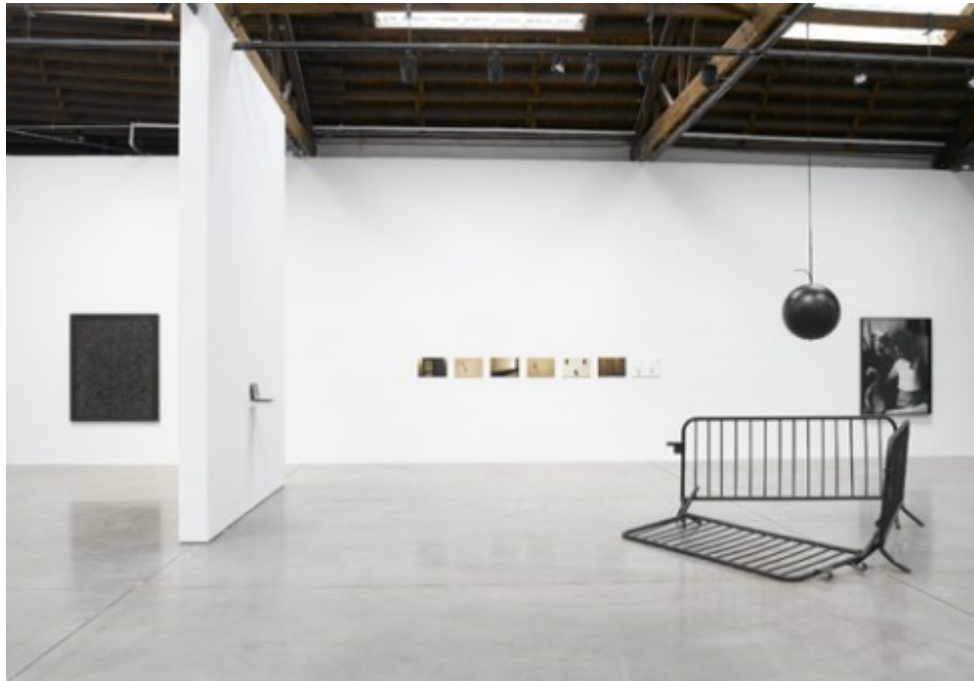


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SOFT MACHINES



a review of the current exhibition at Pace Gallery

by Miles Mathis

Pace Gallery bills itself as one of the top galleries in the country, and of course it is, dollarwise. This in itself is an indication of the corruption of the wealthy in this country. But before we get into all that, let us look at the blurb for the current show, straight from the Pace website:

“Soft Machines” is a group exhibition of artists exploring the influence and effects of control mechanisms on one's psychological and physical disposition. The title of the exhibition alludes to William S. Burroughs' subversive novel,

The Soft Machine (1961), populated by control and the controlled where narcotics, alcohol, sex, power, money, religion, ideology and language expose the fragile entry points of the animal psyche, and the brutality exacted by the modern world.

As usual, we see the “artists” and salespeople of contemporary art trying desperately to give intellectual ballast to their empty commodities by tying them to literature, politics, and theory. And, also as usual, we see them failing miserably to do so. Without even looking at the art or reading beyond this blurb, we can blow a fatal hole in this entire project. To begin with, Burroughs is completely incapable of adding ballast to anything, intellectual or not. He was a draft dodger, drug addict, heroin pusher, and wife murderer, among other things. A rich boy, he actually enlisted in the army so that he could be an officer and bugger other rich boys in uniform. But when he was assigned to the infantry instead he had his mommy and his doctors testify he was mentally unstable. This got him out. Later he shot and killed his sometimes wife in a drunken game of William Tell and then sent their child off to live with the grandparents. So when I read that Burroughs is “exposing the brutality exacted by the modern world,” I know I am reading a whitewash. The brutality in Burroughs' life didn't come from the corrupt ideology of the modern world, it came from within. I am not denying that the modern world is controlling or controlled, or that it is brutal. I am denying that Burroughs' brutal response is interesting in any way. I live in the same controlled world Burroughs did, and I'm not happy about it, but I don't find any release from that feeling in being a drug addict or in reading about drug addicts. I don't find any release from that feeling in shooting my wife or in reading about other people murdering and brutalizing children (see Burroughs' *Naked Lunch*). Nor do I find any release from that feeling in viewing the effluent of the untalented, whether that be fake literature or fake art:



In short, I am not impressed by the entire manufactured “artists' reaction” to the world. This artists' reaction to the modern world has a long history, going back at least to the middle of the 18th century. The *sturm und drang* of Goethe's time was hysterical but slightly appealing nonetheless, with its heightened emotions and overwrought characters like Werther. But the vulgar and brutal *sturm und drang* of our own times is only pathetic. It is pathetic not only because it is false and self-defeating, but because it doesn't even lead to great art. It doesn't even lead to decent art. The *sturm und drang* of the late 18th century led to the great works of Schiller, Goethe, Mozart, Beethoven and many more. The fake *sturm und drang* now leads to oversold nullities like Burroughs and the phonies in this show.

I am also not impressed by the squishy language of these exhibition blurbs: “where narcotics. . . expose the fragile entry points of the animal psyche.” What are the entry points of the animal psyche, and why are they so fragile? More to the point, if in fact narcotics, alcohol, religion, and so on expose these fragile entry points, it seems it would be simple to cover and strengthen these entry points by *foregoing* narcotics, alcohol, religion, etc. The last thing a person concerned with his own vulnerability to outside forces would want to do is become a drug addict, right? In this way the blurb makes no possible sense. It blames control mechanisms for forcing these fragile entry points, but supposing these entry points exist and are fragile, it is not control mechanisms that are weakening them. It is *lack* of control from inside the psyche. To put it in old Biblical terms, what we have here is a blaming of the devil for tempting us, rather than a blaming of the sinner for sinning. The drug addict wants to believe he is not a victim of his own choices, he is a Victim of the Pusher. More on this later.

As another example of obscurantist writing, we may look at Burroughs' most famous convention, the cut-up technique. This is the transparent gimmick posing as a novelty whereby the writer shuffles an already completed work, so that the scenes appear in random order or non-sequential order. Ah, yes, imagine how much more interesting Mozart would be if we threw all his notes into the air and played them as they came down! The “artists” promoted now by the top galleries are people who find stuff like this poignant, or pretend to. They find it poignant because it is all the creativity they are capable of. They aren't capable of real art, but they are masters of the feint. They can always come up with something to divert your attention away from the realization that they haven't produced any art. Writers such as Burroughs finish their books, realize they aren't worth a damn, and then try to figure out how to sell them anyway. If adding a lot of gratuitous sex and violence doesn't work, the next thing to try is a re-edit. “Maybe I can make it *seem* interesting by chopping it up, or writing it in crayon, or writing it in second-person plural, or inserting time-travel between each and every page, or by having the reader read it right to left and bottom to top, like a Chinese manuscript.” The publishers, needing something to sell, go along with the idea and promote the cheap gimmick as some sort of literary revolution. Amazingly, people buy it. Yes, people supposedly appalled by the “control mechanisms invisibly brutalizing them” drop everything to run out and buy a book just because they read about it in *Vanity Fair*. And of course that book is brutal beyond anything they have ever actually

experienced.

But back to the literary cut-up technique: who is impressed by this? Remember that kid in fourth grade who always thought 52-card pickup was a gas? He grew up and became a contemporary artist. He still loves that trick, since it saves him from having to learn any real card tricks. Even card tricks take some skill. But the contemporary artist isn't interested in skill; he or she is interested in substituting literary references, political references, and cheap gimmicks for skill. No, wait, now that I think of it, the artist doesn't even have to do that, really. The suits, hired from the art history and advertising departments, create all the fake buzz with their name-dropping and their relevance creation and their blah-blahing. The "artists" just have to show up with right clothes and the right haircuts.

Look again at the pictures above. That is what has passed for an art exhibition for decades now. It isn't even as interesting as a show-and-tell day at a grade school. It really isn't even as interesting as 52-card pickup. That little 10-year old jerk with his deck of cards had more charm than these people. If the gallery director simply raided the dumpster behind the building an hour before the show, no one would know the difference. The contemporary exhibition is like a cut-up technique, where things are exhibited randomly, as if they fell from the sky in an airplane explosion. I suspect the artists would even embrace this idea. I am not offending anybody here, I would guess. It may have already been done, including raiding the dumpster an hour beforehand, or looking up to the sky waiting for space wreckage. If it hasn't, this paper will give someone the clue.

Many won't see my point. How is this a problem? Aren't artists *supposed* to react against the capitalistic, jingoistic, war-mongering, controlling machine? Isn't that what art is? And isn't it a valid reaction to tear it all down, including the old aristocratic art? Is that the *most* valid reaction? When the controllers tell you to do A, you either do as close to nothing as you can, or you do non-A, right? Doesn't that automatically make you a modern-day hero?

Not really, Jack. That is what I meant by self-defeating, above. Contemporary art is nothing but a reaction to the controllers, and therefore it is controlled. To do nothing or to do non-A is to let yourself be defined by A. The correct answer is: when the controllers tell you to do A, you do B when you like B, and C when you like C, and Z when you like Z. There is so much more than A or non-A or nothing.

Contemporary art claims to be "pluralistic," but it isn't. It is all variations on non-A or nothing. "A wide variation of nothings" and "pluralistic" are not the same. Most of the exhibits at Pace here are variations of nothing. They are examples of the artist trying to exhibit as little as possible, in the way of Duchamp. The rest are variations of non-A. They are the artist pointing to the Man, saying, "Man, I ain't the Man!" In this way, Burroughs in the perfect reference. Burroughs was always about non-A or nothing. He was in reaction from the earliest age. Drugs are the "nothing" reaction. "I don't

want the Man's A, therefore I will have nothing! I will get stoned.” The reaction of the uncreative. Those with a tiny bit more spirit choose non-A. “Dude, the Man wants me to be a businessman, but I will be artist! I will do whatever the Man tells me not to. My life will be a fucking series of transgressions!” That's more aggressive, but it isn't more creative. There would be no transgression without rules, so the creators of the rules have created both the rules and the transgressions.

The truly creative create what they do with little or no reference to what anyone asks for, positive or negative. They are not responding to a market, or against a market. They are not responding to the past, or against the past. The past may supply them with inspiration and ideas, but they are not producing for a “thou shalt” or a “thou shalt not.”

And that is why and how contemporary art is so unaware. Art of the last century has claimed to be more psychologically canny and aware, but it is actually less so. It has claimed to be more realized and relevant, but it is actually less so. You may say that most artists in the past have had an eye on the market, and that may be true of the successful ones, but in the past they only had one eye on it. Now they have both eyes, both hands, both lips, and all genitals plastered onto the market at all times. Everything they do is predetermined by the magazines or the critics or the galleries, from what they staple together in the studio to what they say to what they smoke to what they wear to how they wear it. Even the tone of their voice is determined by the market. But they seem to be oblivious to all of this. They are the most transparent people in history, but they do not even recognize how transparent they are. Those who invented Deconstruction do not realize that they have arrived at the party already deconstructed. They imagine they are hiding behind all their poses, but each pose is a big sign announcing another weakness, self-doubt, disability, or confusion.

They imagine that a show like this at Pace is a sign of their enlightenment, and what could be more pathetic than that? They honestly seem to think they are the vanguard of something, though it is no longer clear what. “Artists” still show up for these exhibits, and apparently clients do, too. Why? To hobnob with the rich and famous, I guess. But why are the rich and famous there? Is there really no better place for them to be? We simply have one more clue as to why they end up at the Betty Ford Clinic.

I mean that seriously. Wealth and fame are supposed to buy you entry into some interesting places: Buckingham Palace, maybe, or the White House, or the casino at Monte Carlo, or the Dalai Lama's yurt, or at least Russell Means' tipi. Surely there are better places to hang out in New York and LA than Pace Gallery? A tailgate party in a parking garage would be more scenic than Pace Gallery. White walls, concrete floors, and unfinished ceilings? For all he charges for art, you would think Arne Glimcher could afford a couple of rugs and maybe a chair or two. The place is frightening. Does he pass out straightjackets at the door? I always picture people at these exhibitions walking around with those little balls strapped in their mouths, and fishnets, and someone walking behind them with a whip. But even that is probably more exciting

than what actually goes on there: “art” talk with a lot of people who hate art, hate themselves, and hate the big city, but can't get out because their career depends on all these other assholes.

That is the real tragedy of the soft machine, since that machine (the human body) is controlled from *inside*. It may be *impelled* externally, but the final decisions are made internally. The modern person wants to blame “control mechanisms” for all his problems, but although these control mechanisms certainly exist, and although they are usually aligned with evil, they aren't the cause of most people's problems. Just as these control mechanisms didn't force or even impel Burroughs to make the mistakes he made, these control mechanisms don't force most of the mistakes that most people make. For example, there are very few cases in which the government or CIA has forced anyone to take addictive drugs (not none, but very few). Burroughs was not a victim of MK-Ultra, as far as I know. I am a hardboiled conspiracy theorist, one who thinks the government lies about everything, but even I don't believe the government is forcing most people to take drugs or pharmaceuticals. If you buy what you are told to buy, by TV advertisers or other pushers, you are not being controlled, you are being *used* for profit. And this also applies to art: if you buy the crap modern art you are told to buy by Arne Glimcher or Larry Gagosian or Mary Boone, you are not being controlled, you are being used for profit. You are not a victim of some vast control structure, you are a victim of your own ignorance and gullibility. To break this cycle, you don't have to deconstruct society or become a “subversive novelist” or unwind any eternal Gordian knot or tune out, turn off. You just have to quit listening to salesmen. If you don't like the new world, QUIT BUYING IT. Or, if you really like the drugs and the modern art and so on, don't pester us with your “control mechanisms.” You have created your own little hell and can take full responsibility for the heat.

