Success and Failure of Peter Fuller

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'Success and Failure of Peter Fuller', *New Left Review*, no. 207, September-October 1994, pp. 87-102.

The British have not been well served by their most popular critics of modern art. Their specious prose and philosophical posturing often masked confused, contradictory thought, producing a writing that was both patronising and mystifying. They tended to be isolated by an atmosphere of philistine hostility which rarely allowed them to proceed beyond an endless rehearsal of fundamentals–supposing that their thought would have allowed it. The most celebrated critic of the Thatcher years was not one to accept this condition lightly: Peter Fuller was an irascible and uncompromising writer, who, while never forgetting to court a public, journeyed from Marxist to conservative, from materialist to quasi-religious views, barely touching the middle ground. Of his early affiliations Fuller wrote, '[...] in the early 1970s, I certainly came close to believing that the editorial board of *The NLR* had access to "The Truth", to which I could be a party if only I understood their texts correctly.'[1] This attitude was abandoned in the later seventies in favour first of essentialism (founded on psychoanalysis and biology) and then conservatism. Two recent books, assembled from fragments of Fuller's work, provide an opportunity to assess his later writing and to suggest its relation to the state of contemporary art and criticism: *Peter Fuller's Modern Painters* is a collection of essays and lectures, and *Henry Moore* is collated from published essays and unpublished notes according to a plan which Fuller had made before his death in 1990.[2] Fuller's books and *Modern Painters*, the magazine which he founded, reached a wide public well beyond the normally closed circle of the art world, and so they are interesting not only their content but as cultural phenomena. Although, following his death, his reputation has gone into decline, an analysis of Fuller's work and political trajectory may yield insights into the condition of culture under Thatcherism.

Fuller's passage from Left to Right was common enough, yet perhaps in his case its form was peculiar. His early materialism was radical but literal, fixed on the determining force of the market. For instance in 1976 Fuller endorsed Hugh Jenkins' argument that art should be entirely

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1 Fuller, *Marches Past*, London 1986, p. 7.

2 *Peter Fuller's Modern Painters: Reflections on British Art*, edited by John McDonald, London, Methuen, 1993, œ25 (henceforth MP), despite the title, the essays are from a variety of sources, not just *Modern Painters*, and they include some not previously published; *Henry Moore: An Interpretation*, edited by Anthony O'Hear, London, Methuen, 1993, œ16 (henceforth HM).

freed from the market so that historically significant works would become available to all.[3] Puncturing the transcendence of art meant revealing its basis in money: he asked Jasper Johns if he restricted his output to keep prices high, and quizzed the dealer Leslie Waddington about the propriety of his financial dealings and the payment of tax.[4] Later, the extent of his conservatism was equally absolute; the market was considered completely irrelevant to the aesthetic quality of work produced, as though it were a transparent and entirely natural system. [MP, p. 41]

At its best and most considered, Fuller's criticism held out a powerful vision of a culture in crisis, evaporating between the poles of triumphant but mendacious commercial media and liberal but vacuous fine arts. Using Sebastiano Timpanaro's biological materialism, and Raymond Williams' relation of biological processes to the material techniques of making art, Fuller argued that the material basis of fine art media themselves could serve as the foundation for a non-ideological practice which might open up glimpses of a socialist future.[5] The analysis was often acute but the recommendations were less than convincing, and elements which were later to serve conservatism were already evident. Timpanaro was used to support the priority of biology, not only in terms of history, but also in terms of importance. The idea of material processes was later extended well beyond mere media to more properly ideological notions of 'the conventions and devices which are the inheritance of a living [...] tradition'. [HM, p. 8]

Later, Fuller saw his switching of allegiances as a meaningful narrative so, while he often relented his Marxist past in print, he was reluctant to dispose of the husks of leftist terminology. 'Materialism', 'structures of feeling' and 'the aesthetic dimension' recur until the end, stripped of all connection with the critical theories in which they had originated. Even Fuller's early work used materialist analysis only for art which had failed: 'When little or no work strives to transcend the present and affirm the potentialities of the future, a critical methodology based on social and economic analysis becomes almost sufficient.'[6] In other words, materialism was 'almost' sufficient to analyse degenerate modernism but was inappropriate to authentic art. Bankrupt avant-garde work was contrasted with art which provided 'glimpses of moments of becoming' in a historically transcendent sense.[7] Yet behind such phrases, spiced with Benjamin, there was never any sense of just what reality should be transcended. Even Fuller's materialism was only ever its spirit. His sentences often bring to mind Eric Morecambe's reply to André Previn when told he was playing the wrong notes; they are the right notes, he said, but maybe not in the right order.

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[3] 'Hugh Jenkins's Rule: What did the Former Minister for the Arts Achieve?', *Art Monthly*, no. 2, November 1976, p. 3.
[4] 'Jasper Johns Interviewed, II', *Art Monthly*, no. 19, September 1978, p. 6; 'Leslie Waddington on Art and its Marketing', *Art Monthly*, no. 11, October 1977, pp. 14-15.
[5] 'The Fine Arts After Modernism', *New Left Review*, no. 119, January-February, 1980, pp. 57-8.
[6] 'The Crisis in British Art', *Art Monthly*, no. 8, June 1977, p. 9.
[7] 'The Crisis in British Art. Part II', *Art Monthly*, no. 9, July/ August 1977, p. 14.

A Shared Symbolic Order

Fuller exercised his invective indiscriminately, yet all that was most positive in his writing was negative. His descriptions of contemporary art as empty and trivial were often accurate. For Fuller, such art was rootless and unpopular; ordinary people rejected it in favour of the comfortable figuration of chocolate boxes, advertisements and the Royal Academy's Summer Exhibition. Modernist art, like its architecture, was a negative image of what an art should be: industrial, inhuman, serial and anti-aesthetic. Andy Warhol was its paradigmatic figure. Here was an artist who deliberately cultivated and exploited the banality of mass culture: '[...] Warhol's imagination was negligible, his painterly skills nugatory, and his aesthetic sensibility non-existent. [...] there is nothing there except "the evil of banality", *anaesthesia* itself.' [MP, p. 138] Fuller rightly criticised much of the nonsense talked about Warhol, yet his own judgement was typically absolute. There was a complete refusal to see that there might be anything radical about the artist's project. He had no conception that Warhol's very blankness, inhuman repetition and absolute commercialism might critically illuminate just these qualities in the art world as a whole.

The fundamental problem with contemporary art, as Fuller saw it, was the lack of a 'shared symbolic order' on which its foundations could rest and from which sophisticated yet accessible superstructures could be built. Without such a bedrock of common understanding, art tended towards the simplistic or the incoherent. For Fuller, the emptiness and autonomy of modernist art reflected its lack of social function: the arts could be free only because they were irrelevant to the stifling and inescapable operation of the 'mega-visual' culture of advertising and commercial imagery.[8] When this argument is made from the Left, the focus rests on the destruction by capital of organic communities which had created their own common cultural context. However, Fuller's Leftist critique of conventional modernism (especially the work of Anthony Caro, Bridget Riley and Richard Hamilton) required little adjustment to shift it to a judgement from the Right, which lamented the lack of an authoritarian, religious system. The shared symbolic order had been abandoned with the religion on which it had rested, and the blame lay with Darwin and geology. Fuller's belief that such an order had held fast until the middle of the nineteenth century is of course extremely dubious. It ignores the repression of dissent, the great diversity of views, and the critique of religious doctrine on logical and historical grounds from Voltaire onwards, while favouring a fabricated tradition of earnest English cranks and eccentrics, of which Fuller was self-consciously a member.

With the fall of a shared symbolic order not only art but mankind's whole relation to nature suffered; once it was learnt that 'the natural world was unrelated to divine creative activity', it came to be regarded as fit only for exploitation. [MP, p. 59] Fuller writes as if such exploitation dated only from the last half of the nineteenth century, and as if *Genesis* could not be used as a pretext for

[8] See *Beyond the Crisis in Art*, London, 1980, p. 61.

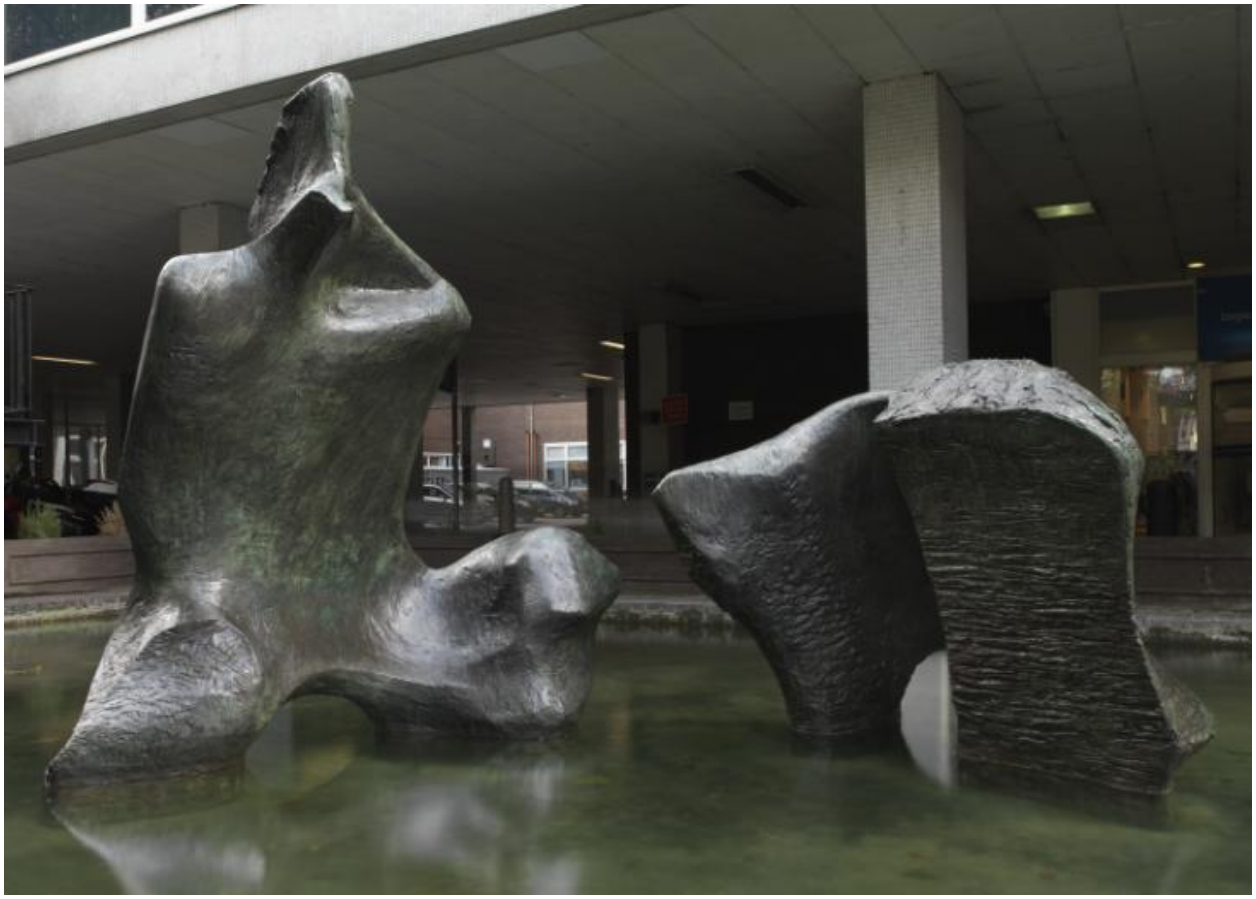
environmental despoilation. Nature was supposed to serve as an absolute grounding for Fuller's theories, and he occasionally flirted with scientific theories in order to make this foundation seem more plausible. So fractals pointed towards 'the scientific truth of the Romantic insight that the whole world is contained in a grain of sand.' [MP, p. 180] Yet in citing Clement Greenberg to the effect that 'the highest aesthetic sensibility rests on the same basic assumptions ... as to the nature of reality as does the "advanced" thinking contemporaneous with it', Fuller claims that here he was wrong on this most fundamental of issues. [MP, p. 75] Fuller's use of science, then, was hardly a matter of principle, but rather an expedient employed whenever it was convenient. Chaos theory and its visual expression in fractals are indeed likely to be of service to materialism for they demonstrate how forms of great complexity and variation can be derived from the action of very simple forces. In chaos theory, nature (but only part of it) emerges as structured but radically contingent, while in Fuller's writing it is unified and departicularised, a Victorian moral essence or inhabiting spirit. As a basis for his theories, it was static and ahistorical, no hint of the dialectic played through it.

One exception to this generalised nature lay in his use of psychoanalysis where Fuller, unlike many other critics and art historians, was laudably committed to a particular and refutable position, based on the theories of D.W. Winnicott. Fuller's conversion to psychoanalysis which, on his own account, marked the beginning of his move away from the Left, was another part of his search for objective foundations. Unfortunately, his use of its language was often somewhat crass, used to flavour biographical or descriptive passages and as a source for anecdotes which could support interpretations based on 'nature'. Fuller described the supposed importance of the Yorkshire landscape for Henry Moore:

> [...] nature as the extension of the mother, the earth mother violated by miners and warriors, full of tunnelling and cutting. In his works a strong, powerful and instinctive response to the Pennine rocks fuses with an equally strong and instinctive response to the female body. The female body is seen as a child views the mother's body, as a source of sustenance, nurture and aggression, as an environment, rather than as an object of sexual desire. [HM, p. 18]

The problem is not whether this description is an accurate account of Moore's psychological attitude, but how Fuller could possibly know one way or the other. Another section of *Henry Moore* applies Winnicott's theories to the artist's treatment of the subject of the mother and child with dubious interpretations and analogies. [HM, p. 68ff] Again the difficulty is that, in the absence of a patient to cure, one set of arbitrary associations is as plausible as any other. Fuller suggests that Moore's celebrated splitting of the figure into two separate pieces may represent the beautiful 'object mother' and the sublime 'environment mother' [HM, pp. 81-2] but makes no recommendations for which piece should be regarded as which for any particular work. In fact in many sculptures (including the Lincoln Center *Reclining Figure*, 1963-5) a straightforward masculine-feminine opposition is more likely, and, as with Moore's use of gender characterisations as a whole, benefits from a social rather than a psychoanalytic treatment. More generally, the mapping of the play of infants which has no genre, technique or medium onto the public practice of art is of doubtful value.

Fuller always assumed that the psychoanalytical and natural foundation of a work of art was the most significant thing about it.



Moore, *Reclining Figure*, 1963-5, Lincoln Center

Moral McCarthyism

Nature was not a sufficient basis for an oppositional aesthetic, partly because modernism had its own well-developed claims to it, and partly because it could not be used to differentiate between nations. National tradition, however, might well serve as a bulwark against internationalising modernism, especially in England where a case could reasonably be made that it was part of the English character to resist modernism in favour of a Romantic engagement with nature, or at least a commonsense attachment to the sloping roofs and not overly regimented gardens of suburbia. Fuller's answer to the success of modernism and mass culture lay in a difficult attempt to re-establish links with native traditions, evolving a means of expression which created a new symbolic order without the foundation of religious belief. Fine painting and sculpture were needed, which

built on the strengths of national tradition, appealing to sensibilities nurtured by 'the complexion of our skies, the trim physiognomy of our fields and hedgerows, [...] the gentle variability of our weather [...]'.[9] The English painters whom Fuller most admired–David Bomberg, John Piper, John Bellany, Frank Auerbach–worked representationally, depicting either landscape or the human body, and were committed to the traditional concerns of paint handling, colour harmony and the representation of space.

In the construction of an authentic national tradition, those who stood in the way were condemned in terms reminiscent of McCarthyism. In the editorial to the first issue of *Modern Painters*, Fuller claimed that art world institutions do not regard themselves as,

> [...] an integral part of a common national culture–nor are they seen as such by the wider public. Indeed, contemporary art in this country is, by and large, administrated by those who feel no particular affection for this nation or its people, with its diverse traditions, customs, and landscapes [...].[10]

McCarthyism was combined with anti-Americanism. Fuller demonised the United States, conflating the nature of the multinational culture industry with the character of its main country of origin. Of Times Square he wrote:

> This is the stranded whale's anus. Its tawdriness is that of London's Soho inflated ten times. [...] the West Side Highway had, in parts, been shut off and was being allowed to erode itself into the sea, [...] the piers that projected from parts of this ruin had become meeting places for homosexuals. [...] a Fellini-like image of an equivalent to the Late Roman Empire. That is how I see the whole city. Each time I come here, New York seems visibly more corrupted, tacky, decadent [...]. The seediness of Times Square has become, for me, the symbol of this terrifying city. Here, it is as if all the aesthetic and affective links between the crippled materiality of the body and the inflated superficiality of the phantasmagoric image had been abolished: unless you have stood here, you cannot understand New York painting.[11]

In New York, at least, the relation between the social, the political and the aesthetic was transparently readable. Fuller argued that modernist formalism was particularly appropriate to the United States:

> There the superficiality of the new aesthetic, its reliance on visual sensation divorced from natural form, spiritual values or, come to that, any deeply rooted sense of cultural tradition, was a positive advantage. In the thin and ugly climate of modern American "cultural" life, this art of mere sensation flourished as it could never hope to do in the English countryside. [MP, p. 111]

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[9] *Images of God: the Consolations of Lost Illusions*, London, 1988, p. 129.
[10] 'Editorial. A Renaissance in British Art?', *Modern Painters*, vol. I, no. 1, Spring 1988, p. 2.
[11] 'Excerpts from a New York Diary', *Art Monthly*, no. 33, February 1980, p. 14.

In fact, in matters of taste, one should never trust 'an American (who comes from an anaesthetised culture)',[12] nor indeed should one have much faith in Germans whose 'nihilism' from Friedrich to Kiefer is as much a national tradition as 'English sympathetic immersion in nature.' [MP, p. 25f]

The same English good sense and moderation which, at least on some level, had preserved their aesthetic sense had also made them resistant to political extremism, the two themes being wonderfully blended in Fuller. The modernist sculptors who followed Caro were 'literal sculptural Stalinists',[13] while the British Neo-Romantic revival of the thirties and forties 'unlike futurism and modernism, could never have led to fascism'. [HM, p. 41-2] The claim implied in 'led' is quite extraordinary even by Fuller's standards, but, leaving this aside, the statement is still false: modernist artists were of course persecuted by the Nazis, while in Italy Futurism was one of a number of permitted trends in a more catholic arts scene. In both countries, neo-classicism was officially sanctioned. Furthermore, if things had gone differently, a Fascist state in Britain could well have made use of a nationalist Neo-Romanticism.

Glynn Williams, *Gateway of Hands*, 1992

[12] *Images of God*, p. 26.
[13] 'Stockwell Sculpture', *Art Monthly*, no. 30, October 1979, p. 15.

In his clearer moments, Fuller was well aware that traditions are fabricated and fought over.[14] Later his purpose in reactivating tradition was the construction of consoling illusions, conscious ideologies which would transcend the godless condition of the modern world. In great art, wherever there is depredation or despair, there is also bound to be redemption: 'Lowry found in the imagery of industrial decline, a secular equivalent for the religious idea of the Fall, and, through his painting techniques, reinstated hints of paradise into this dismal reality [...].' [MP, p. 99] Inverting the Marxist exposure of ideological falsehood, Fuller came to recommend it: the modernist turned figurative sculptor, Glynn Williams, was praised for 'embracing illusion'. [HM, p. 64] Fuller put himself in a curious but perhaps not atypical position with these views. Obviously, if we know that something is an illusion then it may cease to work as such. If the aesthetic is seen as an independent realm, then the character of its relation to life and reality must remain mysterious, and its relevance and purity tend to be simultaneously asserted in an affirmation and denial of its connection with the profane world. The aesthetic was at once absolutely necessary to life, and absolutely independent of politics and economics.

Patronage from Above

A contradiction is evident when Fuller lauds middle-class taste and common sense while vilifying the triumph of mega-visual culture. Fuller was faced with the general problem of why, given natural predilections and strong national traditions, English people gullibly let an authentic culture slip away in favour of aesthetic nullity. We have seen that in part the reason was the decline of religion, but Fuller writes in such voluntarist terms that this can only be part of the answer. In meeting this question, there are further intimations of the turn to the Right. Much of the explanation lay simply in people's unequal ability to distinguish aesthetic quality: 'The capacity to recognise it [...] appears to be rooted in a genetically variable ability for intuitive judgement and/or the cultivation of exceptional taste.'[15] The latter clause is of course circular, leaving heredity as the basis.

Using the analyses of Perry Anderson and Tom Nairn, Fuller had long argued that the peculiarity of English art was due to the nation's unique alliance of the aristocracy and the bourgeoisie.[16] He could hardly continue commending middle-class taste while it was obvious that they were the main purveyors and consumers of mass culture, but a way out was to try to revive the traditional alliance he had once used as a point of critique. This partly explains why in his later writing Fuller courted royalty and members of the aristocracy. The first issue of *Modern Painters* reprinted Prince Charles' foolish comments on modern architecture, along with an essay by Lord

[14] See 'The Fine Arts After Modernism', p. 47.
[15] *Images of God*, p. 59.
[16] 'The Fine Arts After Modernism', pp. 46-7.

Gowrie, who was to become a regular contributor. Where Fuller's prose was once freighted with Marxist terminology, it was now weighed down with details of country seats. Fuller went as far as to state, 'For the time being, I feel that, in Britain, the best chance of a national aesthetic revival lies in the improbable hands of Prince Charles, heir to the throne.' [MP, p. 47] Since royalty and aristocracy were living embodiments of a national tradition, this was not simply snobbery but rather the logical place for him to turn for enlightened patronage and aesthetic leadership. Democratic processes were useless for deciding aesthetic matters because ordinary people are steeped in the dregs of commercial art: '[...] there is no alternative to positive, discriminating patronage from above'.[17] So, in answering the question of how an authentic national culture had been lost, Fuller claimed that the post-war decline of neo-Romanticism was largely due to the replacement of cultural grandees like Lord Clark by grey, bourgeois bureaucrats implicated in the modernist conspiracy. There was also the strong suggestion in the positive criticism, that while plebs might turn to, say, Lowry, for consolation, the elite who recommend it know that its positive charge is illusory.

Moore and Bacon

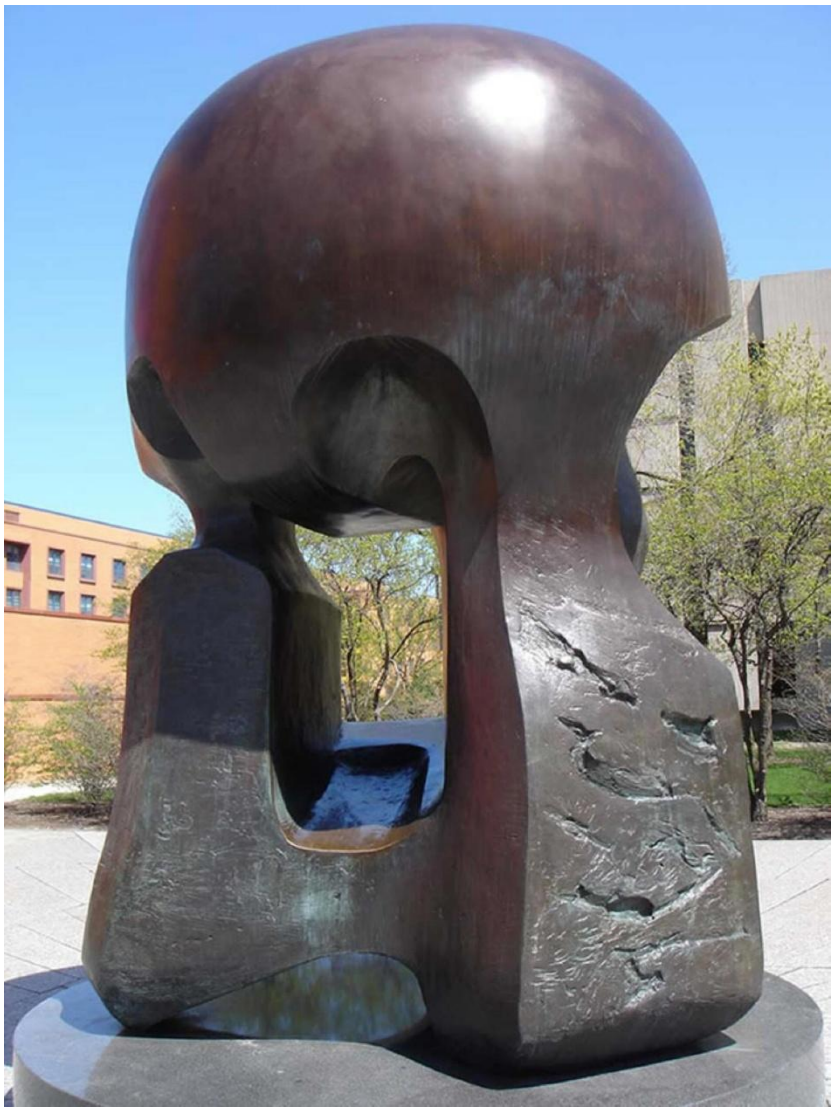
Lest English culture be judged beyond resuscitation, it was important that Fuller find at least one successful artist who was at once innovative and traditional, contemporary and conservative. The most obvious example was Henry Moore whose marrying of figurative and abstract forms in sculpture had won him international fame. Fuller's fundamental argument about Moore runs as follows: 'Without access to a living, iconographic religious tradition, but through his re-invention of sculptural tradition and his rigorous exploration of natural form, Moore was able to show that a secular art of high sentiment is still possible in our time.' [HM, p. 89] Moore was Fuller's ideal contemporary artist, yet even here the critic's understanding of the work was highly contentious. Moore is usually thought of as a modernist, but Fuller must show that this is a mistaken view:

> His greatness can be seen to have resided in his sense of continuity with the past at a time when such things were not highly regarded; in his sense of union with nature; in his replenishment of national tradition; and, perhaps above all, in his standing for a grand and central tradition of sculpture when that was threatened. [HM, p. 5]

So, far from employing modern forms, Moore was defending sculptural tradition against them. Moore, however, often made innovative, disturbing, and even deliberately ugly work, so it was important for Fuller to save the sculptor from himself. His association with Surrealism for instance (which included showing in the International Surrealist Exhibition in 1936) is glossed as follows: '[...]

[17] *Seeing through Berger*, London, 1988, p. 150.

in retrospect we can see that his imagination possessed a poise, balance and, in the best sense, an *ordinariness* which the Surrealists lacked.' [HM, p. 31] In stressing Moore's traditional aspects and discounting the modernist ones, Fuller uses a notion of the artist's essential project which assumes what he is trying to demonstrate. So the sculptures of the 1930s in which space was delineated with strings are 'examples of the way in which the impact of modernism could deflect Moore from his true course'. [HM, p. 33]



Henry Moore, *Nuclear Energy*, 1967

Fuller argues that Moore abandoned modernism in favour of a figurative tradition: in his war drawings he 'reveals himself confident enough to have reached back into the reservoirs of classical convention which was anathema to the Modern Movement'. [HM, p. 38] The war drawings are indeed more figurative than the pre-war work, but Fuller tells us nothing about the circumstances of their creation. They were made for the War Artists' Advisory Committee, a government body which

commissioned artists to document the war, and which would certainly have rejected non-figurative work. Similarly, Moore's *Nuclear Energy* (1964-6), a skull-shaped monumental bronze made for the Fermi laboratory at the University of Chicago, is thought to reach a consoling conclusion: 'It was as if Moore was exploring, and, in formal terms, somehow containing, the cataclysmic forces which threatened both the sustaining environment of nature and human culture itself.' [HM, p. 47] The 'somehow' is never explained, and Fuller again ignores the commissioning and renaming of this bronze, which was originally called *Atom Piece*, the title being abandoned lest there be any danger of a political reference to 'peace'. He does not directly deny the violent and negative elements in Moore's work; what counts is that this 'expression of violence in sculpture involved a process of transformation into its opposite–a "redemption through form".'[18] Fuller never says how this happens nor indeed just what it means.

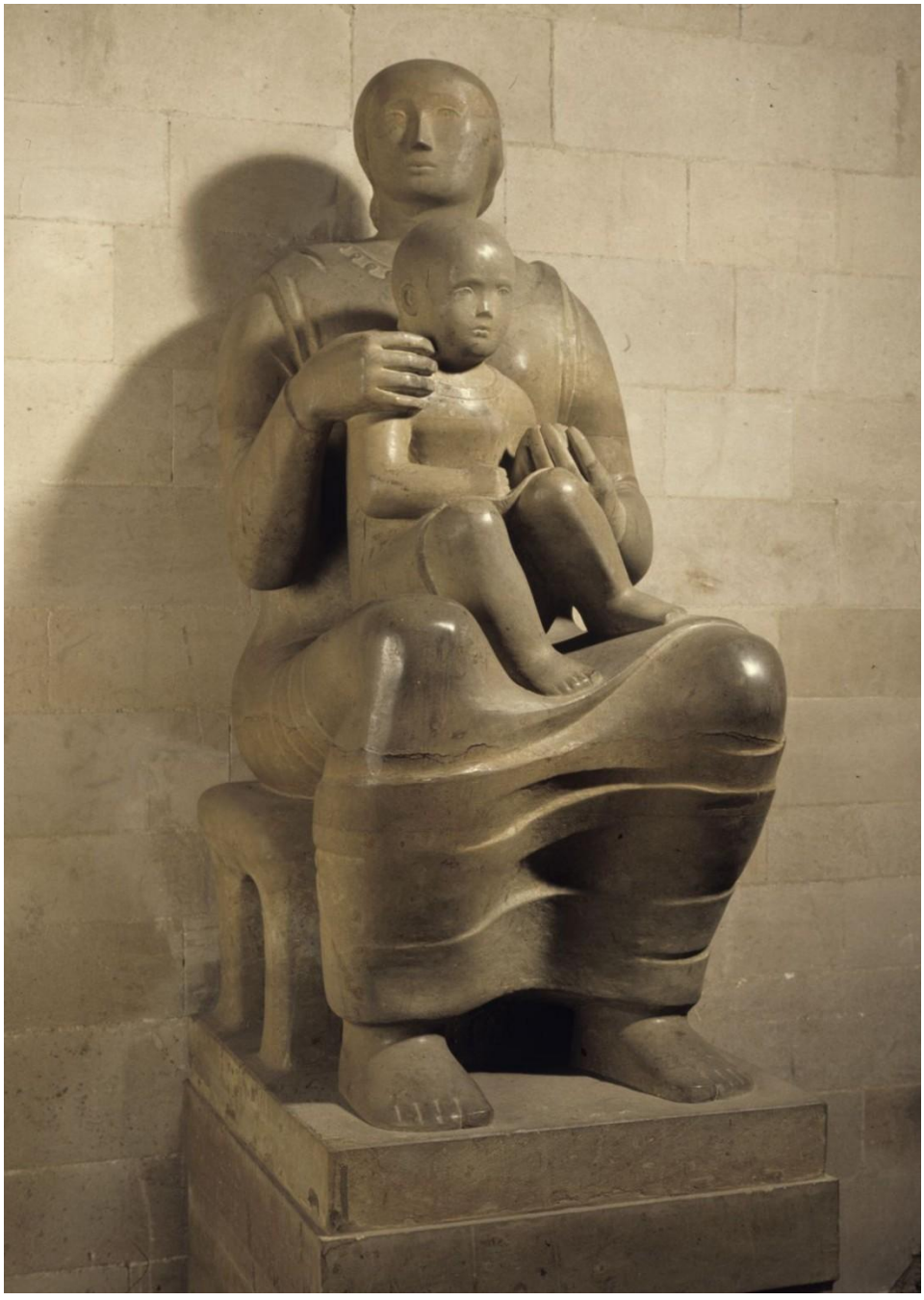
The fundamental claim that Moore abandoned modernism for traditional figuration is, in any case, highly tenuous, since he constantly moved from figuration to abstraction and back again. If the sculpture looks traditional now, this is entirely a retrospective effect since bourgeois commonsense violently objected to the work at the time. The idea that Moore's work is part of an English tradition is also doubtful: despite Fuller's best efforts, Moore's owed most, not to Alfred Stevens, George Frederick Watts or Alfred Gilbert, but to Giacometti, Arp and Picasso. It is in his writing about Moore that Fuller's limited conception of modernism emerges most clearly: it is essentially technophile, materialist, hard-edged and factory-made. Modernist concerns with nature, the primitive, the unconscious, or with the sympathetic working of materials were never a part of the movement but were rather forces acting against it. All that might serve to counter Fuller's arguments is simply ruled out by definition.

The consolation which Fuller would have Moore offer us leads to repose. The *Madonna and Child*, a religious sculpture made during the War for a church in Northampton, and a work which Fuller rates as one of the artist's best, 'is solemn, silent and serene; she gazes out on the world with a classical repose, authority and equilibrium [...]'. [HM, p. 40] Contrasting this sculpture to the work of Francis Bacon, Fuller concludes, 'We must decide whether in a world apparently deserted by God, we prefer to see our fellow human beings as sacks of mutilated, spasm-ridden muscle; or as creatures still capable of composure, dignity, and profound spiritual strength.' [HM, p. 40] There is no path between these two poles, of knowing resignation or animal existence (as much expressed by Lucien Freud as Francis Bacon, Fuller might have added, had his ideology allowed), and certainly no art which could suggest the possibility of change or action.

If Moore acted as the ultimate confirmation of Fuller's theories, Bacon was a living refutation; here was a highly skilled, in many ways traditional, painter whose engagement with religious themes (in for instance *Three Studies for Figures at the Base of a Crucifixion*, 1944) showed no sign of producing any form of redemption, but rather its opposite. Fuller viewed Bacon as an artist

[18] 'Editorial. Henry Moore on Television. An Open Letter to Anthony Barnett', *Modern Painters*, vol. I, no. 3, Autumn 1988, p. 4.

of undeniable ability who 'has used his expressive skills to denigrate and degrade'. [MP 134] The problem was sidestepped by stating that Bacon's bleak vision was a product not of a less than perfect world but of the artist's unsavoury personal qualities: 'Bacon's skills may justly command our admiration; but his tendentious vision demands a moral response, and I believe, a refusal.'[19]



Moore, *Madonna and Child* 1943–4, Church of St Matthew, Northampton

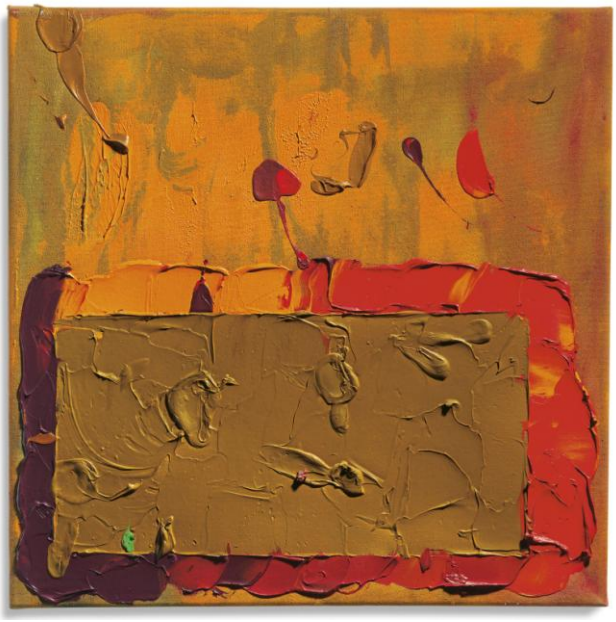
[19] MP, p. 135. See also *Images of God*, p. 67.

Gender

The preference for Moore over Bacon brings out issues of gender and sexuality. Partly because of its basis in psychoanalysis, Fuller's criticism is loaded with conservative gender distinctions. In descriptions of artists he admires, he usually employ the old cliches of masculine heroism: risk, danger and courage. [see e.g., MP, p. 161] If Fuller ever thought of art as a male gaze encompassing a female subject, this was only as its natural and eternal condition. Art where this relation is altered caused him real dilemmas. David Hockney is an artist whom Fuller certainly admires, yet:

> Hockney's vision [...] is stamped by his homosexual stance. In one sense, this undoubtedly limits his work: those of us who are not homosexual will never simply feel the same way about those delicate pink lines with which he tints the buttocks in his otherwise black-and-white drawings of young boys.[20]

It is difficult to know where to start here, whether with the implication that homosexuality is largely a matter of how one stands, or with the presumption that only a homosexual position must be limiting. The accommodation is finally made as follows: 'Like his erstwhile hero, Francis Bacon, Hockney sees men and women as somehow trapped within their own subjectivity. Perhaps this is where the vicissitudes of the homosexual imagination can appeal to a more general existential condition.' [MP, p. 231] Fuller's opposition of a wholesome Moore to a rank Bacon is very much to do with the gender of the figures they depicted and their implied sexual choice.



John Hoyland, *28-02-70*, 1970

[20] 'David Hockney', *Art Monthly*, no. 49, September 1981, p. 35.

Fuller's notion of aesthetic redemption was entirely founded on immersion in a feminine sublime. He wrote of John Hoyland:

> [...] the paint on the surface undeniably evokes flesh, palpable though diffused, "dislimned and indistinct as water is in water", a mere presence, pinkish, melting, peach-like, milky, yet still as specific and enticing as a bosom issuing from a blouse, a siren, sucking you towards the recessive illusions of that "background" [...][21]

Indeed his whole notion of transcendence, which once carried a political charge, was subsequently dependent on this engulfment of the viewer:

> Like *all* dreams of Eden, Lowry's vision seems to have been born, on the one hand, out of his intense and unremitting sense of loneliness and isolation, and on the other, out of some half-remembered dream of mergence with his mother. It is, perhaps, not too ridiculous to glimpse in those incongruous milky backgrounds hints of that longed-for infantile fusion. [MP, p. 103-4, my emphasis]

All the art which Fuller admired, however different it might be–whether it was Lowry or Natkin or Moore – held out, in the last instance, this promise of mammary submersion. Fuller stood as the gallant defender of the feminine sublime against the monsters of modernity. Women artists who dared challenge their role fared even worse than gays. Fuller was asked:

> *Can you say something about your attitude to Feminist Art?*
>
> I don't think there is such a thing. The feminist art movement is nonsense, complete nonsense, from start to finish.[22]

The Primal Scene

Citing Wilde, Fuller claimed that 'higher' criticism is 'the record of one's own soul', [MP, p. xxvii] and he took this to mean that anything he did was relevant to its exercise. If it is difficult not to be personal in a critique of Fuller, this is because every issue he touched was personalised. The reader is rarely spared an intermediate stage through which Fuller passed on his way to a conclusion. Old errors were not concealed but endlessly recanted. This usually involved the 'murder' of his

[21] *Beyond the Crisis in Art*, p. 157.
[22] Colin Symes, 'Art and Politics' [interview with Fuller], *Art Monthly*, no. 89, September 1985, p. 9.

intellectual father and personal mentor John Berger, whose opinions the youthful Fuller had thoroughly digested and frequently regurgitated. In his later writing, the 'primal scene' is played out again and again,[23] although it is the reader who does the atonement:

> [...] there is a very real sense in which the left-wing aesthetic theories of the 1960s and 1970s provided the "programme" for the right-wing governments of the 1980s; for that unholy alliance between the philistines of the Left and the Right. For example, John Berger argued that photography had displaced painting as the uniquely modern, democratic art-form of the twentieth century. Margaret Thatcher's Government squeezed the Fine Arts courses and shifted everything towards design. Berger argued that museums were "reactionary" middle-class institutions that should "logically" be replaced by children's pinboards. Margaret Thatcher proceeded to pressurise every one of our art institutions in a way in which the Director of the National Gallery likened to the destruction of the monasteries during the Reformation. [MP, p. 39]

This supposed equivalence between Left and Right is the crudest sort of guilt by association. Berger becomes the wizard who has broken the magic spell of fine art, releasing the evil forces of philistinism to do their worst.

Just as art must re-establish contact with tradition, so should criticism, but this proved to be an equally troublesome project. From Fuller's point of view, Berger could obviously no longer serve as a model, while Roger Fry and Herbert Read had been in different ways apologists for modernism. To adopt a new father, Fuller had to look further back but, having found one, his identification was absolute. The model was John Ruskin, of course, after whose best-known book Fuller named *Modern Painters*. Ruskin was a restless, comprehensive intellectual and a fine prose stylist, he was moralistic, a purveyor of elevated journalism, ill at ease with his epoch and his sexuality, and somewhat mad; all these qualities suited him in the role of Fuller's alter-ego. Once this enthusiasm was set in train, Fuller scattered his work with purple passages which emulated those of his master:

> To set out to read Ruskin's work today is to begin climbing an unknown mountain. Admittedly, it is a deeply flawed mountain, and it is easy to lose one's way among all that granite stubbornness, those dangerous crevices, valleys clogged with the silt of dead ideas, and endless strata of categories. It is a mountain on which one encounters strange fossils of thought, glacial drifts of verbiage, springs of brilliant insight and frequent glints of an almost preternaturally acute perception. Despite the arduous rocky passages where the going gets so tough that one wants to give up, it is also an infinitely varied mountain, fascinating for its dappled surface, rich in filigreed rocks and luminous hoar-frost. It offers spectacular changes of view and mazes of argument at every turn. Above all it is a majestic mountain, with its foothills and lower slopes rooted firmly in the common-or-garden facts of nature and physical being, but soaring up towards those giddy and sublime heights, swathed in clouds of

[23] Most notably in *Seeing Through Berger*.

> rapture, where non-believers must leave Ruskin to tramp on to meet with his maker. [MP, p. 9]

Ruskin courted contradiction, and the identification was complete enough for Fuller to be happy that such a description, including its 'spectacular changes of view', should be applied to his own work. *Theoria* (1988) was a long account of Fuller's engagement with Ruskin, propagandising for a deeper level of aesthetic engagement, beyond merely pleasurable beauty, in the quest for an awesome sublime. Like Ruskin and William Morris, Fuller objected to capitalism on aesthetic grounds.[24] Like Ruskin, he saw himself as a lone figure railing against decadence, convincing through the force of prose alone. It was as though Fuller was heroically trying to hold back the tide of modernity with pure moral rectitude.

In this personal struggle, all incidents are loaded with significance. In *Marches Past* devotees were regaled with embarrassing accounts, including a Freudian description of oyster eating, a visit to a Times Square sex shop (where our hero nearly lost his lunch), and dark hints of consort with 'painted women'. Elsewhere no detail of Fuller's life or living conditions was felt unworthy of comment. Among descriptions of his indefatigable and partial chasing of sources, he writes that '[... Ludmil] Siskov must have copied the woman from a pin-up photograph published in *Penthouse* magazine. I know, because I remember it.'[25]

This belief in life as narrative was carried over into his accounts of artists' biographies and stylistic developments. Hockney's career was a moral voyage full of traps and lures, a pilgrimage towards a significant and mature style: 'Neither the elaborate devices of Post-Cubism, nor an apparently straightforward naturalism, seemed sufficient to carry Hockney beyond that shimmering pool of narcissism and self-reflection in which he had imprisoned himself.' [MP, p. 229] Direction and progress were all; this was less a hangover from dialectical materialism than a memory of Bunyan. This is just where Fuller's interest in science might have served him better, for chaos theory is deeply antithetical to such views of immanence and destiny.

Grounding aesthetic judgements in nature and national tradition is hardly sufficient. It is easy to think of artists who meet all the right criteria but whose work is still weak, and if this is put down to the general debility of national culture, it becomes difficult to account for those who do succeed. Fuller, like other conservative critics, increasingly founded his judgements in the force of his own personality (expressed in the power of his prose) and experience (sanctified by the pilgrimage from error to enlightenment). It led to that peculiar mixture of populism and snobbery common to such writers, but on these grounds, it is possible to see that nothing Fuller did was irrelevant to his criticism.

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[24] *Images of God*, p. 286.
[25] *Marches Past*, p. 75.

The Success

Fuller's success was a peculiar one. Writers often move from acclaim in their own narrow fields to success with a wider public, but few move the other way. When there was an absolute split between the small, largely London-based, liberal art world and the great uncultured beyond, there was always a role for him as a mouthpiece for the philistines. For most of his career Fuller was beyond the pale of the art establishment; initially for his materialism, then for the accessibility of his writing, which at points threatened to puncture art's divine, money-spinning mystery, and later for his conservative debunking of the avant-garde. There was however a period in the mid to late eighties when it seemed as though Fuller might actually succeed in his task of turning the tide in favour of a conservative, specifically English art. The return to painting was trumpeted everywhere. Galleries were full of ambitious, finely-crafted paintings, and the arts schools (especially the Royal Academy where Fuller haunted the corridors) were stuffed with Neo-Romantics. The Bernard Jacobson Gallery pursued a Fullerite programme of exhibitions and backed the launch of *Modern Painters*. For a moment, Fuller's theories, eccentric and inconsistent though they were, gained an air of plausibility within the arts world itself. In accounting for Fuller's success, we are faced with a similar problem to Lytton Strachey in his biography of Cardinal Manning, an ascetic clerical figure who had achieved fame in a time of apparent progress, science and democracy; Strachey asked whether it was the age which had found a place in its heart for Manning, or rather '[...] was it he who had been supple and yielding? he who had won by art what he could never have won by force, and who had managed, so to speak, to be one of the leaders of the procession less through merit than through a superior faculty for gliding adroitly to the front rank?'[26]

Fuller's reputation was built on his critique of modern art, much of which deserved his invective–this was the positive moment in Fuller's writing and was above all the condition for his success. Yet the critique, because it was not adequately grounded, abandoned itself to philistinism and name-calling (if there is a British tradition, accessible philistinism must be one of its essential components). Beyond this, his success was due to an alignment with Thatcherism; the praise of Victorian values and the characterisation of the sixties as the decade when the rot set in had much in common with Thatcherite orthodoxy. [MP, p. 185-6] Traditional bourgeois tastes were elevated to the level of the universal, excluding all marginal groups. There was a connection between the ideology of the New Right, anti-intellectual, appealing to the nouveau-riche and the little man against the vested interests of professional power, which was congruent with Fuller's views. It was also highly suitable to a later, panicked Conservatism which, calling on authority and nation, attempted to stuff back into Pandora's box the evils released by the unregulated operation of the market. Fuller's criticism was a creature of the Right and could only have thrived in the context of its overwhelming

[26] Lytton Strachey, *Eminent Victorians*, London 1918, p. 2.

victory. In this situation, Fuller's protestations of persecution by a leftist, art-world mafia were particularly hypocritical, as were his attacks on what he described as leftist orthodoxy, which had become rather an embattled minority view.

Fuller's writing was accessible, but its clarity was specious, dissolving as the reader moved from phrase, to essay and then across essays and books. This veneer of lucidity was the direct result of his use of the very techniques he reviled, the means of advertising; slogans, abbreviations, nicknames (one well-known critic was gratuitously dubbed 'Corkballs') and constant repetition– perhaps the most insistent motif is Matthew Arnold listening to the 'long, withdrawing roar' of the Sea of Faith, and glimpsing the 'naked shingles of the world'.[27] The reader of *Peter Fuller's Modern Painters* quickly becomes aware of a formula which most of the essays follow: 1. an inflated and anecdotal claim about an artist's work, positive or negative; 2. a potted biography with psychoanalytic overtones; 3. an attack on modernism and the loss of faith; 4. an assertion of the need for consoling illusions. Moral rectitude, then, was allied with the techniques of propaganda, as though Fuller hoped to wear his readers' resistance down by sheer repetition, as though he could single-handedly compete with the output of the culture industry.

Fashion and Postmodernism

The launch of *Modern Painters* ironically coincided with the Black Monday crash, the beginning of the end of the period when an elite seemed to make money effortlessly (and spent some of it on art), the period which had sustained Fuller's views. Much of the writing now seems prematurely aged, a yellowed relic of the epoch of triumphant Thatcherism. There is a greater irony in Fuller's role in breaking the dominance of modernism in this country, since he certainly helped to usher in a post-modern aesthetic sensibility, of which the brief revival of British neo-Romanticism was only a minor stage. The consequent *m*lange* is, if anything, more vacuous than the late modern art Fuller criticised, which at least viewed tradition as meaningful enough to oppose. Now Carl Andre's bricks and Alfred Munnings's horse paintings can both be shown at the Tate. Something of this eclecticism was even an element of Fuller's apparently principled stand, which co-opted any convenient anti-modern movement: there should be little love lost between the Romantic tradition and the revived neo-classicism which Prince Charles was attempting to propagate in architecture, but in fact they happily co-existed within the pages of *Modern Painters*.

Fuller did not quite know what to make of postmodernism. In one sense he was glad of an art which was anti-modern, apparently 'recuperative' and 'profoundly conservative',[28] and was not

[27] See MP, p. 24, among many examples.
[28] *The Australian Scapegoat: Towards an Antipodean Aesthetic*, Nedlands, Western Australia, 1986, p. 1.

above using it as evidence for the success of his ideas. Yet he was aware that, given its involvement in the products of mass culture, it had no roots in tradition.[29] Fuller's critique of modernism as rootless and unpopular could not account for the steady increase in audiences for contemporary and modern art; postmodernism had commodified modernism along with everything else and fine art started to become fashionable. He could have criticised the manner in which these works were looked at, but did not. Fuller's later denial of any connection between the market and aesthetic value meant that he had little to say about the specifics of the culture which had replaced the religious order, particularly about the marketing of tradition which would have muddied his neat schemas. Post-modernism undermined the grounds for Fuller's critique, not by replacing modernism with an art more in touch with tradition, but by continuing the modernist project as an element in its programme of marketed entertainment.

In one sense, Fuller was right to think of his career as a story with a moral: it was another episode in the sorry tale of British criticism, a tale of cultivated parochialism, and of writing which often had an effect far from that intended by its author. He still has a little direct influence through *Modern Painters* which continues to publish the work of a number of young fogeys who seek to emulate the master, just as he emulated Ruskin, the start perhaps of an ever decreasing spiral of intellect. Yet beyond Fuller's fifteen minutes of fame, he had a slower, deeper, longer-term influence on the British art scene which is no doubt more significant. His accessible and passionate writing attracted a good many people to an interest in art. His insistence on seeing fine art in the context of visual culture as a whole was extremely important and influential. *Art and Psychoanalysis* helped to reopen a debate which, despite the deep trouble in which psychoanalysis currently finds itself, is still resonant within the world of art history.[30] Fuller's interest in Winnicott's description of a stage at which the baby has not yet developed a sense of itself as a separate entity [MP, p. 66] bears some relation to the fashionable writing of Lacan. While the views of those critics who employ Lacan would have been repudiated by Fuller,[31] the conservative and essentialising subtext of much of their writing is partly a product of his early engagement. Similarly, his longing for a sublime immersion in the aesthetic has also found its post-modern equivalents in writing about indeterminacy and heterodoxy. Fuller's writing was caught up in a series of contradictions: nationalism versus nature, aesthetic stasis versus propaganda, the strength versus the fragility of tradition, absolutist authority versus an economy and a society in flux. As a result, if Fuller's work had an influence, it was often the opposite of that intended.

The contemporary British art scene, it must be said, would hardly be congenial to Fuller; an ironic and entertaining mix of Dada, pop and minimalism, enamoured with mixed media and new technology, which sees dismembered animals displayed in tanks or busts made from frozen human blood. Its audience is hip, and consumes, if not exactly the art, then its by-products (catalogues, openings, the scene). A tame relativism and a safe admiration for indeterminacy reigns among the

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[29] Ibid., p. 15.
[30] Fuller, *Art and Psychoanalysis*, London 1980.
[31] Lacan is compared unfavourably with Winnicott in *The Naked Artist: Art and Biology*, London 1983, p. 234.

critics. Fortunately, we have some idea what Fuller would make of all this. About the first Turner Prize, which its organisers admitted was a public relations exercise, Fuller noted the contrast between the high purpose of the artist after whom the Prize was named and the media circus it was supposed to cultivate. He also wondered about the source and the propriety of the anonymous private funding on which the event was founded. The Tate, he wrote:

> [...] are actually welcoming the vacuous self promoting ethic of the new media, with all its attendant careerist and financial opportunism.
>
> [...] the Director of the Tate *wants us to understand* that the Turner Prize is a great publicity gimmick. And the critic of the *Sunday Times* thinks Turner would have enjoyed the 'genteel romp'. And the Minister for the Arts in Her Majesty's Government thinks all the 'razzmatazz' and 'knees up' is such fun. [...] An aging photo-realist [Malcolm Morley] is ten grand richer. And Saatchi is laughing all the way to the bank.
>
> Shame on you. Shame on you all![32]

Despite everything, Fuller's scorn for hype and his strong sense of art as something which at least has the potential to lie beyond the norms of marketing, sometimes serve as an indicator, a compass needle pointing towards an as yet invisible positive.

[32] 'The Lady's Not for Turner', *Art Monthly*, no. 82, December 1984-January 1985, pp. 5-6.