

AUTHENTIC MEDIATION

Art, media, and public space in May '68

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During the Paris students' revolts of May 1968 protesters occupied a print studio. The witty political posters that were produced by Atelier Populaire are often seen as emblematic for the period. Siegelbaum shows how these posters have inaccurately gained a reputation of immediate and authentic transmission of news and ideas.

On 16 May 1968 in Paris, about a dozen painters associated with a movement known as Figuration Narrative, including several members of its more militantly political wing, the Salon de la Jeune Peinture, rushed over to the École des Beaux-Arts which art students had recently occupied as part of the mounting revolt that was spreading across France. A few artists commandeered the school's lithography studio and ran off thirty copies of what would later be regarded as the first poster produced by the so-called Atelier Populaire ('People's Studio'), the revolutionary poster workshop organized in the occupied art school. Known as 'Triple U', the print consisted of three words: 'Usines' (Factories), 'Universités', and 'Union' (the French word connoting 'unity' rather than a labour organization) in white text on purple ground with their first letters lined up vertically.

Though produced by professional artists on a lithograph press capable of rendering a high degree of detail, the style of the print was remarkably rudimentary, almost naive. Supposedly originally intended for charity sale to support the escalating strikes, 'Triple U' became the stylistic template for the approximately 350 different poster designs in over 300,000 editions produced at the Atelier Populaire from May 17th until the police closed the workshop on June 27th.¹ These posters blanketed the walls of buildings around the Quartier Latin as well as at other key sites of contestation. The Atelier Populaire became the model for poster workshops created at other Parisian locations such as the École des Arts Décoratifs in late May and June, and those that sprouted up in Caen, Marseille, Montpellier, and Toulouse. The significance of these posters as embodiments of the legacy of May '68 is confirmed by the fact that they are included



1. Atelier Populaire, *Sois jeune et tais toi*, 1968. (photo : Bibliothèque Nationale de France)

in nearly every commemoration or visual representation of the events and are often held up as paradigmatic examples of creative agitprop or 'political art'.²

As one historian has recently put it, 'the Beaux-Arts posters have become an emblem for the "May movement": they have contributed to the homogenization of its system of values and representations and to the construction of the collective memory of the period.'³ This has often been the tendency of the commemorative evocations of the events stressing the explosion of creative energies and free expression, which the posters somehow are supposed to represent. In addition to photos of graffiti, paving stone-hurling protesters, barricades, and burnt cars, the posters have become the most common graphic depiction of May '68, often reproduced without significant commentary or analysis. One of the few publications devoted specifically to the posters celebrates them as being 'from the French heart, and sincerely express the preoccupations of a generation.'⁴ Mobilized in this manner, the posters don't merely 'speak for themselves' but indeed for the entire movement, which is reduced to the concerns of 'youth'. Fittingly, the posters most often reproduced are those most apparently illustrative of the anti-authoritarian and generational aspect of May '68 such as the caricatures of de Gaulle or the riot police (fig. 1). Analyses that follow from this tendency typically make little differentiation between the Atelier Populaire posters and the graffiti, grouping all visual production together under the blanket of a zeitgeist.

Even recent revisionist attempts critical of the characterization of May '68 as a generational uprising proclaiming unrestrained expression above all, interpret the posters as evidence of the spontaneous rerouting of culture towards politics.⁵ However, such framings efface not only the actual production of these works, but also how they fit into the particular context of media and urban change in France during that era. By placing the famous posters of May '68 in such a context, I argue that the tension between the physical presence of an increasingly outmoded medium such as the street poster and the more dematerialized media of radio and television paralleled that between a collective artistic practice and public visibility. That is to say, that rather than being at

one with the movement, the May '68 posters should be seen as liminal objects caught between the desire for unmediated communication and the desire to transcend the social and spatial divisions of the built environment.

Triple U

Despite the explicit rejection of complexity and the fine arts capabilities of lithography for 'Triple U', the demands made in the Beaux-Arts General Assembly on May 15th for more posters vastly exceeded the possible yield of the lithography studio. Guy de Rougemont, an abstract artist who had been repeatedly rejected by the Salon de la Jeune Peinture for being 'insufficiently political', announced that he knew of a technique that would be able to produce significantly more prints cheaply and efficiently. The process was called silk-screening and he had learned how to do it during his stay in New York City in 1966.

The first silk-screens Rougemont and his friend, Eric Seydoux, brought to the Beaux-Arts the next day were rudimentary and did not allow for the photo-transfer technique favoured by Andy Warhol, but production began quickly. As Rougemont recalls, the instructions issued by the General Assembly to artists were to 'make a simple design, easily drawn with gum Arabic to block the silk, no half-tint, flat, and with one colour per poster.'⁶ These instructions reflected the dual criteria established by the General Assembly for the selection of poster designs: 1) Was the political idea just? 2) Did the poster communicate this idea well?⁷ The General Assembly continued to convene twice a day to discuss themes, issue slogans, and vote on poster designs.

A photo showing the printing of the famous poster, 'La chienlit c'est lui!' provides some evidence of the rudimentary materials and process, and underscores the ideological premises behind the poster workshop (fig. 2). The blurred movement of the workers, and the exaggerated gesture of the comical silhouette in the poster, contrasted with the elegant permanence of the classical marble figure stoically observing the frenzied production. The poster, depicting a caricatured profile of de Gaulle wearing his trademark *képi* and arms raised in a 'V' signifying both victory over Germany as well as the Fifth Republic, was produced in



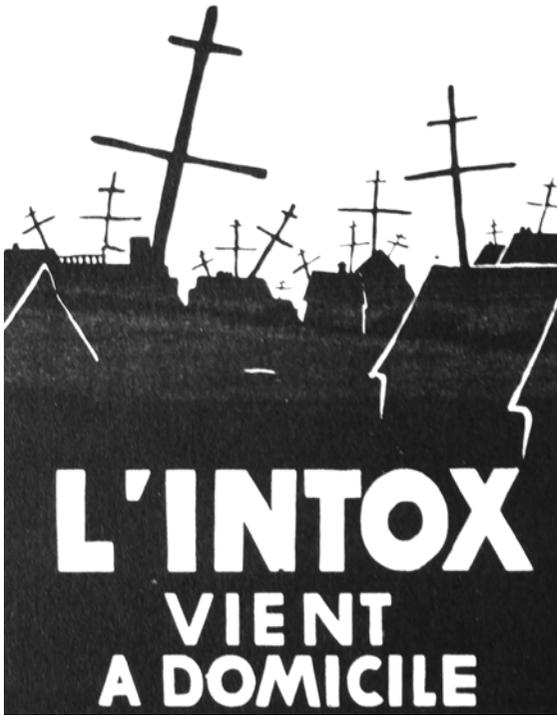
2. Atelier Populaire des Beaux-Arts, Paris, 1968. (photo: Marc Riboud, courtesy BDIC, Paris)

response to the president's supposed first statement on the events, made to his cabinet on the morning of May 19th. In the meeting, he explicitly instructed his ministers to inform the media that he would make a public statement on television and radio on May 24th and that his official position at the moment was, 'La réforme oui, la chienlit non' ('Reform yes, disorder [literally 'shit-in-the-bed'] no').⁸ The use of an anachronistic vulgarity could not have lent itself better to the caricature of the old, out-of-touch general. Though the image became emblematic of the youthful derision of authority associated with May '68, the design was an early test of the political divisions within the Atelier Populaire. Jeune Peinture artist Pierre Buraglio recalls that there was significant debate over its approval within the General Assembly between the anarchists who supported it and the communists, such as himself, for whom de Gaulle's role in the Resistance still made him 'a sacred figure'.⁹

The design was ultimately approved, however, and silkscreened in mass quantity that day, demonstrating the speed with which the Atelier

Populaire could function as a form of media feedback. The posters appeared on the walls of the Quartier Latin on May 21st, the same day the story broke in *Le Monde*.¹⁰ Such swiftness allowed the posters to compete with official discourse and media dissemination. Their stark, crude, hand-made style and physical presence in the street visually positioned them as more direct and unmediated than the established channels of representation.

One poster in particular emphasizes this differentiation of media. It depicts a dark jumble of suburban rooftops, each one crowned with a television or radio antenna in the shape of the Gaullist cross (fig. 3). The bold white text against the solid coloured mass of the houses reads, 'The intoxication comes home' (*L'intox vient à domicile*). Playing on the double meaning of *l'intoxication* as both 'poisoning' and 'disinformation', the poster positions the electronic media of television and radio as means of government penetration and contamination of private space. The sinister silhouettes of the houses with their Gaullist antennae depicts private, domestic, and specifically



3. Atelier Populaire, *L'intox vient à domicile*, 1968. (photo: Bibliothèque Nationale de France)

suburban space as captive and isolating as opposed to the collective space of the urban street.

The insistent yet fragile materiality of the posters, their flagrant eschewal of any pretensions to objectivity, the stark graphic style, and their physical location and approachability in the street, could all be directly contrasted to the dematerialization of the television image, the invisibility of radio media, and the aniconism of text-based print media.¹¹ Indeed the very real presence of the poster images within public space served to emphasize the *absence* of de Gaulle. ‘We didn’t see him,’ recalled a member of the Arts-Déco poster workshop, ‘he had disappeared [...]. The posters were in the street, and he didn’t go down into the streets.’¹² De Gaulle did not appear publicly until May 24th when he made a seven-minute speech on French television and radio calling for increased participation and announcing a referendum on university reform for June 16, to which another series of posters responded, criticizing ‘participation’ as an ideological state ruse, including one which self-reflexively highlighted its own handmade

facture and visually linked it to the graffiti that was competing for urban wall space (fig. 4).

Making visible

An Atelier Populaire text written in late June discusses the diffusion of five ‘wall newspapers’, each capped with an earlier poster design of a factory chimney culminating in a clenched fist:

We wanted to truly take account of the people’s struggles, to give the true information that the bourgeois press hides or distorts. How did we have this information? We gathered it mainly from militants in the Action Committees, themselves linked to the workers. We also made visible [*fait apparaître*] the important information that the press did not put in its correct place.¹³

Though the statement suggests that the Atelier Populaire relied on a more direct and authentic source of information than the ‘bourgeois press’, they also clearly responded to the mass media.¹⁴ The notion that the Atelier’s goal was to ‘make visible’ information by putting it in its ‘correct place’ indicates to what extent the visibility and materiality of posters in the street could be counterpoised as authentic in relation to the invisible or dematerialized media of radio and television received in domestic and interior spaces. While within the workshop’s collective space of production, legibility of content was emphasized as the primary means of reaching a broad public. Outside those confines, however, the physical presence and indexical quality of the productive gestures, rather than any iconic matter, signified the authenticity of the posters’ speech. The notion that visibility in public space was prioritized over the communication of specific content is supported by the handful of photographs depicting Atelier Populaire posters on the surfaces of the city.

Significantly, many of the sites on which Atelier posters were applied were the official surfaces prohibited from posting by the Law of July 29, 1881 (fig. 5). The hijacking of protected surfaces was not merely a provocative anti-authoritarian gesture but a way to challenge the state’s claim to represent the public within the visual space of the city. Posters were typically pasted in an all-over fashion onto a

je participe
tu participes
il participe
nous participons
vous participerez
ils profitent





5. Paris, May 1968. (photo: Marc Riboud, courtesy of BDIC, Paris)

surface so that no one particular poster stood out, particularly given their shared formal qualities, suggesting an emphasis on visibility over legibility (fig. 6). This apparent contradiction between the interior of the Atelier Populaire, where clarity was a guiding principle, and the outside of public circulation, where spatial appropriation and physical presence were the dominant concerns, indicates two separate notions of collectivity: the first can be termed ‘institutional’ and involved the (mis)identification of artists as anonymous workers within the confines of art studios reconfigured as a workshop or factory. Within such a space, legibility and communicative imperatives became means to ‘eliminate the bourgeois practice of individualist creation which consciously or not always arises.’¹⁵ The second form of collectivity pertains to the public sphere of mass media circulation whose very processes of dematerialization corresponded to an urban space that in the 1960s was, in the words of visual historian Jonathan Crary, ‘being transformed by the anti-territoriality of capital.’¹⁶ The Atelier Populaire posters demonstrate to what extent, in May ’68, such different conceptions of collectivity could be momentarily conflated.

Total stereophonics

In 1965, a new master plan for the Paris Region was unveiled (fig. 7). It pictured a patchwork of nodal *villes nouvelles* interconnected by a snaking network of high-speed expressways. Any sense of the rigid physical boundaries, constructed or natural, that defined pre-war and interwar maps and plans seems to have been exploded. In contrast to the May ’68 posters’ assertion of material presence and spatial specificity, primarily within the Quartier Latin, the Paris redevelopment plan seems to operate on a radically different scale of urban space. At the same time, however, the Atelier Populaire and the posters it produced shared post-war urbanism’s desire to dissolve the spatial divisions inscribed in the historical organization of the city. Though the posters’ ability to lay claim to an authenticity of representation in relation to newer media depended on their capacity to politicize public space in the same manner as the physical bodies of militants in the streets, May ’68 can be seen as the crystallization of a utopian desire to transcend the physical structure of the built environment.



This aspiration is evident in Evelyne Sullerot's analysis of the role of the transistor radio in May '68. Sullerot notes that radio, threatened with obsolescence by television, was reinvested with a revolutionary charge in May due to its association with immediacy and its presence in the street. The portable transistor radio, carried in the street by protesters and their supporters, provided the fantasy of instantaneous and unmediated 'total information'.

'Barricades were erected in rue Gay-Lussac on the night of May 10-11. Their volume turned

up full, transistors were placed on balconies, the sills of opened windows, the piles of paving stones. Total stereophonics. From every direction, in the whole street, one was bathed in the sound of what was going on: there was complete instantaneousness between event and information, between information and its reception. Information became commingled with the event that was taking place.'¹⁷

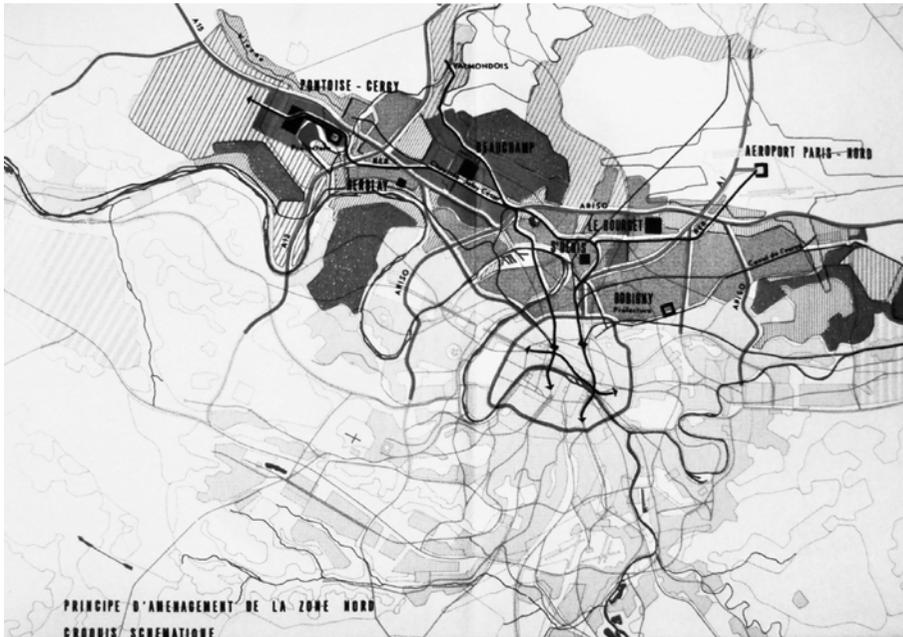
The dream of immediacy and the spatialization of information described above points forward to what would later be formulated as the 'network



6. Faculté de Médecine, Paris, June 1968.
(photo: Bruno Barbey/Magnum)

society' but was already evident in the technoutopian proposals of experimental architects and avant-garde groups.¹⁸ Conceiving of the urban landscape as a medium of communication flows and information networks, architects such as Yona Friedman, Constant, or the Utopie group, as well as the early Situationist International 'presented a vision for a built world in which buoyancy, ephemerality, and mobility would replace the inertia and repression that they believed characterized the architectural urbanism of the postwar.'¹⁹ Their projects, and the discourses that animated them, demonstrated the ways in which 'urban space came to be seen not as a neutral container but as a conductive medium for the movements and exchanges of people, information, and objects.'²⁰ Generally read as an attack on the rationalism of post-war urbanism, it is interesting to note to what extent such ventures partook of capitalist urban planning's desire to dematerialize and systematize the city by overcoming its physical limitations. The temporality they evoked is not that of the individual user in space but rather of the historical changes the city was undergoing due to communications technologies, suburbanization, automobile traffic, and uneven development. In fact, a common practice of the early Situationist *dérives*, or collective urban drifting, was the use of walkie-talkies in order to 'make different parts of the city communicate with each other' or 'to render different aspects or fragments of the city simultaneous.'²¹

Such examples anticipate the illusion of immediacy and 'total information' fostered by the communication technology available to the protesters. The sense of surpassing the physical limitations of urban space prompted one protester to remark that, thanks to the portable radios, 'we were no longer in a ghetto but in a glass house.'²² The very real threat to order and police control posed by the devices was confirmed by the government's banning of short-wave transmitters on May 23rd, thereby further enhancing the posters' status as the only 'unmediated' form of public media available in the streets. Nonetheless, as Sullerot points out, the 'impossible dream' of immediacy and interconnectivity largely ignored the ways in which such technology enabled forms of control and surveillance vastly superior to its potential for disruption. Indeed, 'the forces of order were interconnected by a continuing flow of information, centralized



7. Schéma Directeur D'Aménagement et d'Urbanisme de la Région de Paris, North Zone, schematic diagram, 1965.

by their commanders and assisted by all the most modern technical devices.²³ The very technology that fostered a sense of liberation from older modes of spatial separation and confinement was also re-configuring urban space as a network of controlled circulation.

The posters of May '68 existed in a complex relation to these changes, at once relying on their suggestions of unmediated communication while hindered by the evaporation of physical manifestations of collectivity. In distinction from technological impulses, the Atelier Populaire utilized a simple mechanical technique to produce an outmoded form of media. The iconography evoked the disciplinary society of industrial capitalism: factories, gears, and hand tools feature prominently. As opposed to the sense of spatial transcendence afforded by the transistor radio, the posters emphasized the physical presence of the viewer and the specificity of location, confined, as they overwhelmingly were, to the Quartier Latin and occupied factories.

At the same time the posters, like the inflatable structures envisioned by *Utopie*, were ephemeral objects that attempted to dissolve the spatial and social divisions between gallery, studio, factory, university, and street. The tension between these

two aspects is specific to 1968 and its revolutionary aspirations as a moment when a universal if not metaphysical public, beyond traditional institutional boundaries and categorizations, could be simultaneously represented and interpellated within the physical space of the city. And yet, the possibility of such a public was fostered by the particular nature of postwar modernization in France and its effect on urban space and media.

Once outside the confines of the workshop, the street poster encountered a set of forces that were in the process of redefining the meaning and experience of social space. The sense of transcending the old infrastructure and limitations of the built environment thanks largely to electronic media and urban redevelopment prompted a rediscovery of the street as the privileged site of politics and the overcoming of social boundaries. How was revolutionary art to navigate such a terrain? Rather than being at one with the events, the Atelier Populaire was a momentary concatenation of the outmoded and the prospective, organization and spontaneity, the studio and the street, presence and ephemerality, art and politics.

- 1 See: G. Fromanger, L. Gervereau, 'L'atelier populaire de l'ex-Ecole des Beaux-Arts: Entretien avec Gérard Fromanger', in: 'Mai 68: Les mouvements d'étudiants en France et dans le monde', *Matériaux pour l'Histoire de notre Temps* 11 (1988) 11-13, pp. 184-191.
- 2 See for example: T. Clark, *Art and Propaganda in the Twentieth Century: The Political Image in the Age of Mass Culture*, New York 1997; T. Crow, *The Rise of the Sixties: American and European Art in the Age of Dissent*, New Haven 2005, p. 150; L. Gervereau, *La propagande par l'affiche*, Paris 1991; M. Rohan, *Paris '68: Graffiti, Posters, Newspapers, and Poems of the Events of May 1968*, London 1988.
- 3 M. Zancarini-Fournel, *Le Moment 68: Une histoire contestée*, Paris 2008, pp. 140-141.
- 4 P. Moissac, *Mai 68: La révolution s'affiche*, Paris 1998, p. 7.
- 5 K. Ross, *May '68 and its Afterlives*, Chicago 2002, p. 16.
- 6 L. Gervereau, Rougemont, 'La sérigraphie à l'Ecole des Beaux-Arts: Entretien avec Rougemont', in: 'Mai 68: Les mouvements d'étudiants en France et dans le monde', *Matériaux pour l'Histoire de notre Temps* 11 (1988) 11-13, pp. 180-183; See: M. Wlassikoff, *Mai 68: L'affiche en heritage*, Paris 2008, pp. 12-13.
- 7 Atelier Populaire, *Atelier Populaire présenté par lui-même*, Paris 1968, p. 10.
- 8 Michel Wlassikoff attributes the design to a young printmaker, Jean Hillaireau. See: Wlassikoff, op.cit. (note 6), p. 14.
- 9 Pierre Buraglio, interview with author, March 2010.
- 10 The *Le Monde* article, '«La réforme, oui. La chienlit, non,» declare le président de la République' was immediately followed by another article, 'La «chienlit» de Rabelais à de Gaulle', analyzing the etymology and literary history of the term. *Le Monde*, 21 May 1968, p. 3.
- 11 Though in 1968 only about one million French households owned a television, it was clear that it was poised to achieve a dominant position in the dissemination of images. Newspapers at this time rarely printed photographs and when they did, strictly in black and white whereas glossy illustrated publications such as *Paris-Match* only appeared weekly. See: V.H.F. Scott, 'May 1968 and the Question of the Image', *Rutgers Art Review: The Journal of Graduate Research in Art History*, 24 (2008) Fall. Furthermore, *Paris-Match* was itself absent for the crucial period of May 18th to June 15th.
- 12 P. Bernard, interview with G.M. Tempest, 4 July 4 2006, see: G.M. Tempest, *Anti-Nazism and the Ateliers Populaires: The Memory of Nazi Collaboration*, unpublished BA thesis (University of California, Berkeley), 2006, retrieved 13 July 2011 via www.docspopuli.org/articles/Paris1968_Tempest/AfficheParis1968_Tempest.html.
- 13 Atelier Populaire, op.cit. (note 7), pp. 14-15.
- 14 Several former participants have claimed that radio reports were the Atelier's chief source of information. Pierre Buraglio, interview with the author, March 2010; Philippe Vermès, e-mail to author, August 2010.
- 15 Atelier Populaire, op.cit. (note 7), p. 10.
- 16 J. Crary, J.G. Ballard and the Promiscuity of Forms', *Zone* 1 (1986), pp. 159-165 (159).
- 17 E. Sullerot, 'Transistors and Barricades: A Study by Evelyne Sullerot', in: P. Labro (ed.), *This is Only a Beginning* (trans. C. Lam Markmann), New York 1969, p. 185.
- 18 See: M. Castells, *The Rise of the Network Society, The Information Age: Economy, Society, and Culture, Vol.1* Cambridge, MA 1996; M. Castells (ed.), *The Network Society: A Cross-Cultural Perspective*, Northampton, MA 2004; J. van Dijk, *The Network Society: Social Aspects of New Media*, Thousand Oaks 1999.
- 19 R. Genevro, 'Introduction', in: M. Dessauce (ed.), *The Inflatable Moment: pneumatics and protest in '68*, New York 1999, p. 7.
- 20 L. Busbea, *Topologies: The Urban Utopia in France 1960-1970*, Cambridge, MA 2007, p. 10.
- 21 K. Ross, 'Lefebvre on the Situationists: An Interview', in: T. McDonough (ed.) *Guy Debord and the Situationist International*, pp. 267-283, (272).
- 22 Sullerot, op.cit. (note 17), p. 185.
- 23 Idem., p. 189.