Dark Energy
BRANDEN W. JOSEPH ON THE ART OF MARCO FUSINATO

Marco Fusinato, "Rist"/Black Implications (ST/14-1, 2400662, tina K Blessing), 2007, ink on archival facsimile of scarce, 20½ x 25¼". From the series "Mass Black Implications," 2007–
PROMINENTLY FEATURED on Marco Fusinato's bookshelf is a section dedicated to the Red Brigades, the militant leftist organization infamous for the 1978 kidnapping and murder of former Italian prime minister Aldo Moro. Fusinato admits to having been intrigued, even a bit obsessed, not so much by the group's actions or motives as by the memoirs of imprisoned former members—individuals who at some point early in their lives decided upon the most radical path, only to be compelled to contemplate the outcome of that decision for decades. Fusinato, born in 1964 and thus of a generation destined to come of age in the cultural and historical aftermath of such decisions, places viewers in a similarly deliberative position with regard to the artifacts of political and artistic radicalism appropriated and recontextualized in his work.

Case in point is Fusinato's series "Noise & Capitalism," 2010, exhibited last fall at the Anna Schwartz Gallery in Melbourne. (Fusinato was born in Melbourne to Italian parents and maintains close ties with his family's ancestral home north of Venice.) Drawing on his collection of insurrectionary leftist pamphlets, Fusinato selected a recent printing of Mikhail Bakunin's The Capitalist System and four examples from the twenty-first century: the French theoretical collective Tiquon's Theses on the Imaginary Party, a feminist response to the post-Tiquon offshoot the Invisible Committee, Why She Doesn't Give a F*** About Your Insurrection; a Greek pamphlet addressing the recent unrest in Athens; and a diatribe from the French anarchist journal Non Vides titled "Escapism Has Its Price The Artist Has His Income." With a nod to the legacy of Pop art (visible in the serial treatment of an apocryphal photograph of Andy Warhol's penis on "Escapism") and the Pictures generation, Fusinato enlarged each pamphlet to over seven and a half by ten and a half feet. Simultaneously embracing a spectacular, even billboard-like presence and gesturing toward the original mode of production—
Deploying the conventions of one-point perspective to convert the diaphany of the musical score into the synchrony of a visual field, each "implosion" implies a new version of the score as a noise composition, all the noises melding into a simultaneous cacophony of indeterminate duration. The lengthier of the pamphlets Fusinato "blew up" for "Noise & Capitalism" (the invocation of explosions here far from incidental) are similarly rendered so much noise, "an illegible, ideological mass." The correlation between "Noise & Capitalism" and the "Mass Black Implosions" underscores the extent to which Fusinato's engagements with left politics and with music parallel each other. Indeed, Fusinato cites the agitational lyrics and dense, uniform, black-and-white graphics of the anarchist punk band Crass as aesthetic touchstones for "Noise & Capitalism."

Visitors to Fusinato's exhibition may not have immediately recognized its reference to the 2009 anthology Noise & Capitalism (edited by Anthony Iles and Basque noise musician Maitin), a book that sits on Fusinato's shelf between the Red Brigade literature and Tiquin's Introduction to Civil War. Aspects of Tiquin's discourse, in particular, resonate with the anthologized authors' discussions of the political implications of free noise improvisation. Elaboration of a community based on gesture, habit, and affect, free play within the margins of society and culture; "liquidation of commodity domination"; defeat of the spectacle's "empire of separation"; even an embrace of emancipatory violence: All link Tiquin's Theses to the book's discourse around noise, while Fusinato's other pamphlets imply additional contextualization, historicization, and critique. According to Fusinato, some reactions to his exhibition (primarily from individuals outside the art world) approached accusations of heresy for transforming the cheap, intimate, and nearly clandestine pamphlets into large upmarket commodities, revealing how such leftist materials continue to carry a charge and even perhaps to function as one of the last redoubts of utopian imaginings long since absent from near-ubiquitous appropriations of consumer items and works of art. A similar anxiety—about the ongoing transformation of a radical experimental practice (noise) into an identifiable product (noise music)—runs throughout Iles and Maitin's Noise & Capitalism. By foregrounding art's cultural and commercial status, Fusinato heightens and allegorizes such anxieties. As he observed with typical understatement, "I'm essentially turning [the pamphlets] into art objects, which raises a number of questions in itself."QUESTIONS ABOUT THE LIMITS OF ARTISTIC AND POLITICAL RADICALISM ARE NOT NEW TO FUSINATO'S PRACTICE, WHICH CONSISTENTLY ENTWINES THE ISSUES OF COMMERCIALIZATION, IMPROVISATION, AND REVOLUTION. IN "A DOZEN ROSES," 2006, FUSINATO RECONTEXTUALIZED ONE OF JOSEPH BEUYS'S MOST WELL-KNOWN MULTIPLES, ROSE FOR DIRECT DEMOCRACY, 1973, A SILK-SCREENED GRADUATED GLASS CYLINDER IDENTICAL TO THE ONE BEUYS USED AS A VASE AT DOCUMENTA 5, WHERE, HOLDING A SINGLE ROSE, IT ADORNED THE OFFICE OF HIS ORGANIZATION FOR DIRECT DEMOCRACY THROUGH PEOPLE'S REFERENDUM. FUSINATO TOOK BEUYS'S MULTIPLE AND A BOUTIQUE OF FRESH ROSES TO A COMMERCIAL PHOTOGRAPHER WHO SNAPPED EACH FLOWER AS THOUGH FOR AN ADVERTISEMENT. THE RESULTS, WHICH UNDERMINE THE LOFTY RHETORIC SURROUNDING BEUYS'S POLITICAL ROMANTICISM AND ARE, IN CONTEMPORARY EYES, A GOOD DEAL LESS KITSCHY THAN BEUYS'S OWN LITHOGRAPH WE WON'T DO IT WITHOUT THE ROSE, 1972, ACCENTUATE THE STERILITY OF COMMERCIAL "ART" PHOTOGRAPHY, NOT UNLIKE THE FASHION PHOTOS OF YOUNG MODELS ILLUSTRATING THE BERNADETTE CORPORATION'S THE COMPLETE POEM, 2009. IN "THIS IS NOT MY WORLD," 2006—, FUSINATO EMPLOYED GRAPHIC DESIGN FIRMS TO UPDATE THE 1976 BANNER OF THE SAME NAME BY CROATIAN CONCEPTUAL PHOTOGRAPHER AND GROUP OF SIX MEMBER ZELJKO JERMAN. THE PROFESSIONAL DESIGNERS' EYE-CATCHING, BUT SOMEWHAT ARBITRARY, FRONT AND DINGBATE MANIPULATIONS IMMEDIATELY TRANSFORM JERMAN'S STATEMENT INTO BUNTING FIT FOR AN OUTDOOR ADVERTISEMENT OR A PARADE, BUT HARDLY FOR A PROTEST.

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Questions about the limits of artistic and political radicalism are not new to Fusinato's practice, which consistently entwines the issues of commercialization, improvisation, and revolution.
In the series "Double Infinitives," 2009, Fusinato enlarged pictures of anticapitalist violence to the scale of history painting or, to cite a precedent that hews closer in aesthetic and imagery, Warhol's largest "Death and Disaster" canvases. Each blown-up image features an individual brandishing a rock against a backdrop of fire, a selection inspired by the artist's noticing that newspaper editors persistently choose, out of all possible press photos, to depict uprisings in this manner. Stone and flame make for a highly primitive, even elemental iconography of revolt, one that effectively barishes political context in favor of archetypal (and ahistorical) rage. As captured in the press, each uprising becomes merely a trope, symbol, even advertent for "revolt," a means of fixing identities and the meaning of the protesters' actions. Per Tiquan: "Paradoxically, in this civilization that we can no longer claim as our own without consenting to self-liquidation, conjuring away forms-of-life most often appears as a desire for form: the search for an archetypal resemblance, an idea of self placed before or in front of oneself."

Though allegorizing historical distance, commodification, even "failure," Fusinato's work evokes neither cynicism nor nostalgia as its primary impression; his is not the overwhelming melancholy of early postmodernism. Instead, the work's multiple layers of mediation and its removal of references from their historical contexts speak to the starkness of a contemporary existence that has transformed us all into the type of perpetually impoverished subject that Tiquan has designated under the figure of "Bloom." Despite its often incendiary rhetoric, Tiquan essentially proffers an examination of life after all traditional forms of lived experience have been liquidated, of existence within the exile and isolation of a world thoroughly and irrevocably suffused by spectacle and biopower. Yet Tiquan offers no lament over the loss of authenticity or autonomy, but rather an inquiry into a way forward. The collective's Bloom, in other words, is a properly "ambivalent" figure in Paolo Virno's sense of the term: Bloom's experiential impoverishment forms the historically necessary basis of future engagement, the possibility of accessing experience at a "second degree."

Something of the same ambivalence hovers about Fusinato's production, which seems, despite its many mediations, to retain or reanimate aspects of his material's initial promise. As he notes, "I intend that the works are vital and have a certain energy. Certainly not the 'end' of anything—perhaps a re-evaluation. The works are contemplations, propositions, a playing with the associated 'language'/meaning of each context/medium. I don't intend to kill anything. I'd rather keep it open and search for..."
possible freedoms.” Fusinato’s desire, as Vieno would put it, “to disentangle the question of emancipation even in what Brecht defined as the ‘bad new’” may be attributable to his formative reception of punk rock, if one may say so without seeming to trivialize his work’s careful criticality.2 “You can’t underestimate the importance of punk for a kid in the suburbs in the late ’70s/early ’80s,” explains Fusinato. “You could get the records—The Clash, Sex Pistols, The Ramones—anywhere. The lyrics were interesting, but what I really grabbed on to was the interviews. These guys didn’t speak about girls, fast cars. They spoke about social engagement and politics, which leads you on to further investigations.”1 In essence, Fusinato responded to what Dan Graham has characterized as punk’s propaganda function (hence Fusinato’s interest in Grass), the manner in which it “puts the spectator in direct contact with social practices outside the actual artwork.”12 For Graham, citing precisely the groups Fusinato mentions, punk evinces both a “representing (of) the representation”—an acceptance and foregrounding of the mediated and commercial nature of all popular music—and, via an ironic stance toward those very conditions of production, a means of (re)achieving the “direct connection to its audience” that the corporatization of rock music undermined.12 Like the Italian terrorist memos, then, the punk rock album serves Fusinato less as a thematic touchstone than as an underlying structure, a strategy for maintaining or igniting a charge amid the ubiquity of commercial mediation.

Fusinato’s early work developed in the late ’80s and early ’90s, in the post-Conceptual scene surrounding Store S, an artist-run space in Melbourne’s Prahran suburb that was founded toward the end of the international predominance of neo-expressionist painting. In contrast to neo-expressionism, Fusinato adopted the monotonous, expressionless strategy of the monochrome. In 1995, he chose Solver brand Signal Red as his signature color, and by 1996 he was filling the 200 Gertrude Street gallery with red enamel on Masonite or Alucobond panels, some properly hung, but most leaning against the walls, not unlike the glossy black monochromes of Steven Parrino. Fusinato deployed sets of the cheapest brushes, bread bags complete with crumbs and seeds, plastic detergent bottles, discarded Coke cans—anything capable of spreading paint without getting too much on the painter—and invariably titled each piece with the (brief) time it took to complete: 10/9, 1/31, 3/39, etc. Whereas Parrino’s use of crowbars and circular saws led critics to such terms as “violence” and “distortion” and references to the artist’s interest in the self-destructive German singer Darby Crash, Fusinato’s unconventional techniques imply “process” and “improvisation” and find their analogues in the inventive guitar manipulations of Keith Rowe or Thurston Moore.

Fusinato collaborated with Moore in the painting and video installation TM/MF, 2000, showing a Signal Red monochrome to each of ten guitar solos Moore performs in the video. With Fusinato’s roomful of near-identical, mute paintings facing down Moore’s noise guitar, the installation mediated on so-called de-skilled production and formed a metacommentary on the progression of spectacle: Where painting was, there music video will be, and vice versa.

Fusinato’s own noise-guitar improvisations formed the basis of FREE, 1998–2004, a series of guerrilla performances in unsuspecting music stores. Feigning the intention of testing a distortion pedal, which requires the use of a guitar and amplifier, Fusinato launched into full-blown (and often full-volume) improvisations until asked, politely or not, to turn it down or leave: “It’s always awkward at the end of that action, giving equipment back and saying, ‘No thanks.’”13 Results depended on context. In Copenhagen, where the amp was next to a counter manned by somewhat intimidating customers...
employees, the performance was relatively restrained, whereas on the open floor of the Sam Ash Music Store in Manhattan, the result proved audibly different. Beyond referencing the genre of free noise improvisation, FREE points to the improvement of costly materials, a momentary act of everyday communism that transforms commercial space and merchandise into a spontaneous public concert and “ready-made music studio.”  

(Free was recorded in Auckland—where Fusinato erroneously thought he had been left in a soundproof booth—also benefited from free access to video equipment and a cameraman afforded by a residency at the Elam School of Fine Arts.)

Capturing each performance with a hidden recorder, Fusinato reinserted them into the (subcultural) commercial realm as last-cut seven-inch singles released on Circle Records, a label founded by the late New Zealand Conceptual artist Julian Dashper and Australian abstract painter John Nixon. Before the label’s 2002 demise, Fusinato released twenty-three records and became close to Nixon, who, in addition to being one of Australia’s prominent high modernists, established the lo-fi, collective acoustic genre he called Anti-Music in the late 70s. Publicized through Nixon’s occasional one-page fanzine, Pneumatic Drill, the movement’s various groups (most of which included Nixon) recorded some four hundred cassettes by December 1982.  

Fusinato and Nixon would later co-found Axe A Specialised Rock Music Journal (1988–99), the record label Frewaysound (1999–2002), and the noise duo Solver. Solver extends certain principles of Anti-Music as a collaborative “unskilled” or “de-skilled” acoustic practice. (Neither Nixon nor Fusinato is musically trained or plays instruments in a conventional manner.) Yet whereas Anti-Music embraced the full acoustic spectrum from “harsh” to “poetic,” its willfully ad hoc minimalism often yielded results of an intimate, off-kilter charm. By contrast, Solver’s never-rehearsed, punk-influenced sonic experimentalism always strives for the greatest possible impact: “Guitars and amplifiers are driven at maximum with no regard to the tuning or quality of instruments.”

Fusinato also performs solo guitar and electronics in live sets that, in the words of the Dead C guitarist Bruce Russell (with whom he has also played), “combine extreme sonic assault with complete aesthetic control and an implacable will towards conceptual totality.”

Examples of Fusinato’s “awesome, all-encompassing, real-time guitar nois-concérte,” to quote guitarist and dark metal bard Sunn O))) collaborator Oren Ambarchi, have recently been issued as two apparently authorless black-label LPs: Ripping Skies (No Fun Productions, 2009) and Ambiante (The Spring Press, 2010).  

While much of Fusinato’s visual art, such as some based on his hand as to appear authorless, casts a retrospective glance at moments of radical history, his ear-splitting noise performances—which can sound as though one is swimming through amplified radio static, only more deliberate and unyielding—manifest aesthetic radicality as real-time perceptual experience.

However engaged with musical performance, the conceptual diversity of Fusinato’s artistic practice (like that of Mike Kelley, Rodney Graham, or Stephen Prina) never resolves into a mere translation or illustration of musical concerns. Nevertheless, it would not be inaccurate to describe the larger question around which Fusinato’s oeuvre revolves as one that has been central to rock’s role since its inception: whether representations of revolt initiate or stifle its actual eruption. It is a question that delves deep into the history of the avant-garde and continues to resonate through all facets of radical art, music, theory, and action. Everything else, we might say, is just pop.