

The exhibition brought to New York the works of seven artists who lived and worked in London during the late 1970's and whose practice was informed by social concerns. All of the artists have worked at some point with the British Labor Left, Communist Party, trade unions or women's movement.

Rasheed Araeen, born in Pakistan, exhibited his Xerox prints and the Black Phoenix journal, both dealing with the ostracism of third world artists from British culture. The work of Conrad Atkinson, English born focused on the struggle in Northern Ireland. Alexis Hunter, born in New Zealand, commented through her photographic practice in "War" and "For Every Witch" on fashion, mass media and violence against women. Mary Kelly, American born, exhibited works which explored the relationships between herself and her child in a feminist context by fusing collages, conceptual art practices and theoretical diagrams. Margaret Harrison, English born, investigated in the work on view "Home Workers: Woman's Work" the economic plight of non-unionized "homeworkers" in England using photographs and texts. Tony Rickaby, English born, questioned the boundaries between art and propaganda with works in various medium. Marie Yates, English born, juxtaposed in "A Critical Re-Evaluation of a Proposed Publication" a passion for British landscape with political analysis.

The title "Art from the British Left" identifies the works with two traditions. But more than the art in the show proves to be "British" in the ideological sense, it seems to undermine the identity of what is British according to the narrative of mass media. The works in the exhibition only assume a British identity as part of a struggle against the dominant British culture, to reveal its suppression and aversion towards difference. Some of the artists who participated in the show experienced this struggle quite literally throughout their careers. The police closed Margaret Harrison's first London solo show in 1971, Rasheed Araeen was excluded from the British artistic course due to his racial background, and Conrad Atkinson's work on Northern Ireland was censored by the Belfast Ulster museum on 1978, to name just a few examples.

The direct engagement with social concerns through artistic practice has its roots in the post WWII British left. In contrast to the Continental left,

whose dominant aesthetic theory largely encouraged a greater freedom between art and social practice, the British left was less bound by the Hegelian concept of social totality. That enabled an open approach among British intellectuals from the left towards a view of art as a part of the scheme of culture that has the potential to struggle against mass media as its polar end rather than its dialectical opposition. On those grounds the exhibition's title can make the claim that art can embrace a political identity that would allow it to discuss social concerns.

The majority of the artists in the show were born during WWII, a period which led to the destruction of the Communist party in Britain and marked the turning point towards the totality of the economic right that took over the country in the decades to come. Out of this crisis of the Marxist tradition in Britain the Communist Party Historians group was established in 1946. This proved to be a pivotal moment that gave birth to a growing body of British scholarship focused on social history.

Often trained as historians, British cultural Marxists found Gramsci's theory of 'culture as a potential battlefield against the hegemony' plausible and used it to develop an aesthetic theory that addresses art on analytical grounds as a communicative medium which can serve not only to an expressive end in itself, but also as an antagonist against the hegemony's ruled mass media.

With this background in mind, the impulse of the artists participating in the show to inform their practice by social concerns seems to stress not only the urgency that the works carry, but also the importance of their working strategies as a model for artists outside of Britain. This was especially true in countries where the left became voided of political representation following WWII and the Cold War, in which culture indeed became the most viable political battlefield.

While in London, Lucy Lippard, the show curator, came across a postcard made by Rasheed Araeen made in order to condemn the exclusion of black artists from "Un certain art anglais", an exhibition that opened in early 1979 at the Musée d'art moderne de la Ville de Paris, done with the British Council.

Lippard decided to use Rasheed's postcard, placing an open call on the exhibition's invitation card and other exhibition's promotional materials. "This exhibition is the first in a series of socially concerned art to be held in various locations. It is intended to expand international communication and to form an archive of political art. Anyone interested in participating in future manifestations should contact Lucy Lippard, 138 Prince St., NY, NY, 10013.

The open call was soon answered and eight months later it led to the launch of PAD/D (Political Art Documentation and Distribution) in NYC. While dedicated to archiving political art works, PAD/D also organized exhibitions and collaborative artistic projects around social concerns. "Not For Sale" was a project compiling a series of guerilla exhibitions in the Lower East Side under which artists helped bringing gentrification into public discussion during the early 1980's.

Some of the artists who participated in the exhibition kept influencing the American art scene. Soon after the exhibition closed Conrad Atkinson's carried his work from the show to his first major solo exhibition in the United States at Ronald Feldman Fine Art. The show, called "Material" was the inspiration for the creation of "Group Material", an artists group that influenced the artistic discourse in the United States by embracing on bringing new social concerns into their artistic practices.