

Black Mask & Up Against the Wall, MF!

Are 1960s radical groups now just artifacts for study?

Abigail Susik

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a review of

Up Against the Real: Black Mask from Art to Action by Nadja Millner-Larsen. The University of Chicago Press, 2023

When I met Ben Morea some years ago, I assumed that our correspondence would further my historical research on the interrelation between experimental and ultra-leftist radicalism in the United States in the 1960s and '70s.

As one of the founders of the anarchist affinity group, Black Mask in New York City in 1966, and the catalyst behind formation of subsequent direct-action collectives like Up Against the Wall Motherfucker (UAWMF) in 1968, Morea's uncompromising anti-capitalist and anti-racist stance arose at every turn in my investigations of this period.

Yet, over the years of getting to know Morea, my scholarly questions gradually ground themselves to dust, since I soon found myself far more absorbed in his current theories, like that of revolutionary animism, or the role of art today in anti-authoritarian resistance, or his view of the nature of Marxism as trapped within capitalism's economy, than in what had happened during the storied heyday of the New Left.

It's not that the documentation of Black Mask and UAWMF and their offshoot groups like the International Werewolf Conspiracy was no longer important to me, since I am invested in the potential application of history as a bridge for building continuity between generations of activists.

Rather, setting the historical record straight and sorting out the details, differentiating the group acronyms, etcetera, ultimately became less pressing than learning about what Morea's decades of experience as an activist had taught him about continuing the struggle into the present and future. It is impossible to just stick to the past when talking with Morea, since for him, the commitment to micro-revolutionary actions on a day-to-day basis never died. His lifestyle of resistance became all the more entrenched as the decades passed and the planetary crisis loomed.

I initially approached Millner-Larsen's book on Black Mask with a number of reservations particular to myself. After reading her impressive study, some of these reservations remained, through no fault of the author per se, but rather as a result of the inherent conundrum that arises when we attempt to objectively historicize revolutionary praxis from any period.

Historical chronicles always entail a degree of museumification, but with a group like Black Mask, given their eponymous magazine's striking graphics and the vividly performative nature of certain of their interventions, the risk of institutionalization, if not necessarily recuperation, runs particularly high. What does it mean to have the University of Chicago Press, a highly selective academic publisher, sign on to a project like *Up Against the Real*, which establishes the most comprehensive record of Black Mask to date?

Although I am a historian of radical avant-gardes such as international surrealism, which have been relentlessly indexed and catalogued by writers like me over the past one hundred years, somehow I thought (perhaps naively)

that Black Mask might resist that fate of endless return in secondary scholarship thanks to the large-bore caliber of its explosive extremism.

Millner-Larsen's frequently brilliant analysis by no means isolates the era of Black Mask as separate from our own. Her commentary is effective in its ability to link our present Zeitgeist to both general impressions and specific memories of the 1960s.

Readers can find some helpful information about the author's reason for choosing her subject in the acknowledgements, which refer to her upbringing and interestingly feature at the end of the text rather than at the beginning. But what comes across clearly, given the admitted quirk of my anti-historicist predisposition in the case of Black Mask, is Millner-Larsen's critical distance from her material.

Up Against the Real offers an expertly crafted documentation of Black Mask paired with a deeply impressive contextualization of this group within a larger picture of post-World War II American art and oppositional communities. It is undoubtedly a masterful contribution to the literature on this subject and anyone interested in Black Mask should take a sojourn in its pages, which are clearly the result of years of breathtaking effort. It is surprising to see a few obvious spelling errors in the book, but such issues are not significant considering what the author has achieved.

In particular, the chapters devoted to "The Subject of Black" and "Sweet Assassins" reflexively expand upon the Black Mask chronology in innovative and bold ways. "The Subject of Black" features a dynamic discussion of the black monochrome and the color black in relation to the Black Arts Movement and the work of artist Aldo Tambellini, cofounder of the New York-based Group Center, an early 1960s network of artists who worked with electronic and other fine arts media.

"Sweet Assassins" is a nuanced theoretical re-reading of the work and crime of Valerie Solanas, the radical feminist writer and would-be assassin of Andy Warhol, who was a comrade of Black Maskers. The range of material that Millner-Larsen examines is remarkably expansive, especially considering that Black Mask transformed into other affinity groups after just a couple of years.

Nevertheless, it is my selfish reader's wish that the book offered a frank glimpse of the author's own concrete and "real" stakes in the project in the present moment, for what is the lesson that Black Mask teaches, and that the aim of the book itself underscores, if not to rise up against the status quo with action? The caveats presented at the beginning and end of the book about Black Mask and their art as falling—until now—outside the mainstream concerns of galleries and art museums are unnecessary and dampen the rhetoric.

As an example of such ruthless critical distance maintained in the book, in the introduction to the book, Millner-Larsen indicates that she views her account of Black Mask as a "minor history." Although they were a small anarchist/ultra-left group on the outer fringe of the most extreme forms of resistance culture, this characterization of Black Mask is unsatisfactory because it did not become entwined with the dominant culture and discourse. They wanted to overthrow, not subvert. They weren't minor; they were totally off the radar, as the author demonstrates elsewhere in the book.

Likewise, in the epilogue, instead of returning to the "real" that occupies her inquiry as a whole, through the engagement of oral history material from key figures of the period, we spend time with the sensationalized depiction of a composite figure of Morea in Rachel Kushner's 2013 novel *The Flamethrowers*.

That Millner-Larsen concludes her largely confident exegesis over the course of five chapters by turning to the unmoored territory of fiction and speculation bespeaks the unresolved tension of any attempt to objectively historicize episodes of revolutionary radicalism.

History can easily twist itself into storytelling. The mythology of Black Mask is already recuperated if it doesn't always burn with an activist edge of praxis, even in the space of the text. Whether or not the discipline of History—let alone art history—is capable of such positionality, is a larger problem. Millner-Larsen states her awareness of these fissures separating the commercial art world and Black Mask through statements in the introduction such as, "how can art history negotiate such figures?"

In the era of DeSantis, when teachers and professors in Florida are actively being censored, historians of radicalism must confront the imperative of embedding and exposing activist commitments within our methodologies.

The mere fact of Millner-Larsen's scholarly investment in *Up Against the Real* arguably offers evidence enough of her attraction to this history's oppositional value for the present as an important example of collective Ameri-

can insurgency. Yet, that stance would have been immeasurably strengthened if the boundary of objectivity was unabashedly defied in her book.

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