

King Mob, The Motherfuckers & Revolutionary Art

Lawton Browning

2025

a review of

King Mob: The Negation and Transcendence of Art by David and Stuart Wise. Wise Books, 2024

New York City, 1967. Roaming the streets in debate on the merits of the then-peak vogue art movement, Abstract Expressionism, are Ben Morea, part of a local affinity group, Up Against the Wall Motherfucker, and David Wise and Anne Ryder of the English group of cultural subversives known as King Mob.

It was perhaps only a matter of time before representatives of these two groups would cross paths. Both King Mob and The Motherfuckers (as they were colloquially known) emerged from the political tumult of 1967 under similar formative influences: a Marxist critique of capitalism, the international art movement known as Surrealism and, in the case of King Mob, as expelled members of the French critical theory group, the Situationist International.

Whatever the guiding impulse, King Mob made the right connection.

At the time, there would have been few better guides to the leftist and anarchist ferment in New York than Morea. KM's decision to cross the Atlantic to New York was to have a decisive influence on later actions such as their spontaneous disruption of a Merce Cunningham Dance performance in London, influenced by The Motherfuckers famous takeover of the Fillmore East Theater on New York's Lower Eastside.

But as David Wise recalls in "New York 1967: Black Mask and King Mob," the first essay in this recently published essay collection, it was not their attendance at a Black power rally or meeting fellow travelers like anarchist theorist Murray Bookchin that made the biggest impression on the English visitors, but their skirmishes with the New York avant-garde, in this case represented by Fluxus artist David Higgins and noted "happener" Alan Kaprow.

For Wise, it was Higgins and Kaprow's insistence on engaging with Morea as the artist he appeared to be rather than the revolutionary he actually was that best illustrated the contemporary art world's inability to escape its own self-imposed limitations of installation and performance art. Kaprow's mealy-mouthed praise on the "Typography" of a recently published issue of *Black Mask* (The "Motherfuckers" self-published leftist magazine) and Higgins's claim in a recently published book that he was about to "take to the barricades," evidently infuriated Morea, leading Wise to conclude that the already tenuous alliance between modern art movements ("Happenings" and Fluxus, etc.) and politically motivated direct-action groups like King Mob and The Motherfuckers had degenerated beyond repair. "We," says Wise, "were—and still are—for intervention and disruption; Fluxus and company for performance and display."

King Mob's willingness to critique the most advanced and ultra-modern representations of capital and recuperations of real living as well as the artists supposedly rendered sacrosanct by the advanced nature of their artistic development, is a welcome reminder of the potential of the Situationist perspective. The idea that one of capitalism's most insidious effects is its replacement of any art object—be it a sculpture, dance, or recording—with a financial value now is an evident fact.

As the culture industry of the 21st century continues its homogenization in the form of corporately controlled media like Netflix and financial entertainment monopolies such as TicketMaster, artists and makers would do well

to remember that calls to revolution made by artists under corporate control will only emerge as impotent gestures of protest against their paymasters and a deadly suffocating sham non-conformism.

If the realization by Wise that it was the avant-garde that were most eager to betray their revolutionary ideals by capitulating to the market marks his starting point, the theme weaving the book's following essays together is the postmortem, an autopsy of the myriad ways artists and art movements are subsumed by capital. It can make for depressing reading.

Though there is some subversive joy to be had in watching David Wise take down such contemporary gimcrack con artists as Damien Hirst who recently said that a banana taped to a wall is "serious art." Or, pick apart the vapid pretensions of European art house film schlock like *The Square*, the overall tone of the essays often verges uncomfortably close to despair. Though perhaps these days, in light of sociopath and fascist Donald Trump recently regaining the presidency of the United States, some despair may be in order.

Some of the Wise's most fascinating thinking emerges in a later essay concerning an artist who at first blush appears to have much to offer in the way of anti-capitalist critique. Written in 2015, "All the Way to the Bank(sy)" sees Wise grappling with the implications of the enormously popular and financially successful leftist graffiti artist. His initial attempt at a description of the contradictions inherent in the work is worth quoting in full:

"With Banksy we have: An art that is anti-art seemingly beyond the realization and negation of art / An anti-capitalist ultra capitalism / the non-corporate corporate as his often telling street graphics morph into corporate praxis / a corporate subversion / Anarchy with a PR rep straight from Hollywood / an ultra-commodified anonymity / the clandestine guerrilla of subservice millionairing / disappearance and invisibility as great career moves / Anonymous guerrilla action becoming a personality cult, an innovative publicity gimmick, etc, etc."

By teasing apart the legal apparatus behind which the Banksy myth is maintained (his manager, Holly Cushing, a PR flack formerly working for Hollywood star Sean Penn, his PR company, Pest Control, formed to discourage dealers buying and selling Banksy art, the filing for trade mark protection of the Banksy name with the UK intellectual property office), Wise is able to illustrate the ways in which even an artist as clearly skilled in cultural and market manipulation as Banksy can be subsumed by the neo-liberal marketplace.

Gradually Wise's comparison of the PR stunts carefully designed to bolster Banksy's credibility (actions such as rendering his own objects "worthless" by destroying them or giving them away, refusing to authenticate his art in the market, or the theme park parody called "Dismaland") with similar but far less publicized and mythologized actions by King Mob, the Situationists and others morphs into an elegy for the early anarchistic days of the Internet and the counter cultures subsequent de-evolution into decadent arch capitalism a la Burning Man.

Early on in the same essay, Wise takes a moment to bemoan the current lack of "stunning inspiring examples of authentic anti-art vandalism pointing to a new world." It would be interesting to hear his thoughts on the magnificent and courageous actions of the "Just Stop Oil" group, whose youth and energy were much in evidence during their recent climate justice inspired tomato soup can attack on the Van Gogh paintings housed in the national gallery of art in London. This attack, on paintings whose current obscene market valuation would surely have horrified their creator, and the subsequent totally unjust two-year criminal sentence for the attackers (who merely stained the glass protecting the paintings with soup) showing just how far the powers-that-be are willing to take any even symbolic attack against the status symbols of their hegemony.

In general, one wishes that the essays in the book might provide more of a blueprint towards such actions. The only tender and sympathetic moments in evidence tending to emerge in between the brutal take downs, when the Wise brothers let down their guard and reveal small glimpses into their own personal revolutionary struggles.

These halting confessions on the psychic costs of the destruction of personal relationships and grinding poverty that can result from total commitment to revolutionary ideals, ring the most heartbreakingly true. And really, if the reader did ever get to learn more about the story of King Mob, "Having to take on heavily capitalized and armed drug gangs who'd made life impossible in the social housing complexes we occupied," and the "direct action tactics... deployed against these dealers" hinted at in these essays, it might go some way towards convincing us that not all battles must end in defeat.

The kinds of psychic battles between ideal and reality that King Mob must have been regularly forced to engage in are given a direct historical parallel in an essay near the end of the collection. In "Mayakovsky and Tatlin: A catastrophic social/creative impasse," Wise uses Futurist/Constructivist poet and artist Vladimir Mayakovsky's suicide

as a starting point to examine exactly the fate that awaits those “caught in the horrible nexus of a society...that gives no satisfaction on any level.”

Paradoxically, however, this essay is one of the few that seems to give room for some form of revolutionary optimism. Aided by the revealing shadows of Surrealist thought, Wise finds in the hedonistic “I” of Mayakovsky and his “selfish with a plus sign” search for total freedom, a connection “between the artistic avant-garde and an explosively but necessarily disorganized terrorism,” the same type of subversion that enabled King Mob and Black Mask to conduct direct actions with actual real-world effects.

Lawton Browning is a musician and writer. He lives in Portland Oregon with his wife, young son and unwieldy collection of art house VHS tapes.



Lawton Browning
King Mob, The Motherfuckers & Revolutionary Art
2025

<https://www.fifthestate.org/archive/416-spring-2025/king-mob-the-motherfuckers-revolutionary-art>
Fifth Estate #416, Spring 2025

fifthestate.anarchistlibraries.net