

TITLE SEQUENCE:
FADE IN

ARTIST 1
is a nihilist

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ARTIST 2
is a former member of the
British Constructivists

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Together they are making
THE FREEDOM OF NEGATIVE EXPRESSION

FADE OUT

EXT. AN EXIT TO THE BARBICAN, LONDON
 Grey evening light.

THE NIHILIST, a well-heeled man in his early 30s, is leaving the Barbican from one of the exits. He puts on headphones, places a hand in his jacket pocket and switches on his mp3 player. We hear music that could be considered as being 'nihilist'. Our POV is from behind THE NIHILIST as the camera follows his route back to his apartment, through dilapidated housing estates and eventually to a gated apartment block. The music on THE NIHILIST'S headphones provides the soundtrack to the journey. THE NIHILIST takes the lift to his apartment.

INT. BOURGEOIS BOHEMIAN INTERIOR

The lift doors open directly to THE NIHILIST'S apartment. We see an expansive living area with two partially open doors: one leading to a kitchen, the other to the artist's studio. THE NIHILIST walks to a table where a phone is ringing. We don't hear the phone, we are still hearing the music on his headphones. The music continues as he starts talking on the phone. THE NIHILIST reaches into his pocket and switches off his mp3 player, there's a moment of interference on the phoneline and we come into the conversation halfway through.

As THE NIHILIST talks he picks up and plays with various objects in the apartment. Our POV is moving, following him around the apartment. CUs on his face, eyes, phone etc. and on symbolic objects in the apartment which should be intercut whenever THE BRITISH CONSTRUCTIVIST is speaking. Throughout the film, until the closing dialogue, THE NIHILIST appears restless and distracted.

THE NIHILIST

(holding an empty wineglass up to the light, or some other transparent object)

But then how would you explain the prismatic play of opacity and translucency in your early work, particularly the work you were making in the mid 60s?

Throughout the reply, THE NIHILIST walks around the apartment,

listening, holding the glass. The camera pans, revealing that the opening shot was seen in a mirror hanging on one wall.

THE BRITISH CONSTRUCTIVIST

(we hear her voice on the phone)

I always say I believe in transparency. Not reflection. Reflection is random, it mirrors whatever's happening in the room. And yet it is a double fraud in that it simultaneously suggests the illusion of depth. Transparency is the sincere attempt at depth, as opposed to staged depth, it's an attempt to see through the surface into the sub-mediatic sphere. To put it this way is to understand how this imperfect allegory of the conspiracy, or the world system itself, offers the best representational potential. Established, official narratives have never been much good at conveying the collective, well... except in the explosive drama of war and revolution. And yet, unfortunately, the cognitive potential of real transparency must be for the most part an unconscious one, for it is only at that deeper level of our fantasy that we think about the social system in any realistic way, and sense those realities that are too horrific to behold otherwise.

THE NIHILIST

(puts down the glass. looks in mirror as he speaks to his own reflection. This is the first time that we see him head-on)

Yes, and, through our collaboration, I am sure that we can sense this horrific reality, describe it, give it form... Give it form that is the perfect inverse of the pointless affirmation of reflection. I agree with Borges — that mirrors and copulation are obscene, because they increase the number of men. I have myself made certain forays into the art of the 'vanitas', the reflected image, the painted skull, the imaginary mean-

ingfulness of death, if only to exorcise its hold over me. The mirror's illusion of depth is of no use to us, because it is already filled with an image of the world.

THE NIHILIST turns, looks around the room, at the TV etc. Cut in with intense CU of the things he is looking at, TV, furniture, objets d'art etc.

THE NIHILIST

(continuing from previous dialogue)

Your idea of transparency allows us to escape from that, allows us to see through the disguise of reality, the theatre of media events, the fiction of history that blocks our vision. Perhaps the surface of the world system is in fact a window onto the emptiness that lies behind it, an emptiness that can only acquire real meaning in the context of the unending, blind conspiracy that ceaselessly attempts to block it out behind the walls of a hall of mirrors.

While THE NIHILIST is still listening on the telephone, he looks out of the window. Cut to view from window - faked if necessary

THE BRITISH CONSTRUCTIVIST

But that is unfashionable as a theory, very unfashionable as a thought even. To indulge in any cognitive function of the conspiratorial plot you must be able to flicker in and out, like a pathetic old broken down TV. This is why I've preferred to use glass of varying degrees of translucency. To underline this surreptitious attempt at depth. Some curators, some critics, some dealers, some historians think they can be so bloody transparent just by being so bloody coquettish and self-critical. Can an exhibition really be critical of the art that's in it?

THE NIHILIST turns away from window, sits down on a piece of modernist furniture.

THE NIHILIST

(talking almost to his feet but gesturing expansively)

I have come to see the public exhibition as an endpoint, like the event horizon of a black hole, the moment at which any hope for transcendence, all the grand ambitions that artists have for their work, are sacrificed on the altar of reality – forced into being and so, at the same moment, destroyed. Destroyed by the reality of their public existence, of their capitulation to the meaningless regime of culture that limits and contains them. But sure, you can persuade your audience that you are giving them something of value. These art lovers have already left part of their reason behind, and any vaudeville hypnotist could finish the job. Their culture restricts them so completely that they will see what they came to see – an empty affirmation of their own taste and privilege.

THE NIHILIST stands up, struck by an idea.

THE NIHILIST

(continuing from previous dialogue)

But this is something that we can use. Take their bourgeois tastes, with all of their meaninglessness, and sell those back to them at a hundred times the price. Our taste – I mean their taste – in furniture, in fashion, in the colours of their cars, the way they smile. The way that they are happy to look into the mirror of themselves – to enjoy the concrete manifestation of the means of production that allows them to exist and at the same time limits what they can be – and call that culture.

As THE BRITISH CONSTRUCTIVIST replies, THE NIHILIST walks into his studio (the camera doesn't follow him - our POV is restricted to seeing his profile through the partially opened door). CU of THE NIHILIST's face as he looks at his artwork in progress, he has a dead-pan expression. He then leaves his studio, with the door still ajar, goes into the kitchen and opens a bottle of wine, still listening on the phone.

THE BRITISH CONSTRUCTIVIST

Yes, we can see there are limits here, and this access to the mechanisms that affirm the bourgeoisie's existing image of themselves is always a class issue as well. Not only in terms of access to education. But also in terms of a creative class bred and raised by people who can only allow for a tightly circumscribed economy of mix'n'rule. Of course, the artworld is particularly interesting for minorities and all the other downtrodden since it offers not only apparently, seemingly, ostensibly uncodified rules of entry, but also the transitional possibilities of menial jobs within its very core. Assistantships, technical responsibilities, etc. In other words, you're browbeaten and used more easily, and even peabrains such as Brian O'Doherty could come up with slogans like "art is the opiate of the upper middle classes". And artists are such typical examples of the tension and pretension of the rising middle classes themselves. Which doesn't keep them from policing all sorts of boundaries within their own little playpens.

Whilst THE BRITISH CONSTRUCTIVIST is speaking, THE NIHILIST comes out of the kitchen holding the opened bottle of wine. He puts the wine down on a small coffee table and, with his free hand, turns off the lights, listens in the dark for a few seconds (black screen). He turns the lights back on then absent-mindedly turns them off and on again.

THE BRITISH CONSTRUCTIVIST

(continuing previous dialogue)

Did you ever notice the self-congratulating way political artists who belong to the elite arena of the transnational art world react in front of hardcore political activists – those who wear ugly Oxfam pants and first degree unironic Che Guevara T-Shirts? Have you ever watched?

THE NIHILIST sits down again, pouring himself a glass of wine.

THE NIHILIST

I must confess that I have never had this experience at first hand, but I suspect it is similar to the way that some of my Swiss friends graciously forgive the teenage snow-boarders for sneaking on to the piste without paying, because it gives them a feeling of superiority and a little extra cultural cachet at the same time.

THE NIHILIST raises his glass.

THE NIHILIST

(continuing from previous dialogue)

They can enjoy playing the bohemian, because they know that their bourgeois citadel is not under any real threat.

The phone connection breaks while THE NIHILIST is talking.

THE NIHILIST

(continuing from previous dialogue)

Hello?
Hello?

THE NIHILIST re-dials and, without commenting on being cut off THE BRITISH CONSTRUCTIVIST immediately starts speaking. THE NIHILIST is sipping wine and nodding.

THE BRITISH CONSTRUCTIVIST

The real boundaries, the real conflicts of interest, used to be more transparent. 19th century art bohemia really was explicitly and officially weak, in terms of class background and cultural capital. This spawned an adversity to the salons, and any type of subsidised art – even if this subsidised art was rabidly anti-bourgeois. And so today of course the loss of the bourgeois hold over museums is an opportunity. But for whom? How can we discern who is gaining from all this?

Pause while THE NIHILIST swallows wine and thinks. he stands up again and begins to walk around, glass in hand]

THE NIHILIST

And how can we turn this unknown possibility into a real opportunity? If these possibilities exist, perhaps we can use them to demonstrate the futile nature of this process of reconfiguration. Yes, I'm sure that we can work this concept into our proposal. But how do we discern the best way to proceed? Who should I call?

THE NIHILIST looks for and finds a notebook and a pen during this, and begins to make notes.

THE BRITISH CONSTRUCTIVIST

Any science of cultural production implies the study of the field with respect to powerful decision makers – official and unofficial – and the development of this position over time. And also a study of the internal structure of the field, of the competitions for legitimacy between various positions, official and unofficial. And above all, of the genesis of the habitus of the holders of these various positions as well.

THE NIHILIST

Sorry, I missed that.

THE BRITISH CONSTRUCTIVIST

There's a big and desperate need for both microinstitutional studies of subject formation, as well as macrostructural studies of exploitation, along with genealogical studies to see shifts in time. That is the only way we can see through the servile virtuosity that has come over us. That has beset us. At least we used to be able to see the rules, and thus at rare moments the structures behind these rules, but today we do not even see the rules, only the individuals who represent them, the curators, directors, collectors, sponsors, editors, and the dance of servile virtuosity begins.

THE NIHILIST, excited, closes the notebook

THE NIHILIST

Yes — and this is our subject, of course. Those servile virtuosos who believed that they were doing something. With their empty forms and their radical words, always affirming, always believing that they were moving forward, while all the time they are just being whirled around in this endless dance that ceaselessly returns to its starting point. Courbet and Manet. Malevich and Picasso. Pollock and Newman. Perhaps, despite themselves, they have already achieved the freedom of negative expression, perhaps they have already unknowingly done what we are trying to do?

THE BRITISH CONSTRUCTIVIST

Who knows Barnett Newman anymore, who knows Monica Ross? And John Ahearn must lose. He is doomed to lose. I think it was he who said:

"One should have no illusions. Until capitalism and imperialism are brought down, cultural institutions will go on being, in their primary role, lapdogs of a system that spreads misery and death to people everywhere on the planet." And turning to the UK in particular, how come we have these didactic, compensatory approaches in art in this country? Is that a mere coincidence?

THE NIHILIST puts down the phone, we continue to hear THE BRITISH CONSTRUCTIVIST's voice. THE NIHILIST starts constructing experimental maquettes out of household objects. Our POV is with the partially open door to the studio in the background. We can see evidence of fabrication: a maquette, plaster, brass rods etc.

THE BRITISH CONSTRUCTIVIST

(continuing from previous dialogue)

Who still remembers the Athenaeum movements in Liverpool and elsewhere? Art as a means to resolve social differences by fostering the common pursuit of profit, rational amusement and mental improvement. This was distinctively English as an approach. And I'm not saying the Russians did it better, or had it better, or that Malevich or the constructivists were innocent. There were various collusions, various complicities between the Russian avant-garde and the politburo. The shared effort to breed a New Man, that secular eschatology that was to buttress "Stalinism" one day. Stalinism which was nothing other than a faithful realization of militant avant-garde hubris. Stalinist constructivism triumphed in some places, CIA-funded abstract expressionism in others.

THE NIHILIST walks over to his expensive hi-fi system and presses play. We hear the first bars of the same 'nihilist' music that we heard in the opening scene. We also hear THE

BRITISH CONSTRUCTIVIST continuing to speak.

THE BRITISH CONSTRUCTIVIST

(continuing from previous dialogue)

It will take a long time before we can decide on the enduring outcome of the ideological struggles between socialism and capitalism that took place over the 20th century. The reason for this is that the influence of intellectuals and the bourgeoisie stemming from the preceding struggles and societies, along with their social ideologies, will exist for a long time yet. If we don't grasp this fully, or worse, if we do not grasp it at all, one runs the risk of misconceiving the importance of struggle on an ideological level.

THE NIHILIST

(looking down, until now he has appeared restless and distracted - but now he appears resolute and decisive)

Yes, exactly.

Short pause. THE NIHILIST looks up directly at the camera.

THE NIHILIST

And it is the image of this unknown future, this void into which our efforts in the present will undoubtedly fall, that we must describe in order to realise The Freedom of Negative Expression as an image of both the constant, unwinnable struggle against the unfolding of future events, and of the false consciousness of our own time.

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THE END

FADE OUT

ROLL IN END CREDITS TITLE SEQUENCE

THE FREEDOM OF NEGATIVE EXPRESSION

THE NIHILIST:

Will de Quetteville

THE BRITISH CONSTRUCTIVIST:

Linnet Magner

SCRIPT:

Chris Evans, Will Bradley & Tirdad Zolghadr

CAMERA:

Chris Evans

SOUND:

Joe Watling, Conner Rapp

TITLES

Will Holder

SOUNDTRACK:

Wagner's Faust Overture

PRODUCED AND DIRECTED BY CHRIS EVANS

2007

THE FREEDOM OF NEGATIVE EXPRESSION

is a co-commission with Chapter, Cardiff
and Gasworks, London.

ROLL TO BLACK

