

‘A Revolutionary Proposal’:

Alexander Trocchi, Dramaturgies of Disruption and Situationist Genealogies

Grant Peterson

Occasionally in history, a keen and perceptive thinker captures the pulse of an era long before others, pinpointing and giving voice to ideas that later become defining features of an age. Such figures are sometimes historically obscured because incipient renderings often escape retrospective tendencies to categorize and periodize chronologically. Others are purposely avoided, over-written or forgotten. It is in this way that Alexander Trocchi’s work, particularly his manifestos that start in 1962, have eluded scholars despite anticipating the ideas and countercultural upheavals that characterized the mid-1960s and the watershed year of 1968. Trocchi’s first manifesto ‘A Revolutionary Proposal’—subtitle, ‘Invisible Insurrection of a Million Minds’—prefigured what sociologist Herbert Marcuse would seven years later call a generation’s need for a ‘revolution in perception’.¹ In it, Trocchi combined dramatist Antonin Artaud’s call for spiritual awakenings with the political philosopher Guy Debord’s demand to intervene in capitalism’s commodity spectacle. ‘The cultural revolt must seize the grids of expression and the powerhouses of the mind,’ he wrote, suggesting a collective spectator-participant approach to transforming theatre, and thereby, society.

Little has been written on Trocchi, however, and the relevance of his work to key shifts in twentieth century literature and theatre is immense. Trocchi’s 1962 vision of a revolutionised theatre represent the earliest conceptualizations of a Situationist theatre concerned with what I will call disruptive dramaturgies, or actions that rupture collective theatre experiences. Proposing a revisionist historiography centred on Trocchi, this essay focuses on lesser-known links between

¹ Herbert Marcuse, *An Essay on Liberation* (Boston: Beacon Press, 1969), p. 37.

late modernist writers, political thinkers and experimental theatre practitioners. Archival materials are placed in dialogue with accounts from Trocchi's contemporaries to locate and contest the earliest articulations of Situationism within British theatre practices. The evidence put forth augments established histories associated with the period directly following 1968 and the 'post-Situationist' work of playwrights like Howard Brenton, David Edgar and David Hare.² Whereas writers such as Robert Hewison, John Bull and Chris Megson have connected British theatre to influences of Situationism in *Les évènements* in 1968 France, this essay excavates the work of Trocchi to suggest an earlier starting-point and origins more germane to British shores. Trocchi's writings and activities, I argue, represent early signals of several seismic shifts that were to reshape the tectonics of the British theatre landscape. Yet, Trocchi and his writings curiously remain at the margins of history. In this respect, I make a case for the 'invisible' role of British Situationism in British theatre history to be made more visible.

In a Foucauldian sense, this essay seeks to uncover a critical genealogy of Situationism and British theatre in and from the 1960s and 1970s: a genealogy, that is, as a methodological tool not to revolutionize historical canons but to uncover a wider constellation of inheritances and adaptations.³ Building on Sadie Plant's (1992) and McKenzie Wark's (2011) assertions that Situationism can be historically located at the crossroads of modernism and postmodernism,⁴ the essay explores intersections that branch between historical periods and disciplinary boundaries. Underlining this historiographical project, however, is a critical awareness of challenges that face a history constructed with Trocchi at its centre, a figure once heralded as 'England's most

² Keith Peacock coined the term 'post-Situationist dramatist' referring to British playwrights who cite influences from Situationism (*Radical Stages: Alternative History in Modern British Drama* (New York: Greenwood Press, 1991), p. 66).

³ I draw particular influence here from Sara Freeman's work, especially her article 'Towards a Genealogy and Taxonomy of British Alternative Theatre', *New Theatre Quarterly* 22.4 (November 2006), pp. 364–78.

⁴ Sadie Plant, *The Most Radical Gesture: The Situationist International in a Postmodern Age* (London: Routledge, 1992); McKenzie Wark, *The Beach Beneath the Street: The Everyday Life and Glorious Times of the Situationist International* (London: Verso, 2011).

intelligent creative artist' but who by the 1970s, was unanimously shunned by his peers.⁵ Trocchi's reputation for proselytizing the use of LSD and heroin coupled with rumoured hardships faced by his family (including allegations of forcing his wife into sex work) bring a dark shadow to bear over his corpus. This is not least evident in two biographies and a television documentary from the 1990s that posthumously characterized his life as one of scandal.⁶ As objectionable as some of Trocchi's later life might have been, some accounts are overburdened by a moralizing that undercuts a greater appreciation for his larger cultural contributions. A historian seeking to trace a genealogy inclusive of figures like Trocchi must, as Foucault suggested, 'be able to recognize the events of history, its jolts, its surprises, its unsteady victories and unpalatable defeats—the basis of all beginnings, atavisms, and heredities'.⁷ Hence, what previously may be considered Trocchi's failures, or successes occluded by his later reputation, will be re-examined here as crucial articulations of a burgeoning aesthetic and political movement in the British cultural scene of the early 1960s.

Trocchi's Situationist texts peaked between 1962 and 1966 and were overlooked in part because of the intrinsic limitations of 1968 periodization. To address this historical gap, I place his work in light of later manifestos of 1968 and Situationist-influenced British political playwrights of the 1970s. After an overview of Trocchi's early life and influences, his key manifestos are examined along with the *Sigma* journal he curated and the performance event he

⁵ This quotation is taken from the SI's 'Resolution of the Fourth Conference of the Situationist International Concerning the Imprisonment of Alexander Trocchi', *Internationale Situationniste* #5 (27 September 1960), <http://www.cddc.vt.edu/sionline/si/resolution.html>, accessed 18 February 2016. The resolution emerged after a London meeting in the Institute of Contemporary Arts and was followed by a public announcement authored by Guy Debord, Jacqueline de Jong, and Jorn Asger titled 'Hands Off Alexander Trocchi!' (Situationist International Online Archive (7 October 1960), <http://www.cddc.vt.edu/sionline/si/handsoff.html>, accessed 18 February 2016). The resolution's centric view of Trocchi's importance to England (rather than being inclusive of Trocchi's Scottish roots) is an example of how multiple national associations and allegiances were often attributed to Trocchi.

⁶ Andrew Murray Scott, *Alexander Trocchi: The Making of the Monster* (Edinburgh: Polygon, 1991); Allan Campbell and Tim Niel, eds., *A Life in Pieces: Reflections on Alexander Trocchi* (Edinburgh: Rebel Inc, 1997). Campbell and Niel were the directors of the 1996 BBC TV documentary about Trocchi, also titled *A Life in Pieces*.

⁷ Michel Foucault, *Language Counter-Memory Practice: Selected Essays and Interviews*, ed. Donald F. Bouchard, (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 1980), pp. 144–145.

inspired, *sTigma*. To avoid sensationalizing Trocchi's later life, this essay primarily focuses on his work prior to 1965 and concludes with an overview of his complicated legacy.

Re-situating Trocchi

Born in Scotland in 1925, Trocchi graduated from Glasgow University where he was considered, according to biographer Andrew Murray Scott, 'a student manifestly of genius', and later championed as the writer of one of Scotland's 'greatest modern novels', *Cain's Book* (1960).⁸ Trocchi's novels received critical attention in literary and political scholarship but his activities and influence in British theatre is far less known and examined. This is surprising when one considers Trocchi's close relationships and business ventures with playwrights such as Samuel Beckett. For example, as early as 1952, Trocchi was in Paris on a scholarship working with Beckett and editing the English-language journal *Merlin* – the first to publish Beckett's writings for Anglophone readers.⁹ Under Trocchi's helm, *Merlin* set James Joyce's modernist classic *Ulysses* as its model of stylistic achievement.¹⁰ The journal featured poetry, literary analysis and some of the earliest translations of key writers and playwrights of the twentieth century, including Eugene Ionesco, Jean-Paul Sartre and Jean Genet.¹¹ Using *Merlin* and contacts in Olympia Press, Trocchi helped secure book contracts for Beckett, Ionesco and Genet.¹² A decade later, he formed similarly prestigious connections with leading theatre-makers

⁸ Andrew Murray Scott, *Alexander Trocchi: The Making of the Monster* (Edinburgh: Polygon, 1991), p. 20; Andrew Murray Scott, 'Introduction', *Invisible Insurrection of a Million Minds: A Trocchi Reader* (Edinburgh: Polygon, 1991), vii-xi: p. viii.

⁹ Michael Gardiner, *From Trocchi to Trainspotting: Scottish Critical Theory since 1960* (Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press, 2006), p. 73.

¹⁰ Loren Glass, *Counterculture Colophon: Grove Press, the Evergreen Review, and the Incorporation of the Avant-Garde* (Stanford University Press, 2013), p. 19.

¹¹ Scott, *Alexander Trocchi*, p. 42.

¹² Wark, *The Beach Beneath the Street*, p. 127.

in Britain, including Jeff Nuttall, Jim Haynes, Joan Littlewood, Tom McGrath and Charles Marowitz.

Before leaving Paris in 1956, Trocchi joined a collective of radical artists called the Letterists and helped found an offshoot group, the Situationist International (SI). Most commonly associated with French theorist and cofounder Guy Debord, SI was concerned with what its members perceived as the encroaching materialism of mid-twentieth-century capitalism. Applying a Marxist reading to emergent commodity cultures, the SI compared passive forms of consumption to audience members being mesmerized by an all-encompassing ‘spectacle’. As Debord proposed in his influential book, *The Society of the Spectacle* (1967):

The spectacle is the state at which the commodity has succeeded in totally colonizing social life. Commodification is not only visible, we no longer see anything else; the world we see is the world of the commodity. Modern economic production extends its dictatorship both extensively and intensively.¹³

To undermine capitalism’s colonialization of the individual, SI members theorized methods of creative resistance, or ‘situations’, using writing, film, art, music, theatre and public interventions (drawing from principles of psychogeography).

While much has been written on the SI’s activities in the fields of philosophy, media studies, literature and art, little attention has been given to Situationist applications in theatre. Stephen Hodge and Cathy Turner’s work is a rare exception. They argue the historical relevance of Situationist work as a reference-point for contemporary performance artists ‘working in public space, particularly in relation to walking and activism’.¹⁴ However, the history of Situationism in Britain, and Trocchi’s role within the SI as an ardent champion of performance, extends the

¹³ Guy Debord, *The Society of the Spectacle*, trans. Ken Knabb (London: Rebel Press, 1983), p. 21.

¹⁴ Stephen Hodge and Cathy Turner, ‘Site: Between Ground and Groundlessness’, *Histories and Practices of Live Art*, ed. Deirdre Heddon and Jennie Klein (Basingstoke: Palgrave Macmillan, 2012), pp. 90–120.

importance of Situationism much further. Trocchi's time in the SI marked a shift from his previous associations with modernist literature and playwriting towards a politically disruptive theatre methodology.

'A Revolutionary Proposal'

Building on experiences in Paris, modernist tropes and neo-Marxist philosophies, Trocchi wrote his first manifesto in 1962 and titled it, 'A Revolutionary Proposal: Invisible Resurrection of a Million Minds'. In it, he integrated rhetoric of theatre, politics, and economic theory. It quickly circulated from Scotland's *New Saltire* and the SI's journal *Internationale Situationniste* No. 8 to London's *Anarchy* magazine, San Francisco's *City Lights Journal* No. 2, Britain's *Architectural Association Journal*, Volume 80, Amsterdam's *Randstad*, Trocchi's own *Sigma Portfolio* and was featured in Jeff Nuttall's *Moving Times* (also known as *My Own Mag*).

'A Revolutionary Proposal' begins with a quotation from Antonin Artaud's *Theatre and its Double*, cursing theatre's 'artistic dallying with forms, instead of being like victims burnt at the stake'.¹⁵ Trocchi proceeds with a critique of the state of art and culture; rather than an art world which 'anaesthetizes the living' he argues, borrowing from Brecht, the spectator must be conscious of the modes of production, and thus his/her own manipulation. Trocchi critiques Brecht, writing, 'Brecht's theory has had no impact whatsoever on popular entertainment [...] the zombies remain; the spectacle grows more spectacular'.¹⁶ Here, Trocchi borrows Debord's idea of the spectacle to identify the theatrical aesthetic and political structures that perpetuate passive societies. Trocchi urges his readers to 'eliminate the brokers' of the spectacle, and imagine a theatre as a social institution where citizens can 'seize, and within the social fabric,

¹⁵ Alexander Trocchi, 'A Revolutionary Proposal: Invisible Insurrection of a Million Minds', *Sigma Portfolio* 2 (1962), <http://omeka.wustl.edu/omeka/items/show/9587>, accessed 18 February 2016, p. 1.

¹⁶ *Ibid.*, p. 3.

exercise that control'.¹⁷ In this manner, Trocchi's Situationist theories transcend Marxist and Trotskyite revolutionary materialism by promoting not a macro-political approach but a micro-political cultural revolution. 'We are concerned not with the *coup d'etat* of Trotsky and Lenin,' Trocchi explains, 'but the *coup du monde* [seizure of the world], a transition of necessity more complex, more diffuse than the other, and so more gradual, less spectacular'.¹⁸

The radical ideology expressed in 'A Revolutionary Proposal' notably predates that of the better known manifestos of 1968. These include Peter Handke's 'Theater-in-the-Street and Theater-in-Theatres' in *Theater Heute*, Richard Schechner's '6 Axioms for Environmental Theatre' in *The Drama Review*, Jean-Jacques Lebel's *Drama Review* article 'On the Necessity of Violation', Abbie Hoffman's book *Revolution for the Hell of It* and, to a degree, Peter Brook's book *The Empty Space*. Impelled by unprecedented geopolitical turmoil leading to 1968, theatre-makers and activists formulated visions of what theatre could accomplish. Each manifesto and seminal text connected to contemporaneous theatre practices and activities that either preceded or followed. Lebel, for instance, occupied France's *Théâtre L'Odéon* as part of the 1968 protests while Handke wrote the critically acclaimed play *Kaspar*. Schechner staged an 'environmental' performance of *Dionysus in 69* in New York City's Performing Garage, Hoffman led anti-Vietnam War protests and Brook staged the experimental productions of *US* and *Marat/Sade*. The links that can be made between respective manifestos and key events are more than mere coincidence or accidental transference, but instead illustrate clear relationships and comprise a larger and more significant picture of a cultural moment. In a similar vein, Trocchi's manifestos connect with activities that further contextualize his Situationist theories.

¹⁷ Ibid., p. 5.

¹⁸ Ibid., p. 1 (original emphasis).

Sigma and *sTigma*

Trocchi soon followed ‘A Revolutionary Proposal’ with a second manifesto, ‘Sigma: a Tactical Blueprint’, and sparked a series of developments including the *Sigma Portfolio* and *sTigma*. Whereas ‘A Revolutionary Proposal’ contains Trocchi’s call for the radicalization of theatre, ‘Sigma’ set out methods for collective participation and was derived from the mathematical symbol meaning ‘to designate all, the sum, the whole’.¹⁹ Trocchi argues that theatre is an ‘experimental laboratory’ where long-held relationships between producer and consumer can be recalibrated. He claims that a ‘sigmatic’ approach will transform society into a ‘community-as-art, and begin exploring the possible functions of a society in which leisure is a dominant fact’.²⁰ Trocchi’s Sigma project envisioned nothing less than a radical re-ordering of theatre, a reformulation that championed playful experiences for participant-observers and that would, he believed, transform society more broadly.

In London, Trocchi’s reputation grew exponentially within the burgeoning underground scene. By 1963 he ceased writing novels to concentrate on developing the *Sigma Portfolio* – a journal that featured his writings along with contributions from a host of countercultural intellectuals. Trocchi drew from a collective of artists, poets, writers, architects and photographers that included William Burroughs, Stan Brakhage, Robert Kelly, Anthony Burgess, Timothy Leary, R. D. Laing and Michael McClure. Trocchi self-published the journal by mailing subscribers printed facsimiles. Some, like the publisher John Calder, saw Trocchi’s Sigma project as a distraction from his troubles in writing novels. But in many respects, Trocchi’s Sigma project can be understood as his idealist pursuit of realizing the principles he set out in manifestos. By self-publishing the journal, Trocchi took control over the modes of production (a

¹⁹ Alexander Trocchi, ‘Sigma: A Tactical Blueprint’, *Sigma Portfolio* 4 (1962), <http://omeka.wustl.edu/omeka/items/show/9588>, accessed 18 February 2016, p. 1.

²⁰ *Ibid.*, p. 5.

compelling forerunner to blogs and self-publishing methods of the internet age) and, by seeking a collective of diverse voices, he rehearsed interdisciplinary exchanges. For instance, Trocchi collaborated with theatre-maker Joan Littlewood and architect Cedric Price while planning the Fun Palace in London, extending Situationism to spaces for child play and development. Trocchi and other figures in Sigma were also instrumental in the early plans for London's Anti-University (1968) which started as a 1964 conference in Braziers Park following Trocchi's call for a countercultural 'spontaneous university'.²¹

Trocchi's status as London's radical underground kingpin was confirmed in 1965 when he compered the International Poetry Incarnation at the Albert Hall. The event, which headlined Allen Ginsberg, was in part organized through Trocchi's Sigma contacts. The seminal gathering sparked what Jeff Nuttall declared to be the beginning of the fringe theatre movement and established what Barry Miles called 'a sense of constituency that was never there before'.²² Sigma next played an integral role in Trocchi co-founding the influential underground newspaper *International Times (IT)* with Tom McGrath, Jim Haynes and others. Early iterations of *IT* were even subtitled with the appellation, 'a sigmatic newspaper'. In addition to circulating the idea of Sigma through the fields of print media (*Sigma Portfolio* and underground newspapers), architecture (the Fun Palace), education (the Anti-University) and poetry events (the International Poetry Incarnation), Trocchi believed most of all that Sigma could be realized through theatre.

In 1964, Trocchi and collaborator Jeff Nuttall approached the American theatre-maker and Arts Lab founder Jim Haynes about producing the event. But when that ultimately failed,

²¹ Ibid.

²² Jeff Nuttall, 'On the Fringe', interview by Cindy Oswin, Roger Ely, and Sarah French, DVD, Date of recording unknown, British Library. Call Number: 1DOC0000985; Barry Miles in Nigel Fountain's *Underground: The London Alternative Press, 1966-74* (London: Routledge, 1989), p. 18.

they set up shop in the basement of Better Books, an alternative book-shop on London's Charing Cross Road.²³ In January 1965, the show opened and its title, *sTigma*, was understood as a clever rebranding of Sigma and a provocative play on words. The symbolism in the capitalization of the letter T evoked a Christ-like sacrifice and was not missed by critics: 'sTigmartyrs start here' read the title of *The Observer's* review.²⁴ 'The "Experience"', as the article went on to explain, was 'devised by sTigma, offshoot and corruption of sigma [...] About a dozen people were involved in putting the show together, among them John Latham, sculptor, Keith Musgrove, poet, and Bruce Lacey, sculptor, object maker and comic'.²⁵ Trocchi contributed voice recordings of poetry readings and Sigma materials along with recordings made by William Burroughs. The recordings played throughout the basement; the immersive environment was in many ways a collective installation of text, sculpture, light and sound. *The Observer* described *sTigma* as an experience of 'negotiating a haunted house, getting covered in feathers, and crawling on your belly through a tunnel of lorry tyres'.²⁶

What *The Observer* left out, however, are details of how the performance referenced horrors of the Vietnam war. This included what *Peace News* described as 'a mangled head, photos of Hiroshima, Civil Defence posters, two breasts made from washing-up liquid container, and a bookstall packed with religious, humanitarian and political propaganda of every description'.²⁷ Nuttall later wrote, 'It was propagandist rather than art. Its brutality, its nauseous elements were intended to enforce life and to inspire compassion, an angry diagnosis intended to provoke correction'.²⁸ Collaborator and contributor Bruce Lacey also confirmed the show's anti-

²³ Jeff Nuttall, *Bomb Culture* (London: Granada, 1970), p. 222.

²⁴ George Seddon, 'Briefing / Who & Why', *The Observer* (7 March 1965), p. 23.

²⁵ *Ibid.*

²⁶ *Ibid.*

²⁷ Dick Wilcocks, 'sTigma-a Kick at Soporifics', *Peace News* (12 March 1965), p. 10.

²⁸ Nuttall, *Bomb Culture*, p. 225.

war political intentions in a 2000 interview with Gillian Whiteley. Lacey explained how the creators wanted to shock the audience with hidden atrocities of the Vietnam War and to counter the dominant splendour of military tattoos. According to Lacey, the artists of *sTigma* originally wanted to drop human cadavers into the performance space to maximize the disruptive aesthetic.²⁹ Unable to reconcile this idea with the group's pacifist ideologies and unable to acquire the cadavers, the group used dummies.³⁰ The intention, however, to unsettle the dramaturgical journey of spectators with falling corpses speaks strongly to Trocchi's Situationist call to disrupt the spectacle of capitalism's mystified victims.

Exceedingly bold for its time, *sTigma* asked much of the audience. It ran for three months to much acclaim in periodicals such as *Peace News*. However, some collaborators, upon later reflection, changed their position. Nuttall, who once planned to tour *sTigma* around the provinces, claimed only two years later that *sTigma* failed to awaken people's collective consciousness and instead simply attracted 'sadistic fetishists'.³¹ Nuttall further wrote, 'At that time we were never quite sure whether what we were doing in happenings was demonstration or personal therapy. Frequently a savagery that began as satire [...] changed mid-way to sadistic participation on the part of the artist, as he expressed himself in the mood of the piece'.³² Regardless of whether *sTigma* can be considered a failure or success, it is historically significant as the earliest event that attempted to embody Situationist theory in its design and its spoken (recorded) texts. The piece was devised as an extension of Trocchi's Situationist manifestos and Sigma network; it featured themes that sought to shatter perceptual blocks; and it sought to

²⁹ Bruce Lacey, Interview by Gillian Whiteley, National Life Story Collection: Artists' Lives (15 and 18 May 2000), British Library Archival Sound Recordings (<http://sounds.bl.uk/View.aspx?item=021M-C0466X0099XX-0700V0.xml>, accessed 11 March 2016).

³⁰ Ibid.

³¹ Nuttall, *Bomb Culture*, p. 227.

³² Ibid., p. 12.

empower citizens through collective participation and engagement. *sTigma* broke new ground in theatrical experimentation, immersive performance techniques, audience engagement and collaborative devising, but remains largely unmentioned in theatre history.

Re-Situating British theatre historiography

Histories of Situationist-influenced British theatre consistently pivot on a post-68 periodization. Playwrights such as Howard Brenton, David Hare, Trevor Griffiths and David Edgar have remarked how Debord's writings, worldwide riots and *les évènements* in 1968 inspired and inflect their work. Chris Megson illustrates how numerous British political playwrights attribute inspiration to the Situationists. Building on Sadie Plant's argument that worldwide protests in 1968 vindicated what SI claimed would be an inevitable shift in collective consciousness, Megson positions Situationism not just as an influence, but as a 'model both of political analysis and oppositional cultural practice in the contemporary context'.³³ In this respect, tenets of Situationism (resistance to prevailing institutions, creative disruptions and mobilizing political consciousness) percolated in the cultural zeitgeist from which these playwrights emerged.

Of particular interest for many playwrights and directors of this period was the need to challenge perceptual boundaries between public life and artistic practice. Hence, there is a preponderance of characters that speak of, or physically enact, the shattering of screens. Megson uses Brenton's play *Magnificence* (1973) as a key example in which audiences witnessed the radicalized character Jed speak of a disgruntled man throwing a bottle through a cinema screen. Similarly disillusioned, Jed declares his solidarity, 'The poor bomber. Bomb 'em. Again and

³³ Chris Megson, "'The Spectacle Is Everywhere": Tracing the Situationist Legacy in British Playwriting since 1968', *Contemporary Theatre Review* 14.2 (May 2004), 17-28: p. 6.

again. Right through their silver screen. Disrupt the spectacle. The obscene parade, bring it to a halt!³⁴ Brenton's reference is not an oblique gesture towards Situationist mottos but an unequivocal citation and creative appropriation. The meta-theatrical metaphor challenges spectators in the theatre reflexively to consider commodified frames of representation through the imaginary synecdoche of a ruptured cinema screen.

It is also important to note that invoking Situationist themes in British theatre was not a domain solely of male playwrights – despite the focus of most histories. Joan Arden's work, for example, offers a compelling testament and demonstrates a dynamic use of a disruptive dramaturgy. *Vagina Rex and the Gas Oven* (1969), for instance, is concerned with shattering perceptual blocks to women's liberation and is remembered for, amongst other things, its depiction of female genitalia. One of these moments occurred when the character of Nameless Woman lies down and a previously recorded close-up film of a vagina was projected onto two large white plastic sheets. Several naked performers playing a chorus of 'Furies' emerged through the slits of the projected vagina and rolled into the laps of audience members.³⁵ Later, the Nameless Woman is metaphorically stabbed and dismembered by the Nameless Man before being transformed into a mother-goddess.³⁶ The narrative of Arden's play is repeatedly disrupted, as are the frames of spectatorship. Through a series of disjointed actions and sensorial assaults, the audience is constantly put on edge. The show articulated emerging perspectives on women's oppression and asked questions to its audience through screen projections, such as 'Do you believe in penis envy?' and 'Are you one of the great mass of women exploited as cheap

³⁴ Howard Brenton, *Plays: 1 Christie in Love; The Churchill Play; Weapons of Happiness; Epsom Downs; Sore Throats* (London; New York: Heinemann, 1988), p. 96.

³⁵ Jack Bond, *Vagina Rex and the Gas Oven* (1/2), interview by Susan Croft and Jessica Higgs, 8 November 2009, <http://www.theatrevoice.com/audio/vagina-rex-and-the-gas-oven/>, accessed 18 February 2016.

³⁶ Emma L. E. Rees, *The Vagina: A Literary and Cultural History* (London: Bloomsbury, 2014), p. 75.

labour?’³⁷ Michelene Wandor argues that *Vagina Rex* was ‘Arden’s version of the need to “disrupt the spectacle” and shock the audience, which was influenced by the 1960s French situationists’.³⁸

Graham White, however, questions the validity of connecting Situationism to post-1968 playwriting. White suggests that the “influence model” is suspect because ‘it is difficult to locate clear relationships of cause and effect between the Situationist International and the English counterculture’.³⁹ Attempts to connect Situationism to British theatre are undermined, in White’s view, by what he calls ‘overarching’ and ‘overgeneral’ models of historical transmission.⁴⁰ Referring to playwrights commonly associated with Situationism like Brenton, Hare and Edgar, White states that the contradiction of placing Situationist ideas into ‘the context of broadly naturalistic, text-based English drama’ is irreconcilable.⁴¹ In other words, conventions of what was primarily white, middle-class playwriting in British theatre (even by Leftist practitioners) cannot accommodate the radical anti-commodity theories of the Situationists. Even if Brenton believed *Magnificence* was a metaphorical way to throw ‘Petrol Bombs through the Proscenium Arch’, as he told Catharine Itzin in 1975, the play could not escape its frame of conventional theatre viewing practices.⁴² Yet, playwrights like Brenton, Edgar and others were often aware of the dangers of appropriating Situationist principles. Some like Trevor Griffiths adopted a view that ‘strategic penetration’ of cultural institutions was important – in Griffiths’

³⁷ Jane Arden, *Vagina Rex and the Gas Oven* (London: John Calder, 1971), p. 19.

³⁸ Michelene Wandor, *Look Back in Gender: Sexuality and the Family in Post-War British Drama* (London: Routledge, 2014), p. 95.

³⁹ Graham White, ‘Digging for Apples: Reappraising the Influence of Situationist Theory on Theatre Practice in the English Counterculture’, *Theatre Survey* 42.2 (2001), 177-90: p. 181.

⁴⁰ *Ibid.*, p. 188.

⁴¹ *Ibid.*, p. 183.

⁴² Catherine Itzin and Simon Trussler, ‘Petrol Bombs Through the Proscenium Arch’, *Theatre Quarterly* 5.17 (March 1975): pp. 4–20.

case, a justification also to move into television writing.⁴³ Couched as opportunistic interventions, however, the work of self-identified Situationist-inspired playwrights reveal nuanced and sometimes paradoxical deployments of Situationist ideas.

Performances less steeped in traditions of naturalism but seeking experimental alternatives, like *Vagina Rex* and *sTigma*, can therefore point to models of theatre outside the scope of White's otherwise perceptive critique. These works occurred at 'underground' platforms and were resistant to traditional notions of bourgeois theatre, proscenium stages, and playwright-driven productions. The success of Arden's play, though arising from a radical script, was attributed to a team of theatre-makers that included her director (and husband) Jack Bond, Arts Lab founder Jim Haynes and the show's audio-visual director, Jack Moore.⁴⁴ Through a collective process, the group experimented with multimedia documentary projections to counterpoint narrative elements and intervene in spectating practices. Related but distinct from Brecht's *Verfremdungseffekt* (or distancing effect) and Artaud's Theatre of Cruelty, *Vagina Rex* employed devices that explicitly evoked mediatized representations of the 'deranged'⁴⁵ and biologically inferior female. Elements of the production distanced the audience from the narrative, and moments such as the ritualistic birthing of the Furies seemed intended to elicit an Artaudian awakening amongst its viewers. But it was the show's obsession with language that confine and medicalize women that keenly resonate with Situationist ideas of dismantling the 'spectacle':

We must destroy the language. Bird-brained – tender, intuitive – garrulous – unreliable – disloyal and weak. We must destroy the language. Who are they – these illogical rulers of

⁴³ Catherine Itzin, *Stages in the Revolution: Political Theatre in Britain Since 1968* (London: Methuen, 1980), p. 174. See also Trevor Griffiths, 'Author's Preface', *Through the Night and Such Impossibilities* (Faber & Faber, 1977), 7-11.

⁴⁴ Bond, *Vagina Rex* (interview).

⁴⁵ Arden, *Vagina Rex*, p. 1.

the kitchen? Gossiping – dirty – incomplete – moon-crazed temptresses. [...] Our capacity to think – except in the service of that, which we are dangerously deluded into supposing is our own self-interest – is desperately limited and shrouded in veils of mystification. ‘My dear lady’, they hint, ‘There is nothing accurate in what you have observed - it's all in your poor tormented psyche, come with me to our nice expanding mental hospitals, where we'll teach you, once again, that it's not history - but your head’.⁴⁶

Arden assaulted audiences not only with the cruelty of existing languages and spectacles of women’s domesticity (and threats of institutionalization), but hijacked these representations in order to seek new languages of expression. ‘We have no language, the words of women have yet to be written’, she wrote.⁴⁷ By inverting hysterical stereotypes of women into an ultimate awakening of an ‘omnipotent mother-goddess’, Arden accomplished what the Situationists called a *détournement*, or a recouping of female dissident figures. As Arden wrote in the play’s introduction, ‘yesterday’s “deranged” females are emerging as today’s radical leaders’.⁴⁸ Debord similarly wrote of how a ‘*détournement* is inseparably negation and prelude in culture, at the turning point of culture’.⁴⁹ Even the title, *Vagina Rex and the Gas Oven*, suggests a double *détournement* of holocaust symbols and of women not as possessors of mere baby-producing organs, but as kings with the power to incinerate mechanisms of their own oppression.

In a similar fashion, Trocchi’s *sTigma* can be seen as a critique of discourses of complacency around capitalism and war. ‘I want to make people aware of nasty things in a cosy

⁴⁶ Ibid., 11 (original emphasis).

⁴⁷ Ibid., p. 10.

⁴⁸ Ibid., p. 1.

⁴⁹ Guy Debord, ‘Letter to Patrick Straram’, *Not Bored! Anthology* (31 October 1960), <http://www.notbored.org/debord-31October1960.html>, accessed 18 February 2016, p. 6.

society’, Bruce Lacey, a *sTigma* collaborator, told *Peace News*.⁵⁰ ‘I would like to do a commercial for sanitary towels, contraceptives, abortions’, he said.⁵¹ Nuttall called the show an ‘anti-deodorant’, a ‘kick at soporifics’ who sleep walk through life and become numb to politics. Referencing Situationism and nodding towards Trocchi’s work, Nuttall further argued, ‘Art must inform the living; we envisage a *situation* imaginatively and passionately constructed to inspire each individual to respond creatively, to bring to whatever act a creative comportment’.⁵² But *sTigma*, like *Vagina Rex*, was also a *détournement* of theatre and art as conservative institutions. To enter *sTigma*, participants had to become ‘members of a club’ (a clever and common way to circumnavigate Lord Chamberlain censorship) called SKOOB, an inversion of the word ‘books’. A tower of Latham’s burned books also featured as part of the underground event. Together with the location of *sTigma* beneath an operating book-shop, the event spoke in many ways of the Sigma project’s aim to undermine print culture and publishing.

Legacy

Connecting Trocchi’s work to a genealogy of texts and events is a tricky affair. The gulf that separates it from 1968 histories can be explained, in part, by periodization and Trocchi’s antipathy for institutional publishing-houses, but also by his public profile as an ardent advocate of drugs. By 1965, Trocchi had become a celebrity prophet of LSD and heroin, comparable to R. D. Laing and Timothy Leary. He regularly appeared on BBC television when an intellectual perspective was needed from a ‘tame junkie’.⁵³ ‘His arm is like a moonscape,’ Barry Farrell commented in *LIFE Magazine*; ‘Trocchi’s double misfortune is to be the world’s second most

⁵⁰ Wilcocks, ‘sTigma-a Kick at Soporifics’, p. 10.

⁵¹ *Ibid.*, p. 10.

⁵² *Ibid.*, p. 10 (emphasis added).

⁵³ Barry Miles, *London Calling: A Countercultural History of London since 1945* (London: Atlantic Books, 2010) Kindle Edition, Loc. 2862.

famous junkie'.⁵⁴ As decades wore on, Trocchi's drug habits continued and he fell out with many friends and colleagues. His wife and two children suffered from health problems and difficult living conditions. By the time he died in 1984, both his first wife and son already had passed away from hepatitis and cancer. Six months later, his remaining son committed suicide. Not long after Trocchi's death, an unexplained fire swept through his house making his corpus all the more difficult to recover from the ashes.

Yet, though Trocchi's professional life may have diminished after 1965, the ideological jolt of his early manifestos continued to reverberate through London and Europe. Despite his failure to establish a Sigma Centre in London (an attempt was made at the Roundhouse), Trocchi nonetheless inspired Sigma activities and centres in Belgium, the Netherlands, France and America.⁵⁵ Olivier Boelen from the legendary and influential Living Theatre Company became a Sigma partner and joined Situationist poet Simon Vinkenoog to open Amsterdam's Sigma Centrum. In addition to the Living Theatre, Sigma Centrum hosted groups such as the New Electric Chamber Music Ensemble and performance artists such as Twyla Tharp. According to Robert Adlington, Sigma Centrum cultivated its activists from its audiences who intervened in the 1969 Dutch premiere of Stockhausen's *Stimmung*, creating what one journalist described as "THE GREATEST SCANDAL" in the eight-year history of this temple of the muses'.⁵⁶ Niek Pas connects Trocchi and Sigma to the Netherlands' first indoor pop festival, which took place in 1967, writing that what started as a 'critique of consumerism and capitalism ultimately became absorbed by popular (youth) culture'.⁵⁷ The phenomenon of diffusive co-option was also evident

⁵⁴ Farrell Barry, 'The Other Culture', *LIFE* (17 February 1967), p. 95.

⁵⁵ Niek Pas, 'In Pursuit of the Invisible Revolution: Sigma in the Netherlands, 1966-1968', *Between the Avant-Garde and the Everyday: Subversive Politics in Europe from 1957 to the Present*, ed. Timothy Brown and Lorena Anton (New York: Berghahn, 2011), 31-43: p. 41.

⁵⁶ Robert Adlington, 'Tuning in and Dropping Out: The Disturbance of the Dutch Premiere of Stockhausen's *Stimmung*', *Music and Letters* 90.1 (1 February 2009), 94-112: p. 94.

⁵⁷ Pas, 'In Pursuit of the Invisible Revolution', p. 43.

in the Sigma Festival in Bordeaux which operated from 1965 to 1996 and hosted thousands of experimental shows, films, concerts and world premieres.⁵⁸

A pattern of influence and absorption can be seen in British theatre genealogies as well. The People Show company was founded by Nuttall just a year after *sTigma* and premiered in the same basement of Better Books.⁵⁹ The performance art group experimented with multimedia and audience participation. Many of the aesthetics and methods of the People Show have clear inheritances from Nuttall's time with Trocchi and *sTigma*. But, unlike the forgotten *sTigma*, the People Show earned a place in history as the earliest and 'the most influential performance art group'.⁶⁰ There is an established performance genealogy that connects the People Show to the practices of early alternative companies such as John Bull Puncture Repair Kit, Jail Warehouse, Pip Simmon's Theatre Group and to later groups like Lumiere & Son, Hesitate and Demonstrate and Forced Entertainment.

Conclusion

Sensing himself on the cusp of a paradigm shift, Trocchi wrote that Sigma represented a transition in consciousness so radical and so impactful as to be compared to those previously 'denoted by words like "renaissance", "reformation"'.⁶¹ Indeed, Trocchi's trajectory from the 1950s to the 1960s connected him with the crucial milestones and distinguished figures of twentieth-century theatre practice, from late-modernist playwriting (e.g., Beckett and Genet) to British socialist theatre-makers (e.g., McGrath and Littlewood), and avant-garde performance

⁵⁸ 'SIGMA | E-Flux', <http://www.e-flux.com/announcements/sigma/>, accessed 3 May 2015.

⁵⁹ Grant Tyler Peterson, 'The People Show', *British Theatre Companies: 1965-1979*, ed. John Bull (London: Bloomsbury Publishing PLC, 2016). In press.

⁶⁰ Sandy Craig, *Dreams and Deconstructions: Alternative Theatre in Britain* (Derbyshire: Amber Lane Press, 1980), p. 24.

⁶¹ *Ibid.*

(e.g., Nuttall, Haynes, Living Theatre, Marowitz). With a utopian grandeur, Trocchi believed that Sigma could encompass an expanding net of emerging countercultural activities and transform society as well as our very notions of history. Although narrowly yoked under the banner of Sigma, Trocchi fundamentally outlines tenets of early-postmodernism: he unpicks binary spectacles of producer/consumer and artist/spectator, he champions techniques of disruption, intertextuality, pluralism, and hastens the death of the proverbial author – even at the expense of his own historical erasure.

Central to Trocchi's vision was that Sigma needed to be “invisible” to be effective'. As he wrote in a later Sigma publication, 'so long as our techniques for the passing on of informations grow with the passage of time more and more effective, etc., our insurrection will snowball of its own momentum'.⁶² Trocchi, like many Situationists, was ambivalent about categorization and historicization. Sigma, he stated, 'will tend naturally to be collective production, and anonymous production'.⁶³ In this sense, a history that seeks traces of Trocchi is somewhat antithetical to his larger project of anonymity for the sake of a collective overturning of cultural consciousness. However, as the Sigma project and *sTigma* demonstrate, Trocchi's work created an important hub to which many of Europe's experimental artists and critical thinkers gravitated. Trocchi was not simply a product of his time, but an instrumental force and key instigator of radical practices that rippled diffusely through twentieth-century literature and theatre.

⁶² Alexander Trocchi, 'Project: The Holding Company', *Sigma Portfolio* 22 (1964), <http://omeka.wustl.edu/omeka/items/show/9672>, accessed 18 February 2016.

⁶³ Ibid.