INTROSPECTIVE

Gee Vaucher

Firstsite
2016

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GEE VAUCHER'S PUNK PAINTING AS RECORD SLEEVES

George McKay

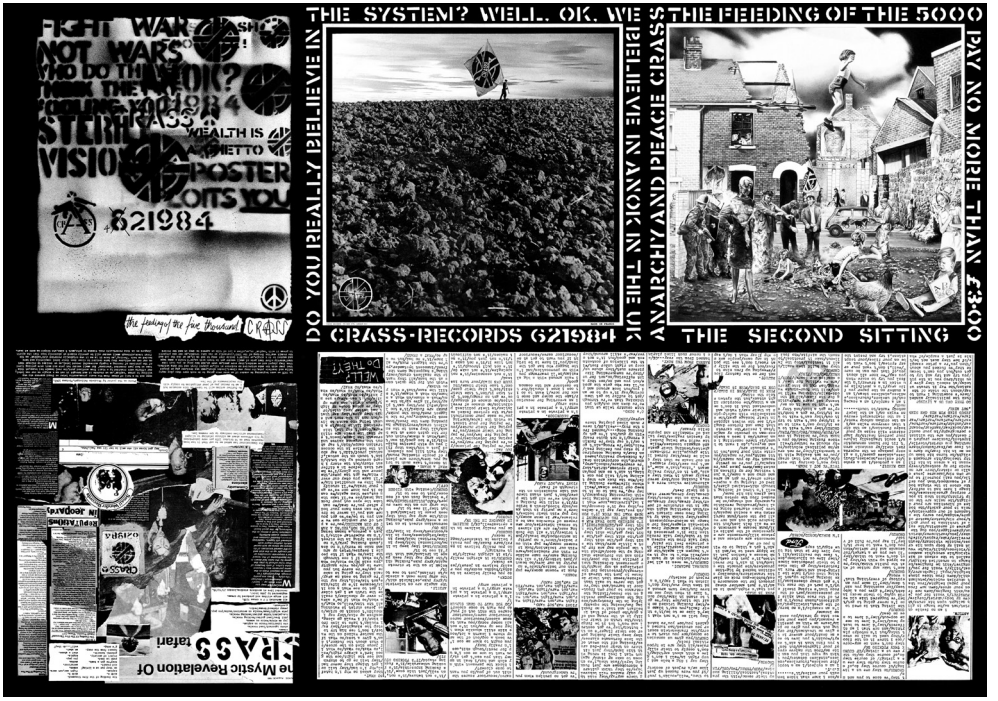
All art is 'political,' all aesthetic is 'political.'
How do you draw the line?
– Gee Vaucher[1]

It is of course a standard claim, that 'all art is political', often enough stated by political artists (not without exasperation) when questioned about their politics. But the part that interests me here is the artist's follow-up question, 'How do you draw the line?' How did Gee Vaucher of Crass draw the line, paint it, interrogate it, demolish it, multiply it, deny there is such a thing? More centrally, how did she do that on the apparently secondary cultural form (after the recorded music they contain) of punk rock record covers?

Vaucher's work with Crass showed her both exploiting and extending the possibilities of record cover art, for political and creative purposes. She worked at the tail end of the high popularity of record cover art, an interdisciplinary art form that burgeoned in the 1960s and 1970s, wrapping, protecting, packaging and enhancing the new music, and which began to diminish in size and importance with the onset of digital music consumption from the 1980s on (CDs then downloads). Steve Jones and Martin Sorger note that '[v]isually, the 12-inch square of the album cover has proven a fertile forum for the development of a rich sense of cultural, artistic, and social history', and argue that the record cover 'is the historical cornerstone of pre-recorded music packaging'.[2] In the 1960s and 1970s, record companies and artists produced increasingly 'elaborate packages. Album covers incorporated die-cuts, embossing, multiple gatefolds, books, posters, and assorted gimmicky constructions and novelties. One variety included covers shaped after the paraphernalia of rock: speakers, amps, concert tickets, record players, and so on'.[3] Vaucher and Crass, during the band's active existence from 1977 to 1984, extended the boundaries of record cover art in both 7" and 12" forms. Vaucher's art was a sustained challenge to the idea that the record cover was a subsidiary artefact to the music of the record itself.

It is widely recognised that the art school was central to Britain's popular music and subcultures from the 1950s and 1960s on (Vaucher herself was a student at South East Essex School of Art and Design in Barking in

Front cover for Crass *The Feeding of the Five Thousand*, 1978
Gouache. 260mm x 260mm



the early to mid 1960s). But there may be something particular to punk's amateur or DIY aesthetics or shambolics ('here's a chord, here's another', etc) that made the music itself less important than its visual or attitudinal aspects. After all, as Johnny Rotten noted, probably self-ironisingly, 'if people bought the records for the music, this thing would have died a death long ago'.[4] From Jamie Reid (Sex Pistols) to Linder Sterling (Buzzcocks, Ludus), Peter Saville (Joy Division and Factory Records) to the later work of Barney Bubbles (Stiff Records), as well as Vaucher with Crass, punk's record covers and band graphics were a compelling feature of its visual innovation.

Ian Inglis has proposed a four-fold categorisation for the purpose of record covers:

Fold-out poster sleeve for Crass *The Feeding of the Five Thousand*, 1978
624mm x 884mm

functionally as protection of the record itself, as advertisement of the product within (packaging and branding), as accompaniment to the music (lyric sheet and so on), and as commodity in its own right (collectible artwork and graphics).[5] Crass record sleeves did each of these, of course, and Vaucher's role as visual producer of Crass's 'aesthetic of anger', as the sleeve of *Yes Sir, I Will* (1983) puts it in bold capitals, was pivotal. (We can identify many other considered visual aspects of the band's aesthetic, including in their uniform clothing, the multiple banners as backdrops to live shows, the Crass font, their popularisation of the stencil as street art and protest, and the films of Mick Duffield.) But Vaucher's artwork and the covers' design, form, and material take us further too, as Ana Raposo points out: Crass's 'musical packaging constantly offered extra surfaces, from inserts, to inner sleeves, to complex box sets including different media, to the iconic fold-out sleeve – providing six times more printable surface area than standard sleeves'.[6] And the total discourse of these 'extra surfaces' was an ideological one, magnifying the case that, indeed, 'all aesthetic is political'.

This is evident from the start. We can see with the front cover image of the ground-breaking Crass 12" release, the band's first record, *The Feeding of the Five Thousand* (1978) – which is a complex painting by Vaucher containing an unsettling collection of images of violence, poverty, urban despair, torture, family bliss, in a recognisable British street of the 1970s. But, intriguingly, the cover is more enigmatic than propagandist in operation, as Vaucher herself has pointed out: 'the *Feeding* cover … you can translate numerous ways'. She goes on to explain some of the original painting's operation.

> Nothing actually in that image … wasn't around. That image of that scarred face [for instance] was on the back of buses in London [at the time]. It was a big poster on the back of a bus, about drink driving. Everything in that [record cover] image you've seen [somewhere else]. It's only in

Back cover for Crass *Yes Sir, I Will*, 1983

Digbeth Civic Hall, Birmingham, 22 April 1981

> the way it's put together that gives it another narrative …. All of the images I've done, if you take one piece from it, there's nothing you haven't seen before.[7]

Enigmatic aspects of the cover image contribute both to its overt ideological representation or hyperrealism and to a disturbing or unnerving communication. The young schoolgirl in her gym gear leaping mid-air, her right hand fully obscuring her face – both how and why are questions raised, floating mid-image, is she falling or has she leapt, and if so where from? On the right, the man in the striped shirt who seems to be inspecting his bricks and mortar, his back turned on the extraordinary busy scene below – is he a proud home owner or builder,

to contrast with the ruined terraced housing behind him? From where in this place of devastation has the chicken come, and where is it heading to – the C page of the little boy's first reading book? The burning mannequin, reminiscent of the 1963 self-immolation by Buddhist monk Thich Quang Duc (Rage Against the Machine would later use the actual image of that event on an album cover.) Everyday snaps mean that the everyday snaps: the soldiers at a riot (so: rioting?), the iconic British design of the Mini car heading towards a defenceless child against a wall, the unemployed men trying to keep warm, the contrasting versions of womanhood (loving mum, flaming fashion model, bikini'd squaddie-lover), the television-viewers glimpsed through a broken window (though there is no aerial on the chimney stack), a standing man gagged and bound, passers-by with redacted faces, at least ten unhappy children scattered…

If there is any hope in this dismal, monochrome world of 1970s Britain, the cover image tells us, it is located in the colour splash of red, on the logo'd banner, that spells the single word CRASS. And perhaps it is the typography of that word that signifies: a version of the influential Crass typeface, by which a new design of writing is a new way of writing the world. Turn the album over and the back cover shows us the countryside, an earthy field before the next harvest, almost ploughed like the very record's microgrooves, with a single human presence, the banner-holder. The band logo and red-lettered CRASS are clearer now, and seem to speak of heroic survival and future possibility. Is this for *after,* when we have consumed the package contents, for when we have listened to the music therein?

One of the fairly regular targets for Crass's considerable ire, especially early on, before things got too serious with major political events like the Falklands War, the Miners' Strike, and the Greenham Common anti-nuclear protest camp, was the punk scene and the bands and music press in it. Vaucher's cover art for the 1980 joint single with Poison Girls, 'Persons Unknown' / 'Bloody Revolutions', features on a fold-out inside poster which also appears (in extract) on the front cover. A well-known Sex Pistols publicity shot was reworked, each band member given a different head, mostly of world leaders. Raposo calls this self-reflexive punk cover image of Vaucher's 'one of the most controversial statements within this field'. It really didn't seem like that to me in 1980, when I bought the new release; I just thought it a funny (for Crass) joke, attacking the punk hierarchy – a visual repetition and extension of the argument previously made in the song 'Punk is dead' from *Feeding* (with its terrific and knowing opening line: 'Yes, that's right, punk is dead'). Ludicrously 'the inflammatory nature of the cover [image]… beyond the bounds of good taste' caused the

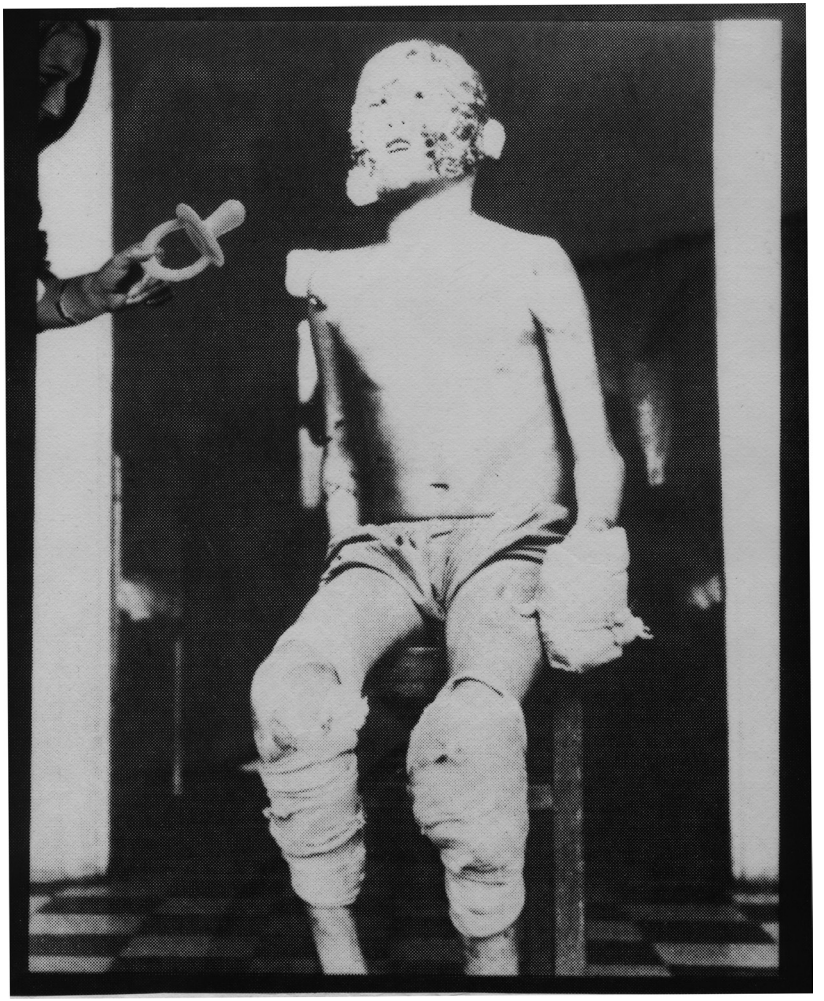
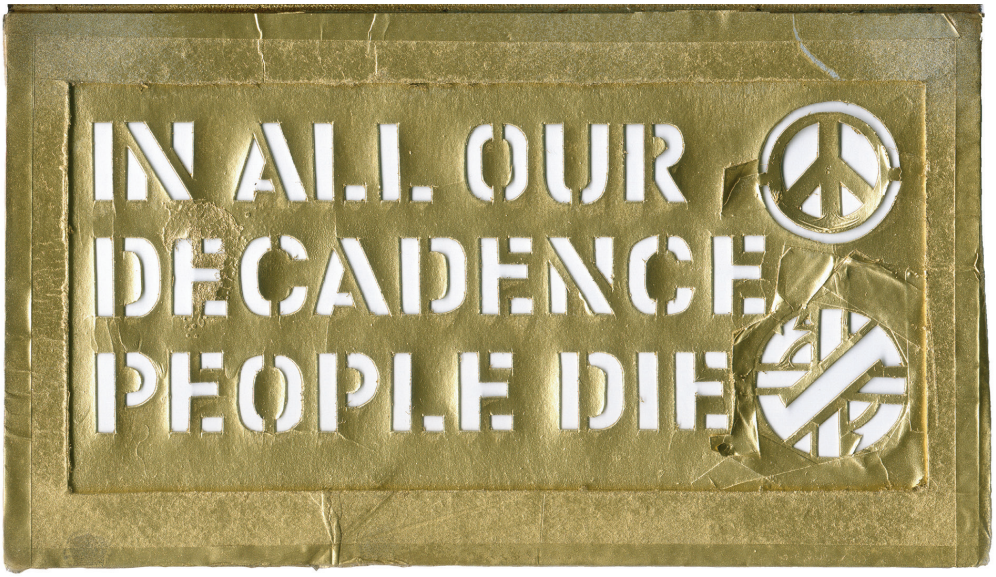


Illustration for Crass 'I am tired of the limitations and the humiliations' handout, 1980
Collage. 240mm x 170mm



record to be removed from sale in HMV record stores up and down the country,[8] but at the time I wasn't aware of the response to the cover from, of all places, the barely three or four year-old punk community itself. As Vaucher herself remembered: 'the most violent reaction … came from punks who thought it was a heresy against the Pistols'.[9] Shot by both sides.

The black and white streetscape is the now familiar one of contemporary urban dystopia – deprivation in the cracked walls and pavements, a badly boarded-up shop front, a glimpse of suburbia (house number 84, as in the year) where a uniformed officer is engaged in a violent struggle with a man, anarchist and pop graffiti on the walls, an advertising billboard with its image of feminine sexual promise. Competing slogans: 'Underneath they're all lovable' from the lingerie ad, then Crass's stencilled and logo'd challenge: 'WHO DO THEY THINK THEY'RE FOOLING; YOU?'

As is the nature with much propaganda (OK, discuss …) there's something a little obvious in the punk/world leader doubleness

Hand cut stencil, 1978

– a set of single-hit visual puns presented to the viewer with the expectation that a double-take will be generated, consensus temporarily disturbed. Juxtapose to deconstruct: Sid Vicious's body with Queen Elizabeth's head, guitarist Steve Jones headed up by Pope John Paul II, that sort of thing. But when you look at the figure on the right, it's altogether more interesting, because it's politically complex. Blonde on blond: the radical right-wing Prime Minister's head on Sex Pistols singer Johnny Rotten's body. And vice versa.

It's all in the hair! Dyed blonde on dyed blond. Two radicals moving in one space, each wrapped in a Union Jack while changing the nation. It was the political consensus of many early punks – and almost everyone on the left – that, unlike the Rotten figure here, Thatcher didn't need to *wear* a DESTROY

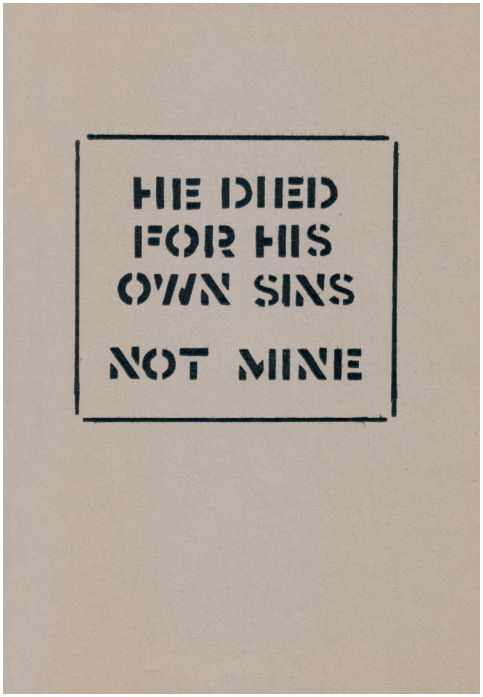
Inside poster for Crass single *Bloody Revolutions*, 1980
Gouache. 430mm x 290mm

t-shirt, for she was the arch-destroyer. She had a safety-pin in her handbag. In this brilliant moment from Vaucher's brush, Thatcher and Rotten are a united/twinned pair of blond/e bombshells, 'potential H-bombs'. A troubling union – wonderfully provocative anarchist art. Shooting at both sides.

While (ok, debatably…) a good deal of punk was or thought it was speedy, instant, impactful, brash, careless, some of Vaucher's very best contributions were slowly and carefully produced. The artist's emphasis that these were paintings was part of that – as she has put it, discussing the cover of *Feeding*, 'it was more powerful because it's a painting, it's not a collage, it's a painting, and for some reason that looks more real'. Such works are intended to introduce a reflective pause, to induce a thought, of course, but their complexity makes the pause endure (approaching 40 years since *Feeding*, and, from a personal perspective, it is 20 years since I first published on Crass. They are not letting go). Vaucher's Crass works were something to make a politically obsessive teenager (me then, say) stare intently at what he's holding in front of him, so he will recognise and re-view aspects of the social and cultural poverty and violence of parts of 1970s Britain that have somehow been brought together in one place, this process of engaged recognition taking place against the noisy, shouty, sweary backdrop of the recorded music. While Inglis makes the point that 'the design of any [record] cover should reflect the music it contains and evoke the intention of the performers',[10] Vaucher takes issue with record art as reflection or evocation of the essential music.

There is a faithful promise in that feeding too, Gee Sus; to be honest I'm not sure whether that's a good thing, or just Crass, well, blowing their own. The pure religiosity

Inside poster for Crass *The Feeding of the Five Thousand*, 1978
Photograph from Vietnam 1968 by Ghislain Bellorget. 884 mm x 624 mm



of the band was magnified by the (puzzling, I still sometimes feel) ferocity of their attack on religion. Crass were missionaries, from some other place (Epping, or the Sixties, maybe), and Vaucher with record cover art like *The Feeding of the Five Thousand* and 'Bloody revolutions', made punk a much more interesting, complex, contradictory culture, or belief. I mean, what was it Patti Smith said (apart from 'Jesus died for somebody's sins, but not mine', which Crass also reworked)? 'If you want to see where the world's been, just look through some old album covers'.[11] Sound visual historicising, that.

1. Quoted in Alex Burrows, "Something From Nothing: The Crass Art Of Gee Vaucher," *The Quietus*. December 2nd, 2012. Available at http://thequietus.com/articles/10865-gee-vaucher-crass-art-interview
2. Steve Jones and Martin Sorger, 'Covering music: a brief history and analysis of album cover design,' *Journal of Popular Music Studies* 11–12 (1999): 70/83.
3. Ibid., 77.
4. Ibid., 68.
5. Ian Inglis, '"Nothing you can see that isn't shown": the album covers of the Beatles,' *Popular Music* 20 (2001): 83–84.
6. Ana Raposo, 'We mean it, maaan!: the representation of "extreme" politics in punk rock graphics'. Published in the conference proceedings of The Endless End: The 9th International European Academy of Design Conference 2011. Available at https://www.academia.edu/1116054/We_Mean_It_Maaan_The_Representation_of_Extreme_Politics_in_Punk_Music_Graphics.
7. BRHW [Bristol Radical History Workshop]. 2014. 'Film: Gee Vaucher anti-war art.' Permanent Culture Now website. http://www.permanentculturenow.com/gee-vaucher-anti-war-art.
8. Penny Rimbaud, *Shibboleth: My Revolting Life* (Edinburgh: AK Press), 122–123.
9. Quoted in George McKay, *Senseless Acts of Beauty: Cultures of Resistance since the Sixties* (London: Verso), 92.
10. Inglis, 89.
11. Quoted in Jones and Sorger, 1999, 70.

From Crass *621984* booklet, 1978
297mm x 210mm

CONTRIBUTORS

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Rebecca Binns is currently researching a PhD on Gee Vaucher's work, entitled *Vaucher's Autonomy: Notions of Freedom in Divergent States of Production*, at the London College of Communication. She has written widely on punk graphics, photography, fine art, architecture and squatting for academic journals and various other publications. She also curated the exhibition, *They've Taken Our Ghettos: A Punk History of the Woodberry Down Estate*, which opened at Craving Coffee, Gaunson House, Tottenham (London) and then toured Rebellion Festival (Blackpool) as part of their Punk Art exhibition (2015).

Yuval Etgar is a doctoral candidate at the Ruskin School of Art, University of Oxford, a Research Associate at Luxembourg & Dayan, and a curator for modern and contemporary art. His current research is focused on the history and theory of collage and image appropriation in Britain and the USA around the 1970s and 80s.

Martina Groß is a radio journalist living in Berlin and working as a freelancer for German Public Service Broadcasting. Since 1997 she has been writing features about culture and politics about music, literature, politics, unions, and the Basque cooperative Mondragon. Her broadcast "Ten seconds from now – the American radio pioneer Elsa Knight Thompson" was awarded the 2010 Juliane Bartel Media Award. Her latest productions include "We are like gods and we can be just as good – The Hippies and the Cyberspace" and "Living Radical. The British artists Gee Vaucher and Penny Rimbaud."

Marie-France Kittler is a curator living and working in London and East Anglia. She is currently Curator of Exhibitions at Firstsite in Colchester, Essex. Previously she has worked at Institute of Contemporary Arts (London), Kettle's Yard (Cambridge) and Tate (London) as well as on projects for various galleries and artist's studios.

George McKay is Professor of Media Studies and Arts & Humanities Research Council Leadership Fellow for the Connected Communities Programme (2012–18) at the University of East Anglia, UK. His most recent books are ed., *The Pop Festival: History, Music, Media, Culture* (Bloomsbury, 2015), *Shakin' All Over: Popular Music and Disability* (University of Michigan Press, 2013), and *Radical Gardening: Politics, Idealism and Rebellion in the Garden* (Frances Lincoln, 2011). He was co-founder of the Routledge journal *Social Movement Studies* in 2002, and an editor of it until 2010. He first wrote about Crass 20 years ago in *Senseless Acts of Beauty: Cultures of Resistance since the Sixties* (Verso, 1996). He was a punk rocker back in the 1970s, and has found himself increasingly returning to the topic. His website is georgemckay.org.

Penny Rimbaud didn't go to Oxbridge. He is not married, has no children and no dog. He does not have a private dwelling in the Home Counties nor a pied-à-terre in Hoxton. He neither drives a car nor owns a mobile phone; his landline is inoperative. Having never received one, he has been unable to return his MBE to sender, although he eagerly awaits the opportunity to refuse a knighthood.

When asked, he says that he is a bread maker, this being because he realises that his bread is considerably easier to digest than his poetry and philosophy. He has been writing for all of his life, well, at least the last sixty-eight years of it. He is under no illusion that his writing days are not numbered.

John Sears taught for over 20 years at universities in England. He is author of *Stephen King's Gothic* (University of Wales Press, 2012) and *Reading George Szirtes* (Bloodaxe Books, 2008), and has published essays on a number of modern and contemporary novelists and poets. He co-curated and co-edited the catalogue for *Taking Shots: The Photography of William S. Burroughs* at The Photographers' Gallery in 2014. He is currently working on an exhibition and catalogue of photography relating to the 1934 opera *Four Saints in Three Acts*, scheduled for 2017.

Stevphen Shukaitis first encountered Gee Vaucher's artwork in a record store in suburban New Jersey at the age of 15. Since then he has obsessed over art, politics, and counterculture. One thing led to another and that led to working on bringing together this catalogue and exhibition. Currently he is Senior Lecturer at the University of Essex, Centre for Work and Organization, and a member of the Autonomedia editorial collective. He is the author of *Imaginal Machines: Autonomy & Self-Organization in the Revolutions of Everyday Day* (2009) and *The Composition of Movements to Come: Aesthetics and Cultural Labor After the Avant-Garde* (2016), and editor (with Erika Biddle and David Graeber) of *Constituent Imagination: Militant Investigations // Collective Theorization* (AK Press, 2007).

Gee is making bread.

"We like to have good bread all day, it's so much better than shop bread, shop bread is never as good as our own. Yes, you can buy Spelt flour here too, it's a fine German wheat isn't it? What is it called in German?"

"Dinkel."

"Dinkel? What a great word; Dinkel."

"What are you doing now?"

"I'm kneading the bread to push out the air which will force it to grow again. Kneading is such a lovely tactile thing to do. After that, you shape it, put it in the bread tin, let it rise, bung it the oven to bake, and then eat a slice whilst it's lovely and hot."

"Mmm, yummy."

"Dinkel."

Enough, 2007
Gouache. ???mm x ???mm

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