The Difficult Politics of the Popular

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I don’t do black music. I don’t do white music. I make fight music, for high school kids.

—Eminem

As practical psychology teaches us, the taste for destruction seems innate in the soul of a child.

—Renato Poggioli

On November 19, 1971, in a gallery space in Santa Ana, California, the young avant-garde artist Chris Burden did a performance piece titled Shoot, which has since become infamous in contemporary art history. In that relatively featureless space—after the gallery had closed and before an invited audience of less than a dozen people—Burden had a friend shoot him. Like all of Burden’s performances, it survives today in representation—through a photograph taken of the performance as well as through Burden’s brief textual commentary: “At 7:45 p.m. I was shot in the left arm by a friend. The bullet was a copper jacket 22 long rifle. My friend was standing about fifteen feet from me” (Chris Burden 53). The black-and-white photographic documentation of this event—showing the marksman with his back to the camera and Burden with his back to a wall—looks like an execution scene. In it, everything is clear except Burden’s figure, which appears blurred—the photo taken perhaps at the sudden moment of impact. Burden had asked his friend only to graze his left arm with the bullet; instead, faulty aim resulted in a wound right through the arm. (There is another post-performance photo of the event showing Burden, clutching his left side, a trail of blood streaming down from the dime-sized wound.)

With this performance, Burden’s near-mythic status as an artist was assured. Critical evaluation of the artist who would perpetrate such a piece was irresistible. Shoot became a kind of Rorschach test, with critics reading whatever meanings they wanted into the artist and his act. Art historian Frazer Ward chronicles some of these depictions: “Among other things, Burden has been described as a masochist; an avant-garde novitiate; a social therapist; an existential populist; a hero; the alter ego of the
biblical Samson; a helpless, passive victim; a heroic victim; an anthropologist; someone inclined toward the scientist, engineer, inventor, tinkerer; a victim-by-request; the hero of an impossible quest (a modern Don Quixote); a voluntary scapegoat; and a survivalist” (116). These are the relatively positive comments. I have also seen Burden described as suicidal, sick, and masochistic. Even the middlebrow, gee-whiz attitude of the New York Times is captured in the title of its piece on Burden: “He Got Shot—For His Art.” Adding to the nascent image of Burden as odd were some of his other performance pieces. A few years after Shoot, for example, there was Icarus: lying naked on his back on his studio floor, Burden had assistants rest six-foot sheets of plate glass against either of his shoulders (forming his “wings”); then they drizzled gasoline down the glass and put a match to it, the flames spreading up the wings and onto Burden’s shoulders. Or, a few months later in Through the Night Softly, the artist, lying on his stomach in a downtown Los Angeles parking lot, wearing only a skimpy bathing suit and holding his hands behind his back, crawled through fifty feet of broken glass (Chris Burden 63). And there were other similar performances in which the artist risked his body through crucifixion, electrocution, falling, drowning, confinement, and traffic fatality. In what must be a similar spirit, Fight Club’s Tyler Durden says, “I don’t want to die without any scars.”

One of the best comments on Burden’s work—and one that I find relevant to a discussion of the film Fight Club—was made by Paul Schimmel, one of the curators of Burden’s twenty-year retrospective. He called Burden’s performances “an individual’s empirical investigations” (15). Burden, then, as scientific body inquiring into the cultural “real,” concentrates on unspeakable violence. And what better reality for an American artist to investigate? A piece like Shoot, for example—done at the height of the Vietnam War, when accounts and images of death and destruction were daily television fare, as were urban violence at home and fictional violence filling the media—is Burden’s attempt to fathom the power and fascination violence holds in this country. When asked why he felt the experience of being shot was “interesting,” Burden replied, “Well, it’s something to experience. How do you know what it feels like to be shot if you don’t experience it? . . . Everybody watches it on TV every day. America is the big shoot-out country. About fifty per cent of American folklore is about people getting shot” (qtd. in Ward 118). He is an empiricist, much like Tyler Durden (“How much can you know about yourself if you’ve never been in a fight?”), who wades into the accreted lore of violence in order to connect with some human truth about life
actually lived in its thrall. Burden will later return to *Shoot* in a piece entitled *Show the Hole* for a performance festival in Italy in order to further reflect on the reality surrounding that scar he will now not die without. He explains:

> Using black velvet curtains, I constructed a small private room in the entranceway of the theatre that was being used to present the American performances. I sat in this small room with my name above me in white letters on the wall. One at a time, I received each person from the audience waiting outside. As each person entered, I addressed them in Italian and asked them in a cordial manner to “Please sit down.” Then, looking at them, I said “In 1971 I did a performance in which I was shot in the arm.” Finally, I would roll up my sleeve and as I pointed with my finger at the scar in my arm, I would say “The bullet went in here and came out there.” Each spectator was alone with me and physically close to me. I received approximately 300 people, but because each person took about one-half minute, some people had to wait in line up to 3 hours. *(Chris Burden 163-64)*

Some people, then, will wait up to three hours for physical proximity to the real, for a look at even a trace of it, its traumatic scar—his audience marveling, no doubt, at someone who willingly stepped into one of the terrifying scenarios of modern life, trying to divine through its residual trace what such a voluntary gesture meant. And Burden accomplishes this in a piece, like so much of the art of the 1970s, that strenuously attempts to escape the logic of commodification.

*Shoot*, then, is my kind of *Fight Club*: a work that takes on the seemingly incomprehensible cultural insistence on violence and its representation and tries to understand it, not intellectually or theoretically, but actually, bodily, physically; a work that hopes, through such a painfully personal event and its recycled representation, to educe reflection—possibly even change—in subsequent viewers, participants, now, in the results of his experiment. The actual film *Fight Club* I found ludicrous. My strongest memory—visceral, repulsed—is of heads being thwacked on concrete, the preposterousness of guys so nasty that they want to beat up Gandhi. For a film that purports to be about rediscovering masculinity, the men are all cartoons; there are no nuanced, complex male role models in this movie, just male models. I’m bored by high-gloss, quick-cut images spliced together to a techno beat; that’s the formal grammar for seemingly every hip commercial these days, and that’s what *Fight Club* seemed most to me when I first viewed it: a kind of film version
of an Abercrombie and Fitch catalogue displaying scantily dressed men moving through a variety of kicky location shoots (the office, the luxury hotel, the airplane, the seedy bar, the decrepit house), modeling fashionable items from the new collection. I felt, ultimately, that the film was trying to excite me into buying the sunglasses Brad Pitt wears, his red leather jacket, those cool T-shirts, the chenille bathrobe and bunny slippers. The film has almost nothing whatsoever to do with nature, and I don’t like art that makes it easy to forget about nature (which, ironically, is in large part the “real” that Fight Club’s consumerist ennui hungers for).

To see everything I found lacking in Fight Club, I need only compare this film to Key Largo, another film in which a new, personally meaningful ethic of masculine honor is forged to counter the cynical culture of gangsterism. Or better, if Tyler Durden were crossed with Chris Burden, then we’d have a different film, an unexpected one, in which Brad Pitt, the person, asked someone to really hit him as hard as he could; one in which he put himself in a situation where he could get really seriously beaten or get in a real car crash, and then maybe talk about what it felt like and why he did it. It would contain some footage perhaps in which he had people line up to get a minute or so of his time to see all the bruises and breakages, the scars he will no longer live and die without. Instead, the film delivers on what the audience has by now come to expect in its entertainments, our current brand of American folklore: a couple of those interchangeable young actors (Katha Pollitt calls them “underpants models”), romping through scenes of graphic, sexy violence to the beat of a hip, marketable soundtrack (30).

And, yet, mine is a reading I resist. So many clever readings are possible, after all. (“How’s that working for you,” Tyler Durden asks us, “being clever?”) I resist it because my students loved this film. I teach first-year developmental students, young men and women of a wide range of colors. Except for one young white woman who was bored by the film (because the guys in the dorm watch it twice a week), all my students had very positive, interesting things to say about it. I resist my reading, then, because I like my students, and I don’t value them only to turn around and do a wholesale refiguring of their culture according to my preferred ideology (in the name of “critical literacy”). We’re in the post-happenings, post-situationist, post-rock and roll era, where the participatory element completes the form, so I’m more interested in the space of Fight Club’s reception. My students all felt it was politically interesting, intellectually substantive (they pointed out that there haven’t been too many films released lately that give you something to really think about).
They eagerly embraced the anti-consumerist message even while wearing the hippest fashions possible, because they know style is a good thing (Tyler Durden is nothing if not stylish) while overdone materialism is bad. As I spoke with them about the film, I regretted my earlier dismissal of it. Dying for an exuberant life, an excessive life, any sort of “near-life experience”? That could be Georges Bataille’s story. I think of the ways that so many of my students negotiate this unquenchable need for the primitive in modernity: sports (however extreme), piercings, tattoos, wild clothing, drugs, dancing, drinking, and music—texts mostly written on the body (and exscribed in social space). The film’s script is dotted with provocative sound bites such as “everything’s a copy of a copy of a copy,” “losing all hope was freedom,” “this is your life and it’s ending one minute at a time,” and “our Great War is a spiritual war; our Great Depression is our lives.” Ultimately, there’s something very punk about this film, about having “front row seats for this theatre of mass destruction.” Not surprisingly, the film falls victim to its own contradictions: Can a critique of consumerism be mounted from the pages of an Abercrombie and Fitch catalogue? Do we kill the messenger because the grammar of the message is flawed? Frankly, I don’t know how a fetishized figure such as Brad Pitt is used by his fans. I assume that his insouciant attitude and lean, muscular body make him a cool object of desire. And when I wondered aloud about the misogyny in the film, the young men and women in my classes hadn’t seen it that way at all. The bottom-line: it’s a film that tries to eroticize the destruction of global capitalism. How wrong can that be? My students, I feel, wouldn’t respond too well to a sternly worked out reading of the film. Texts are like CDs to them: bits and pieces put together to present a semblance of a whole; what you don’t like, you can always fast forward.

To demand a better, more politically rigorous Fight Club, one that, as Henry Giroux suggests, says something about unemployment, spending cuts, and corporate lay-offs—I can’t fathom who would pay money for a feel-bad lesson like that. But nihilistically rigorous art—the kind currently being practiced by Eminem, for example—sells extremely well, enacting the sort of alternative community formation that politicized academics claim to value. There is no surprise in the fact that punk has always had the ability to bring people together in their common disaffection. Music critic Jon Pareles notes that “punk didn’t go out of date. It went underground,” proving “a lasting match with the frustrations of teenage outsiders.” Fans and practitioners went on to form what might be called a kind of CBGB Nation (after the punk club in Manhattan), and Pareles
charts its anti-mainstream creed: “They were against hypocrisy, intolerance and the misuse of authority; they were for self-expression and solidarity.” Eminem simply offers the most recent update on the movement’s continued growth: “There’s a million of us just like me, who cuss like me; who just don’t give a fuck like me; who dress like me; walk, talk, and act like me; and just might be the next best thing but not quite me” (“The Real Slim Shady”). Whatever else he is, Eminem, by countering mainstream culture, is definitely avant-garde. To call a seemingly apolitical or anti-political art such as his (or Fight Club’s or Chris Burden’s) nihilism is to ignore how central nihilism is to the avant-garde. The nihilism of Dada, for example, was both radical and metaphysical for literary theorist Renato Poggioli, who reminds us that the concept of nihilism was originally value-neutral, coined to translate the philosophical concept of nirvana. Traditional politics (even the progressive brand) have absolutely nothing to do with the avant-garde. According to Poggioli, “the only omnipresent or recurring political ideology within the avant-garde is the least political or the most anti-political of all: libertarianism and anarchism” (97). We remember Marcel Duchamp’s dismissal of politics, calling its discourse “killingly funny” (Cabanne 103). Applying a traditional political hermeneutic to the avant-garde is bound to result in a misreading. I could, for example, probably predict a leftist academic’s response to Eminem: outrage at the lyrics’ reprehensible violence against women and gays, despair over a gleeful nihilism that seems to render activism beside the point. But such a response is a dead-end because my students like Eminem. They like him a lot. He’s that rare music eagerly enjoyed by my black, white, yellow, red, beige, brown, and tan students, male and female. And these young people are not stupid or duped. They are, however, part of the post-Simpsons, post-South Park generation for whom sacred cows exist to be slaughtered. And that’s how Eminem functions in the culture: “Okay,” he sings, “I’m ready to go play, I got the machete from O.J., I’m ready to make everyone’s throat ache!” (“Kill You”). As punk, Eminem’s is not a market morality; it’s a market immorality. Expressing righteous outrage over the popular avant-garde, because our keen political insights process it in full-panic mode, we risk becoming as meaningless as everything else in this absurd culture. The voice of political critique is one of many that Eminem ridicules; in fact, he has critique-proofed, so to speak, his latest album against anyone who would step to him according to a traditional political beat:
I'm sorry, there must be a mix-up
You want me to fix up lyrics while the President gets his dick sucked?
Fuck that, take drugs, rape sluts,
Make fun of gay clubs, men who wear make-up.
Get aware, wake up, get a sense of humor,
Quit tryin’ to censor music, this is for your kid’s amusement.

("Who Knew")

That it’s shocking is the purpose. Eminem (like Burden, like Durden) chooses to enter into the violence and hate and drama and lies to search out some point of real feeling and truth, mirroring back a culture distinguished by its inhumanity. Political progressives offer a positive message because they ultimately believe in the culture’s promise and potential to be reformed. The attitude of Burden, Eminem, Durden, et al. is that of consumerist culture’s end-logic, the Final Clearance: “Everything Must Go!” As Tristan Tzara put it: “There is a great destructive, negative task to be done: sweeping out, cleaning up” (qtd. in Poggioli 63). The resulting work is as off-putting as possible, to cause uneasy self-consciousness in hypocrites and poseurs. Emblematic is Burden’s Shout Piece, performed outside of an art gallery. There on the expectant threshold of traditional culture,

I was seated on a platform suspended fourteen feet above the floor. My hair was braided and my face was covered with red body paint. Four 500 watt movie lights were placed around me facing the front entrance of the space. My voice was amplified by three speakers. As people entered the gallery, I repeatedly yelled at them to “get the fuck out, get out immediately.” Because the sound was very loud and contained high frequency feedback, most people left quickly. (Chris Burden 49)

Do lyrics like Eminem’s (or films like Fight Club) promote cynicism in politics, or do the politicians themselves do that? Given the cynical nature of politics in this country, it’s no wonder that a populist counter-discourse has bubbled up (with the television show That’s My Bush as its most recent example). The social commentary in this country that has truly transformative potential is certainly not coming from the academy; rather, it has the naughtiest, most negative popular sources. It’s sources like these that have the greatest possibility of forming sympathetic crosscultural alliances. Paul Valéry acknowledged long ago the ability of politically suspect, media-censured, avant-garde art to form powerful affinity groups:
I said sometimes to Mallarmé: “There are some who blame you, and some who despise you. It has become an easy thing for the reporters to amuse the people at your expense, while your friends shake their heads. . . . But do you not know, do you not feel, that there is, in every city of France, a youth who would let himself be cut into pieces for your verses and for you? You are his pride, his craft, his vice. He cuts himself off from everyone by his love of, faith in, your work, hard to find, to understand and to defend.” (qtd. in Poggioli 91)

And so a young black woman in my class last semester casually mentions that she has a shrine to Eminem in her dorm room. I can’t help noticing that a shy, quiet, mixed-race young man mouths along steadily to every single lyric of the three Eminem songs I play in class one day.

Art like Eminem’s or Fight Club will not be resolved by a tidy political analysis. Neither will Burden’s. As Howard Singerman notes in the anxious edge in his brand of disturbing, politically ambiguous work, “We need, to put it bluntly, to know Burden’s politics or pathology. . . . Is it good or evil?” (28). But Singerman nevertheless champions the art because of its excess, the suggestiveness of its gesturing: “Its grand scale, its interaction and direct address, and its refusal of constraints assert an optimistic belief in questioning, in liberating, in doing something. . . . [Burden’s practice] does not solidify and freeze audiences and institutions; it does not take them as complete and add to their image. Rather, it helps to thaw them, to set them in motion” (28). I worry about a teacher who might use Eminem or Fight Club in class, only to perform a finely detailed, perfectly hermetic political reading that places under suspicion student pleasure, triumphantly revealing the work’s “true” meaning. I refuse to think about art in two columns: the ideologically correct and the ideologically incorrect. How can a film be said to reinscribe white heterosexuality when it is popular among gay males (gay magazines feature articles about queer fight clubs) as well as young non-white heterosexuals (rap critic Toure uses the film as a reference point in his reviews; JT Money’s new video for his song “Hi Lo” basically offers the story of a black fight club)? And what does a reading of the linkage between violence and misogyny do about films such as Girlfight or the increasing participation of violent young women in urban street gangs? I worry that academic revulsion over the popular can become yet another reason to deny validity to noncanonical, possibly transgressive materials. Maybe it’s because I teach a composition course based on the texts of rap music, and see firsthand how such a politically marked genre functions for
its audience, that I’m disturbed by those who can so thoroughly catalogue the popular’s retrograde sins. Tricia Rose writes about one of the many contradictory messages in rap, the (misogynist?) ambivalence of women’s exaggerated sexual self-representation, suggesting, “Black women rappers’ public displays of physical and sexual freedom often challenge male notions of female sexuality and pleasure.” She argues, however, that for some “their sexual freedom could be considered dangerously close to self-inflicted exploitation” (166, 168). That was Rose mulling things over in 1994. Now, seven years later (which is about a generation in rap time), the stakes are even higher. The rapper Eve performs a song with two other black women rappers, Da Brat and Trina, entitled “Gangsta Bitches.” Here’s Trina’s verse from that cut:

I step on toes
In a pair of hot shorts and eight-inch stilettos
Iced-out, drippin in Chanel, Prada, Gucci, and all that,
I make ‘em fall back.
Hair done, fresh metti and pedicure, bikini wax,
Gotta keep the cat smooth so when my nigga ask for the pussy
It’s good and wet.
After just one fuck you won’t forget.
I’m made up in the tropics, gettin sunburned,
Bare ass out with the diamond thong on.
Nigga, you thought you got yo freak on in Japan,
But I was gettin my creep on with yo man
Cuz I’m a hot bitch

Does that continue the logic of women-as-men’s-pleasure-objects, or does it compensate for their previous silence and vulnerability in hetero-sexual politics? The song came to my attention when a couple of young women in my class presented their research on women in rap music and were very excited to play this song as an example, they felt, of independent sisters, women flipping the script and bragging about their sexual prowess, physical perfection, and material wealth, just as men have done for years, appropriating that hard, gangsta image. Likewise, the hyper-masculinity in *Fight Club*, especially in terms of Tyler Durden’s concerns about feminization as castration suggests this question: Does it perpetuate misogyny or compensate for men’s vulnerability in those same sexual politics? Rose, for example, develops her discussion of the complicated, dialogic nature of issues of heterosexual politics in rap by discussing Ice
Cube’s response to the increased representation of women’s self-styled sexuality: “In his rap entitled ‘The Bomb,’ Ice Cube warns men to keep an eye on women with big derrières, because, it is inferred, the greater your desire, the more likely you are to be blinded by it and, consequently, the more vulnerable you will be to female domination” (172). Misogyny is an awfully tricky issue, and I’m not sure if films such as Fight Club and rap such as Ice Cube’s and Trina’s aren’t just showing that romantic love is complicated and messy, that people in relationships are often stupidly human. In any event, I love lyrics like Trina’s, the way they seem to scream “get the fuck out, get out immediately” to all the haters and busters who won’t take the responsibility of attending closely and carefully to as central a youth genre as rap.

In terms of pedagogy, what sort of discourse regarding cultural violence would impress students? A canny, well-reasoned, meaningful reading of the fascist tendencies of Fight Club, or of a more open-ended, jaw-dropping gesture like Burden’s Shoot? David Ross calls Burden “as much a product of his generation as he is its prophet,” and I can understand why: he clearly understood the grammar of the focused, visually poetic spectacle as a key text in our culture (30). Burden, like Tyler Durden, also went from auto-scarification to culture-jamming: he did a series of media-terrorist works in the 1970s, small ad-sized bits of video for which he bought airtime on a local broadcast station. In one of them, Poem for L.A., he faced the camera, talking-head style, and read a found graffiti text he had discovered scrawled on the side of his Venice Beach studio, “SCIENCE HAS FAILED, HEAT IS LIFE, TIME KILLS” (Chris Burden 32). It’s difficult to gauge now the power of such a work, seemingly all the more startling in the way it overloads the very system of televisual advertisement of which it is a part, prompting audience reflection by its very nature as interruption. Burden realized the poetic and mysterious could be crucial factors in public discourse. Clearly, those qualities are what draw my students to a film such as Fight Club, which, in delivering the unexpected (the anti-consumerist message, the narrative trick ending) interrupts the usual film-viewing cycle of young people. Similarly, Eminem’s unexpected lyrics interrupt the usual dynamic of pop pleasure; as he puts it, “I’m like a head trip to listen to, cause I’m only givin you things you joke about with your friends inside your living room” (“The Real Slim Shady”). My students are only too aware that such media as Eminem and Fight Club are not going to reproduce in listeners the violence that drenches the work. Rather, they see Eminem as simply chronicling the sad shape of contemporary culture. For example, my
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student Tyrone saw utter hypocrisy in the media's blustery furor over Eminem's misogyny when the rest of the culture was guilty as hell. Tyrone observes,

Why does Eminem take all the flack for an entire society that is derogatory towards women? Perhaps it is because he is so brash and no-nonsense, or probably that he doesn't sugar coat anything. What about the subtle things that are just as demeaning towards women? *Cosmopolitan* is a popular women's magazine. It gives advice on everything from fashion to cooking, from how to get a man to different types of contraceptives. "Kama Sutra 3: You begged for more. Our New Batch is soooo intense and tantalizing. He'll want to tattoo your name on his chest."

*Cosmopolitan* is full of articles containing tips for trapping and keeping a man. It makes it sound like a woman's only purpose is to look pretty on a man's arm. Popular culture today is all about sex and violence, so that is what the media uses to sell their products. Another student, Jane, sees a young person in society the same way that Burden does—as growing up in a wash of violent imagery, needing to find some truth through experience and reflection. Interestingly, she advocates in her paper the parent-child dynamic as empirical, pedagogical:

If the parents of our society focused on teaching their children to learn and grow from the messages media sends out, then we might at least start a break in the circle. For example, if I had children, I would sit down with them and listen to Eminem's album *The Marshall Mathers LP*. I would provide them with his lyrics so they could read along as we listened. Afterwards we would pick apart the songs, and find what parts/sections we thought might have a good message, and what parts/sections we thought were hurtful or distasteful. By picking both positive and negative sections of Eminem's music it would allow my children to become open-minded. Children need to learn how to make opinions for themselves instead of hating or loving something based on what their friends said. By talking to our children and allowing them to express their feelings and afterwards discussing those feelings, we allow our children to love and accept themselves.

I'm not surprised to see Jane phrase her analysis in terms of child-rearing, and how she would reconfigure the scene of parenting. It's a major concern for students, many of whom are quite frank in discussing
the shortcomings of their own folks. Similarly, it's unsurprising that one of the best scenes in *Fight Club* concerns the ambivalent conversation Tyler Durden has with himself about the bogus advice his father gave him. Jane, like Tricia Rose, knows there is no real hope of resolution to "the complexity and contradictory nature" of rap's dialogues on sex and violence (Rose 150).

In many respects, *Fight Club* is its own pedagogy of disruption. It tries to present an alternative, imaginative politics that undoubtedly resonates among young people who are warily impatient with the conventional. I simply can't believe that the problem is in any way a half-baked film that depicts the bold, doomed attempt by a young man to try to choose his own bruises in this hideously awful world, the quest for nirvana in a world where, as the song goes, we don't know whether we're the boxer or the bag. It seems futile to catalogue the film's crimes according to the stable reading of a modernist hermeneutic, one in which the strictly codified symbolism of an ideological metanarrative hovers unforgivingly over every text. It's like taking an MRI of the Abercrombie and Fitch catalogue. As Singerman notes, Burden "thins and speeds his works on purpose, insisting not on their meaningfulness but on their immediacy and their publicness"; his performance practices "refuse . . . the depth of the symbolic or the extension of metaphor. The gesture rather than the symbol marks Burden's work" (19). Students are comfortably in the post-symbolic, and so the popular culture they prefer—a hodgepodge of sound and vision, sometimes cool, sometimes clunky—rings truer, in its complexity of excess, than the traditional political. Through exposure to the gangsta rappers of her congressional district of South Central L.A., U.S. Congresswoman Maxine Waters realized this much: "For decades, many of us [in politics and the media] have talked about the lives and the hopes of our people, the pain and the hopelessness, the deprivation and destruction. Rap music is communicating that reality in a way we never have" (United States 9). In which of those discursive camps—successful or failed communication—would the academy's cultural studies theorists place themselves vis à vis the young consumers of popular culture? Of course, I'm unsatisfied with the narrow conceptual world of *Fight Club* (or Eminem). The real Tyler Durdens of our culture—the discursive provocateurs, the source of the most useful vocabulary to talk about rebuilding the ruins of our social (our Chris Burdens, our Marcel Duchamps, and the rest of the avant-garde)—are the ones who have never been given much of a chance in mainstream America (or mainstream American academies, for that matter). It's no wonder that
students turn to even half-baked instances of complicated, confrontatory art to find anything that smacks of the real.

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