

claiming to employ "a symbological and epistemological lexicon"; it's lucky critics are still around to do the dirty work, to alienate the thinking audience still more effectively.) Probably the last laugh is offered by a Canadian punk rock group called Battered Wives, whose logo is a fist and a bleeding mouth and who sing a song of the stupidity of housewives. They surely became "high artists" when they said, "The name's symbolic. It doesn't mean anything."

It used to be only abstract art that fostered this intense disregard of or even hostility toward and from the audience. In the heyday of Minimalism, I and others used to talk approvingly of "the cult of the difficult," in reaction against the instant cooptation of new art. In a curious way the retro sensibility represents another, more overt, wave of this attitude toward the public. Pop art, which was once the detestably accessible art, is the idolized ancestor of unacceptable art this time around. Today's costume militarism, violent porn, pseudoterrorism and ethnic-racial-and-gender-based slurs are seen by some as nose-thumbing counterparts of the cereal boxes, comic strips and washing machines of the early '60s. We've come a long way. The durable and adaptable Warhol is once again the epigon of Cool. He alone of the Pop artists shared some of the Minimalist sensibility, and he alone is now whooped up by post-Conceptualists who despise the rest of '60s art. Retrochic is envisioned as a kind of red-hot risktaking not everybody is man enough to try, "a DC current . . . too hot to handle," as one journalist put it.

But where are all those burned fingers? If symbols are meaningless, I shudder to think what art is. If Warhol is the godfather of punk, the real retrochic heroine is Valerie Solanas—the uninvited guest whose "Scum Manifesto" was too hot for *anyone* to handle, or maybe Norman Mailer, who has lauded such "existential acts" as murder. Retrochic is subversive in the sense that Reagan and the oil companies are subversive. It's part of a TV culture that offers Insult, Assault, Torture. Yawn.