In May 1968, France was the site of massive public discontent. Frustration over unemployment and poverty under the conservative government of General Charles de Gaulle united the French people in popular uprisings that eventually escalated to a national general strike. The revolt transcended politics and unionism to cut across class lines; intellectuals and artists, students and workers joined together in a revolt that, at its height, nearly collapsed the French government and ultimately led to de Gaulle’s resignation.

The events of May began as a result of conflicts between students and the administration of the University of Nanterre over anti-Vietnam War activity. The administration was forced to shut down the university on May 2, in order to quell demonstrations and expelled a group of students including Daniel Cohn-Bendit. On May 3, students met at the Sorbonne University to denounce these actions. As the rally grew, the activists seized the administration building and soon occupied the campus. Violence erupted as the police attempted to regain control of the campus, and at the end of the demonstration, over 500 people had been arrested. Disputes continued the following day and as protesters, numbering close to 20,000, marched on the Sorbonne they were again confronted by a violent police force. In response, the group barricaded themselves within the campus, using whatever means available including the paving stones of the streets. As Reporter Jean Jacques Lebel reported at the time, “literally thousands helped build barricades ... women, workers, bystanders, people in pyjamas, human chains to carry rocks, wood, iron.” Yet, as street fighting intensified, hundreds more were arrested.

Heavy media coverage of these events unified the French, both in anger over the government’s heavy-handed and violent response to the revolt and in fear of the resulting chaos. Popular sympathy for the strikers brought about support from the French Communist Party and the major trade unions (the CGT and Force Ouvrière) which called for one day of general strike. On May 13th, over one million people rallied in the streets of Paris. The students were then able to reoccupy the Sorbonne and declared it an autonomous and communal People's University.

In solidarity with the students at Sorbonne, art students at l'Ecole des Beaux also went on strike, occupying the studios and print workshops as the headquarters for an artistic collective. Forming Atelier Populaire (the Popular Studio) they worked 24 hours a day producing a mass of posters and wall newspapers that were then pasted up in the streets in the support of the revolt. As art erupted in the public sphere, the students cried out for “all power to the imagination.” Graffiti and posters covered the city of Paris, proclaiming “we refuse to be highrised, diplomatized, licensed, inventoried, registered, indoctrinated, suburbanised, sermonised, beaten, telem manipulated, gassed, booked.”

By all accounts, it was a very organized operation. Atelier members met each day in a general assembly for the discussion and democratic choice of poster designs and slogans, while also debating current political developments. “Every attempt was made to reject traditional power hierarchies by

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marking authority as provisional, and subject to change as necessary, or as willed by participants within the group. The posters were produced in several of the workshops by silkscreen, lithography or stenciling, and distributed all over Paris by student and worker representatives. Activist comment - often witty, invariably bitter - was on the streets almost hour by hour. Each poster was created in the most simplistic means possible - the images were often nothing more than hand-drawn lettering and brushed silhouettes. However, by exploiting the minimalism of these graphic designs, the students were able to question the complex apparatus of printed image-making in the consumer society whose values they opposed. In the hands of these students, the riots escalated from anti-war and anti-bureaucratic sentiment to a full-out revolt against the capitalism and consumerism that had proliferated France since the end of the Second World War.

In her book *May '68 and its Afterlives*, Kristin Ross argues that “only the most ‘immediate’ of artistic techniques…could keep up with the speed of [this] event...To say this is...to point out how much politics was exerting a magnetic pull on culture, yanking it out of its specific and specialized realm.” In the work of Atelier Populaire, one witnesses such a relationship between that of politics and culture. As Ross notes:

The ‘message’ of the majority of the posters was stark and direct, it was the certification, and at times the imperative, that whatever it was that was happening - the interruption, the strike, the ‘moving train’ - that it simply continue: “Continuos combat.” “La grève continue.” “Contre offensive: la grève continue.” Nothing in the message aspires to a level of ‘representing’ what was occurring; the goal, rather, is to be at one with - at the same time with, contemporary with - whatever was occurring.

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5 Ibid. p.15
The artistic production of Atelier Populaire was not a representation, re-presenting the conflict occurring outside their studios, rather, their work functions as a direct site of the conflict. “The posters produced by the Atelier Populaire are weapons in the service of the struggle and are an inseparable part of it.” The posters of Atelier Populaire are thus able to achieve a complete interpenetration of art, life and event, by achieving presentation, rather than representation. An analysis of the group’s fundamental philosophies on art and culture, their insistence on communal artistic creations and their reclamation of public space alongside their visual production, will demonstrate the extent to which the Atelier Populaire were able to reject bourgeois culture and develop works of a popular culture that functioned in the service of the people and of the people’s revolution.

The fundamental philosophy behind the graphic creations of Atelier Populaire was a strict rejection of bourgeois culture and its mythologizing affect on the general population: “It assumes [a] mask of universality [and thus]... is the best means of defending and reinforcing the capitalist structures of society. Bourgeois culture is an integral part of the system of oppression which the ruling class has erected against the interests of the people.” Invoking a rhetoric that draws influence from Karl Marx and Roland Barthes, the group insisted that the only means by which to incite and encourage revolutionary change was to reveal the reality of the autocratic bourgeois myth. “We

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6 Atelier Populaire: p: ii
7 Ross: p:16
8 “Culture” in this essay, will not only refer to artistic production, but visual culture as a whole. It refers to the reflection and prefiguration at any given historical moment, of the possible organization of daily life; the complex of mores, aesthetic, and feelings by which a collective reacts to a life which is objectively given to it by its economy.
9 Atelier Populaire: p: 5
should work towards the development of a truly popular culture that is to say of the people at the service of the people...in opposition to the oppression of bourgeois culture.”

The subversive activity of postering, that is, the affixing of a revolutionary message directly onto all sites of middle class authority, such as state-owned buildings and storefronts, functioned to demystify and denaturalize the processes of capitalism and [consumerism] by openly debating and contesting the politics of corporate hegemony in public spaces.

Essentially what the group strove for with their posters was a means to reconvert and reclaim cultural production for their own revolutionary purposes.

Direct affinities can be seen here between the intent of the Atelier Populaire and Guy Debord’s notion of the Society of the Spectacle. For Debord and his group, the Situationist Internationale, the spectacle was a never-ending torment of advertising, marketing, and media events that has dominated contemporary society. “The Spectacle is not a collection of images; rather, it is a social relationship between people that is mediated by images” where ideology is created through the consumption of images themselves. “The Spectacle is both the outcome and the goal of the dominant mode of production...it is the very heart of society’s real unreality.” The Situationist Internationale attempted to attain the real through détournement, a clever and sarcastic reversal of existing media and bourgeois culture.

The Atelier Populaire built from a similar concept, and sought to disengage themselves from cultural production that would contribute to the creation of spectacle or commodity, in an attempt to bring themselves closer to the historical reality of the world in which they lived. While they also utilized the language of the mass media, Atelier Populaire employed more simplistic graphic design, in terms of illustration and slogan than the Situationist Internationale in order to convey their message. To create a popular culture that was truly in the service of the people, basic illustrations and straight-forward slogans, reminiscent of Atig-Prop, were engaged in order to critique the repressive nature of bourgeois cultural production.

10 Ibid. p. 5
12 The Situationist International (SI), an international political and artistic movement, originated in the Italian village of Cosio d’Arroscia on 28 July 1957 with the fusion of several extremely small artistic tendencies: the Lettrist International , the International movement for an imagist Bauhaus, and the London Psychogeographical Association. This fusion traced further influences from COBRA, Dada, Surrealism, and Fluxus, as well as inspirations from the Workers Councils of the Hungarian Uprising.

The journal Internationale Situationniste defined situationism as “having to do with the theory or practical activity of constructing situations.” The same journal defined situationism as “a meaningless term improperly derived from the above. There is no such thing as situationism, which would mean a doctrine of interpretation of existing facts. The notion of situationism is obviously devised by antisituationists.” The group was one of the many intellectual groups involved in the May 68 uprisings.
14 Ibid. p.13
15 One could view détournement as forming the opposite side of the coin to ‘recuperation’ (where radical ideas and images become safe and commodified), in that images produced by the spectacle get altered and subverted so that rather than supporting the status quo, their meaning becomes changed in order to put across a more radical or oppositionist message.
16 Atelier Populaire. p-3
Such can be seen in posters that spoke against the government-regulated communication network, ORTF (Office de Radio Télévision Français). Posters called for the free, unmediated flow of knowledge, and drew attention to the falseness of the information that was disseminated by the national communications network.

Most interesting are the posters that call attention to the manner in which the government used the media in order to reinforce the dominant ideology of the time:
Liberons L’ORTF depicts a man being imprisoned by his television set, while On Vous Intoxique shows a man’s body, divided into television, radio and sheep sections. These images depict the average man as being held hostage by the media, oppressed by the media, and used by the media - formed by it into a consenting member of the collective herd. Although incredibly rudimentary in their economy of means, these images provide a striking challenge to the spectacle, as credited by mainstream media.

In their rejection of the dominant culture, Atelier Populaire also abandoned the contemporary view of the artist as separate and somehow politically removed from society. Bourgeois culture, according to the group, “is the means by which the forces of oppression of the ruling class isolate and set apart the artists from the rest of the workers by giving them a privileged status.” They argued that in this position, the artist only further encouraged the dominant ideology propagated through mainstream bourgeois imagery. This notion of the artist places him or her “in an invisible prison, in a position where (s)he can do no harm and in which he [or she] functions as a safety-valve in the mechanism of bourgeois society.”

By refusing this notion of the artist, it is not surprising that the Atelier Populaire chose to utilize the medium of the poster in the service of their cause. Classically, in protest or revolution, it has been the poster that had come readiest to hand for the ordinary man. It is one of the few media of mass communication that the average man can manage for himself throughout - thinking up his own ideas, drawing them out on paper and posting them up for everyone to see. By this token alone, the poster remains at the service of the people - for if the general population were able to produce imagery that could be pasted in the streets along side those of the artists, than the medium itself truly speaks to the egalitarian struggle of the time. The social hierarchies that traditionally separated artist from the proletariat are thus collapsed - if the people are able to create works similar to that of the artist, than the artist no long holds a special or exterior space within society. “Culture is a direct manifestation of the class struggle. This is why the Atelier Populaire intends to continue its work through artistic activity...to give support to the workers in their determination to prolong the struggle.” Atelier Populaire sought to engage the artist in political events as they occurred within society, rather than situating the artist as observer, removed from contemporary events.

In their creation of a truly popular culture, the artists of Atelier Populaire removed themselves from the dominant modes of artistic display which guarded the work within approved artistic institutions, and instead moved themselves and their art into the street. It was in the streets, within the public arena, that the work of Atelier Populaire situated itself fully as a direct site of cultural conflict. As Ross accounts, during the first production of the Atelier Populaire

17 Ibid. p.3
18 Ibid. p.3
19 Rickards. p. 25
20 Atelier Populaire p.4
posters, the original intent was for them to be sold in order to support the revolutionary movements.

Yet, on the way to the gallery, the copies are snatched out of the arms of the student carrying them and plastered immediately on the first available wall. The poster becomes a poster. In this moment, ‘the real,’ in the shape of the movement, literally intervenes, short-circuiting the steps that art must take to be art in bourgeois culture... There is no time, [once art has entered the streets] for the art object to remain a commodity.²¹

La Police s’affiche aux Beaux Arts; Les Beaux Arts affichent dans la Rue stands as a direct push towards artists to move into the streets, in opposition to the domineering force of the middle class. As the slogan suggests, the group is not willing to have their struggle to be overthrown by the force of the police, for as the police move in to occupy or post themselves within the school of fine arts, the artists will take their struggle and their posters out into the streets. By converging within the public sphere, their posters can be read as an attempt to demythologize culture and to move closer towards popular imagery concerned with reality - the reality of the workers struggle, a reality unmediated by false representations.

The result of moving their visual culture to the public sphere was that it became situated in direct opposition to the public images of the bourgeois. Gérard Fromanger, an artist active in Atelier Populaire remarked at the time that “artists are no longer in their studios, they no longer work, they can't work any more because the real is more powerful than their inventions...we live in the

²¹ Ross: p.16-17
streets, in the occupied spaces…we no longer paint, we don’t think about it anymore.”

To this point, the public sphere had been occupied by images that functioned, as Debord and the Situationists would conclude, as spectacle. The oppressive and forceful media of advertising and consumerism imposed itself upon the public, invoking not communal response to the images, but rather a passive reception and absorption. The result was that public space “was entirely taken up by that staging of the social performed by advertising.”

In direct opposition to these images, the Atelier Populaire positioned its own imagery alongside, or on top of that of the dominant culture. “The home-made poster…serve[d] not only as a bearer of a message, but as a gesture of irreverence to the walls it covers.” Juxtaposed against mainstream advertisements, and functioning within very much the same medium as advertising, the posters operate as a means by which to call attention to the naturalized and neutralized imagery employed by the bourgeoisie. Their direct political message screams forth from the walls of the city, demonstrating an “insistent desire to transform a non-dialogical space into a forum for oppositional communication.”

In images such as Retour à la Normale, the group ironically illustrates this oppression, by depicting the ‘normal’ as a flock of sheep, thus insinuating the normalizing and tyrannical affects that bourgeois imagery encourages. The illustration suggests that passive, hegemonic consumption has turned the general public into sheep and in doing so, alerts the public to this despotic effect.

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22 Ibid p. 16
23 Lauzon, p.104
24 Rickards. p. 25
25 Lauzon. p. 104
posters of Atelier Populaire thus act as a means by which to reopen public space for public dialogue and return culture to the voice of the people.

The formation of Atelier Populaire as an artistic collective also serves their creation of a popular culture at the service of the people, as well as continuing to question and politicize the traditional roll of art and the artist. Maxine Greene defines collective or communal art as functioning in “a way to speak of an expanded community [that] takes shapes when diverse people, speaking as who and not what they are, come together in both speech and action to constitute something in common among themselves.”\(^\text{26}\) This insistence on cooperation and solidarity between members of the group, in the case of Atelier Populaire, in effect comes to operate as a metaphor for the production of a movement that stresses the comparatively unwieldy principles of non-hierarchical decision-making and coalition building\(^\text{27}\) thus mirroring the aims of the revolution itself.

Evidence of such can be seen in works such as Pouvoir Populaire and Nous Sommes le Pouvoir. “In our choice of posters we will support struggle of a revolutionary nature. We will support the unity of all the forces for the working people grouped around the militant workers fighting against the bourgeoisie.”\(^\text{28}\) Each of these placards illustrates artists in unison with workers and intellectuals, linked together by the common goal of regaining power. The works thus speak not only for the artists, but for the entire public who struggled against the bourgeois.

\(^{26}\) Ibid. p. 65  
\(^{27}\) Ibid. p. 67  
\(^{28}\) Atelier Populaire. p. 5
Usines, Université, Union functions much in the same manner, yet without the use of illustration. The urgency of the slogan presents the concept directly and succinctly, ensuring that the message of solidarity is fully comprehended by all those who experience the poster.

One may postulate the argument then, that by functioning in a group collective, Atelier Populaire refused to speak as students, or as artists, but rather as a unified whole with the workers. In a text written just after the events, Jean-Paul Sartre, who himself was involved in the revolutions, suggests that the group’s refusal to “speak as students or to express the interests of students, is a necessary part in demanding instead to speak the language of common affairs, the language that is the carefully guarded prerogative of professionals.” In their refusal to engage in cultural critique as artists separate from the workers’ struggle, Atelier Populaire pushed further towards creating a popular culture in the service of the people. This allowed for the opening of communication to a large number of people who had no access to speech, an action which is “symbolically, if not physically, violent, and beset with all the violence of the specificity of political action.” The insistence on the inclusion of the voice of the workers with whom they wished to draw an affinity, was just as, if not more important than the poster that was created out of such sentiment. Essentially, the collective format of artistic production in this situation pushes Atelier Populaire towards the creation of a people’s popular culture and asserts the concept that art’s significance may not in fact be located in an ‘end product’ but rather in the process of art-making.

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29 Ross p. 188
30 Ross p. 188
The work of Atelier Populaire, whether it be in their collective objectives, their reclamation of public space, or in their rejection of bourgeois culture, is permeated by the notion that art does not consist solely of the final image. The actions, subversions and philosophies of the group are equally, if not more important than the graphic agitations they produced. Reaching far beyond the image itself, the Atelier Populaire was able to produce a genuinely popular culture during the protests of May 1968, which functioned as a direct site of cultural conflict and in doing so, achieved a complete interpenetration of art, life and event at the service of the people's revolution.