

## 2 THE IMPACT OF 1968 ON EUROPEAN ART

Just as the United States was traumatized by political events in the late 1960s, so was Europe—by the student uprisings that occurred in 1968 in many of its major cities. And just as the Vietnam War was the catalyst for violent demonstrations in the United States so, too, it was in Europe. There was also widespread alienation—and at a time of unprecedented prosperity and cultural tolerance. As philosopher Jürgen Habermas observed, the student riots constituted “the first bourgeois revolt against the principles of a bourgeois society that is almost successfully functioning according to its own standards.”<sup>1</sup>

During the academic year 1967–68, demonstrations and takeovers occurred in twenty-six of Italy’s thirty-three universities; in March an estimated half a million students were on strike. On March 17 in London, some twenty-five thousand demonstrated against the Vietnam War at the American embassy. In May the French government was temporarily paralyzed by striking students, joined by millions of workers. The uprising reflected the rise of a counterculture, exemplified in the graffiti scrawled on Parisian walls. THE IMAGINATION TAKES POWER / TAKE YOUR DESIRES FOR REALITY / IT IS FORBIDDEN TO FORBID.

The chronicler of the rebellion, David Caute, asked:

What were [the students]—courageous visionaries or romantic utopians? Genuine revolutionaries or posturing spoiled brats? An authentic resistance movement or a frivolous carnival by kids who had never known poverty and the fear of unemployment? An idealistic challenge to imperialism or a pantomime of rhetorical gestures? A rebirth of the critical intelligence or a long, drugged “trip” into fashionable incoherence?<sup>2</sup>

If a collective personality could be defined, it would probably encompass all these stances to some degree. But there was no denying that an entire generation was sorely wounded by the events of 1968—and that the wounds would fester. All those involved were gripped by an attitude criti-

