



# XOXO

*Love Letters to our Friends,  
Hate Mail to our Frenemies*

ON COMMITMENT & WITHDRAWAL

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Edited by Kelly Gallagher, Becky Nasadowski & Heath Schultz



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## Introduction

# Committed Withdrawal?

## A Few Notes on Paradox and Revolutionary Efforts

HEATH SCHULTZ

*This reader was assembled for the exhibition Exuberant Politics held in Iowa City and Cedar Rapids, Iowa in early 2014. The exhibition acted as the exclamation point on an excellent series of programming around the theme of the same name.*

According to the organizers:

‘Exuberant Politics’ is a yearlong programming initiative examining recent intersections of art and activism around the world. Grassroots political actions have increasingly used creative, performative means not merely to communicate a message but to create transformative, aesthetic experiences that prefigure a more just and democratic world. Exuberance means joyfulness,

liveliness, even superabundance, but at its Latin root it is also ‘fruitful’ and ‘productive.’ Where have we experienced exuberance in protest and affinity? What has it produced, and how? Focusing on the period roughly bookmarked by the 1999 protests against the World Trade Organization in Seattle and varied initiatives stemming from Occupy Wall Street (Occupy Sandy, Strike Debt, etc.).

Within an art context we might find parallels in the *representation* of this joy or playful activity in the work of the Yes Men, Mark Tribe’s *Port Huron Project* (2006-9), Jeremy Deller’s *Battle of Orgreave* (2001), giant protest puppets, and predictably in exhibitions like Nato Thompson’s *The Interventionists* (2004) and *Living as Form* (2011). Of course there are dozens more one could cite, and most of these projects are complicated and offer various readings, both positive and negative. But there is a danger that this ‘exuberance’ has become a style that has grown to take a solid spot in the art-left’s lexicon. Perhaps its expressiveness and visuality has become a paradigm that translates too easily to the white-wall—as politics under glass, performative resistance in the gallery instead of the streets.

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We’ve opted not to provide another critique of the summit-hopping days of the counter-globalization movement or a discussion on the impossibility of artists to engage with a radical praxis being worked out in the streets. Instead we’ve found ourselves reflecting on an ‘exuberant politics’ that describes forms of living in relationships with those you care for, and the struggles we commit ourselves to. This might be described as the exuberance of an embodied joy arrived at through the building of care, love, commitment, and experimentation with our friends and comrades. This altered definition of exuberance notes long-term temporality, or a desired split with capitalist time and space, and locates liveliness not in a moment, an action, or event but over time through communal efforts. In this reader these ideas are reflected primarily in exploring two themes that we might crudely refer to as *commitment* and *exodus*.

We’ve included several essays about culture used in revolutionary struggles, namely from the Black Panther Party, Cuban Revolution, Madame Binh Graphics Collective and third world solidarity, and ACT-UP. What strikes me as powerful in these essays is not another rehashing of the conversation of whether or not art is pure dogma when it serves the struggle, which in turn makes it uninteresting and

non-revolutionary, but the relationship the artists had with the struggle. *It was their life*. Organizers were killed, some are still in prison, some are working terrible and precarious jobs because of their involvement, some are still living underground. This is nothing to take lightly and it is something many cannot wrap their heads around, especially in a time when we've been so beaten down by capitalism. This kind of an investment in one's livelihood—one's heart and brain and muscles—perhaps is also a kind of exuberance. This is important to understand because it requires both the investment of oneself as well as the commitment to another—that is a deeply communist effort. That isn't meant as a romanticization, but a realization that how we often talk about political art like the work of Emory Douglas, for example, is disingenuous as it mistakes Emory Douglas solely as the Panther's freelance graphic designer, as if he wasn't a revolutionary first who happened to make the Panther's art. That doesn't mean we can't look at and critique how that artwork functioned within the movement, but we must always speak of this work as integral to the movement, never peripheral or superfluous. This also means that we must profoundly understand the revolutionary (or non-revolutionary) politics of said movement—something that is seldom required in art schools or universities.

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Secondly we've included some essays that struggle over questions of exiting the matrices of capitalism as a sort of collective exodus. Claire Fontaine's two essays engage with this question most directly in the complicated notion of the human-strike. But a collective exodus or human-strike isn't the kind of individualist dropping out story we're so familiar with in liberal America, the exodus where some bourgeois family goes 'off the grid' for a year and then writes a book about how not using toilet paper is a real pain in the ass and 'going-green' is the way forward. Nor is it the kind of exodus where the punk-rock 18 year-old crimethinc white kid moves to Portland and dumpster-dives for a year or two and says he's revolutionary. This is a collective, embodied withdrawal, a moving away from the relationships that rely on us more than we rely on them. Why, for example, are we all hustling to be a part of this exhibition? Is it because we find it really useful, intellectually stimulating and politically relevant? Or is it because we want to put it on our CV? You get the idea, and like this exhibition it is often a gray area with no clear answers. The point is to build our relationships, our counter-institutions, our art, our politics, our food, our sex, our

languages *together* while we abandon those relationships we don't need. Extrapolate this logic, and eventually you'll find that we don't need work, either, at least not as much as capitalism needs the working class. This is the revolutionary potential of this line of thinking, but it is in a natal stage at best and requires a lot of experimentation and struggle. With that said, I want to think of my participation in this exhibition as a thickening of my relationships with those I care about. This is the reason Becky, Kelly, and I engaged with these ideas together (although, admittedly, we were victim to the deadline!). External to my immediate collaborators, I also think of our participation in the exhibition as a way to learn from many of the other participants involved and find more fellow travelers.

Of course all of the essays included don't fit comfortably in this rather simplistic sketch I've provided. Instead, most of them fit on a sort of arc somewhere between the ideas of commitment and withdrawal I've quickly outlined; an arc that begins with Emory Douglas and flows through time to a more contemporary moment and also confronts various knotty questions related to commitment, autonomy, representation, and anti-representation. Many of the essays also engage with the problematics of 'socially engaged' art, a paradigm we have ambivalence toward, to say the least. We have no clear answers and this reader reflects that lack of clarity, which feels honest in how we engage with our practices and each other. We hope that that complexity offers some footing from which to begin elaborating on collective experiments within this complex space from which we think and act.

The reader ends with a poem by Juliana Spahr and David Buuck that elucidates a long, at times uncomfortable, complicated, and contentious conversation about when poetry is political and when it is not. It takes place at the dinner table over drinks, with strained and sometimes fucked-up power dynamics and intellectual performance. But the conversation also unfolds with a lot of love, passion, and sincerity around the communal space of the home shared with comrades.

• • •

To ask, 'how can one escape the market?' is one of those questions whose principal virtue is one's pleasure in declaring it insoluble. ... If anyone knows how to overthrow capitalism, why don't they just start doing it? — Jacques Rancière<sup>1</sup>

True to the form of this project, I'd like to end this introduction by allowing others' ideas to fill the air, ideas I hope offer insight to some of the problems we have tried to deal with in this reader.

*Is there a space for art outside of the market and the state?*

This is the question posed at a somewhat awkward 'Oxford-Style debate' held at Simon Fraser University in Vancouver in 2012.<sup>2</sup> Six participants sat at a table, three 'for' and three 'against' the proposition. Both the participants and audience seemed to be taking the tongue-in-cheek formality of a For / Against debate in stride if a bit sheepishly. The audience willingly holds up cards to declare 'yes' or 'no' but with a certain amount of exasperation the intensity of weekend conferences can bear. The moderator explains each panelist will first present their position—one for, one against, one for, etc.—and finally all panelists will have a chance to respond. Lastly, each participant is allowed a brief closing statement and the audience votes again to close the session.

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Most of the panelists qualify that they don't find the format particularly useful, but being forced to state 'yes' or 'no' does in fact yield some interesting results by forcing the panelists to move beyond the perpetual gray zone of academic caution. But the playful quality maintains the camaraderie necessary to continue to work out extremely knotty questions, questions that show no signs of becoming irrelevant any time soon.

Greg Sholette opens the panel by noting he finds the proposition useful not as a question but as a provocation. He then provides an admittedly vulgar outline as to what a Marxian response would look like: "If art is a form of production, then it takes place within an administered space of capital." And thus, no, there is (by Marxist definition) no space for art outside of capitalism. This preliminary response allows him to complicate his analysis by continuing to describe how what is *excluded* from institutions necessarily defines the institution itself. This obviously has consequences for what can be considered outside the state, as well as if there is an 'outside' of capitalism. To illustrate this he discusses a project he was involved with in the '80s called Political Art Documentation/Distribution (PAD/D) and notes this archive is today housed inside MOMA in NYC.<sup>3</sup>

PAD/D was an archive of social and political art, an archive of cultural excess that includes collectives and projects and social experiments that are largely now forgotten. It represents the tip of an iceberg of a larger shadowy space of over-production that is at times also in opposition to making mainstream and capitalist institutions. Which is to say, this supplementary, even redundant archive, does not belong to some fantastic, alien cosmos, it is instead fully inscribed within the institution's ideological architecture. It's a necessary absence/presence; and it's filled with micro-histories, resistant practices, and partially submerged outlaw memories. At the same time its very existence attests to the fact that opposition to cultural hierarchies is not uncommon... It is an outside that we encounter all the time, much like the invisible labor that constructs exhibition walls, fabricates artworks, teaches younger artists; even administrates events like this [panel]. So, quick conclusion—this PAD/D archive is sometimes raided for research by the museum, sometimes we even see some of the work in it put in temporary exhibitions. But, there has never been the archive presented in its totality because to do that the museum would then have to acknowledge what it has to oppose: dark matter.<sup>4</sup>

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Deidre Logue, artist and one of the founders of the Feminist Art Gallery (FAG) in Toronto, speaks first for the 'yeses.' She begins by quickly reminding us to consider spaces of subversion and to keep in mind organizations that are "flying close to the sun without getting completely burned." This, she seems to imply, might be a necessary survival strategy if not the most radical or revolutionary position. But the more interesting position she puts forward is that an "embodied space" may be where art can exist outside of the state:

This embodied space [that exists outside the market or state] is the space of the body as it resides in our optimism; it resides in our fighting against the pessimistic tendencies that the market and the state force us to experience everyday. To argue for the optimism we need to create possibilities for spaces—maybe we don't see them right now...—but I think it is our obligation to be optimistic that those spaces can be created. [...] If you don't see them around you, note the possibility that they actually reside within us. In lieu of one that we can see, I think those spaces can be conceptual, can be a ready-made, can be a garage, they can be a person, they can be a people, they can be a thought...<sup>5</sup>

Finally, also for the 'yeses,' Jaleh Mansoor:

Within the parameters of this panel I just have three main points:

The first is as an Art Historian. Simply, can art exist outside the state and market? Yes, because as it is now functioning as a vehicle for art production is a fairly new system, as is the market. They [the state and market] haven't existed forever, they're not natural, they can easily end. In the interest of answering the question I wanted to re-circumscribe the state as the state apparatus—the museum—which we can locate to the middle of the 18th century in its current iteration. The museum is more or less dissolved by the market. We can't tell ourselves that a museum as a state apparatus is itself independent of a market system. As Greg [Sholette] points out, that has indeed collapsed, and that is symptomatic of the kinds of movements and convolutions we might see to come.

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The market we could locate in the way that it functions now—as an enabler, a manager, of artistic practice—to the middle of the 19th century. We could locate it, say, with Courbet's pavilion in 1855 or we could go back to the middle of the 17th century with Vermeer and Rembrandt. [...] Greg brought up this issue of changing hegemony: it is precisely those kinds of points, reasons, for which he would justify there being no position outside of the state or market that I think there will be, inevitably, nothing but a position outside the state and the market *if any position at all*, because they are young entities and they're failing. We find ourselves in 2012 where all of us, sort of puppets in the art world, have to make the rounds to the biennials and triennials and this and that—that phenomenon begins in the middle of the 19th century where the state and the market intersect; where the two 'axes of evil' intersect. The art fair of 1851 or the *Exposition Universelle* of the 1870s are the paradigm for what we are now.

It is time that those tensions [between art, the market, and the state] are volatilized and dynamized if we're going to have interesting art again. So my position is there has to be a position outside the state and market *if we're going to have art at all*. Or the other solution is to dissolve what we're calling art, which is also a possibility. [...]

My third point as an armchair activist: the state and the market are failing anyway, so artists will forge a space outside because they *must* forge a space outside...

Deidre and Jaleh's positions coupled together make a great illustration of what many of the texts included in this reader suggest: a kind of collective, embodied exodus from those structural and biopolitical



rhythms and relationships we have no use for but are nonetheless bound up with. It is an *anti*-representational position, one that disinvests from a struggle for inclusion or a resolution made through a dialectical tension. Although Deidre speaks of optimism and embodiment, this position should not be mistaken for an abandonment of criticality or even negation.

Near the end of the panel, after a crudely formulated charge that the smashy-smashy impulse of criticism is ‘too easy’ Jaleh responds:

I really object to the by-now cliché that criticism is somehow easy or facile and that one just bash and smash everything. It is a very difficult position to say that one incrementally—through practice, through process, embodied [criticism]. Not in some theoretical or idealist way, but in one’s own day-by-day process would try and find an outside precisely because there is no outside. That is not a horizon to be scoffed at... It’s not a snarky cynical position; it is not attacking for attacking’s sake. It is attacking in the interest of survival.

## Notes

1. “The Art of the Possible,” Fulvia Carnevale and John Kelsey in conversation with Jacques Rancière, *Artforum*, March 2007, pp. 256–269.
2. The panel can be viewed at: <http://vimeo.com/52102767>. Team “For” included Jaleh Mansoor, Deidre Logue, and Matai Bejenaru; and Team “Against” included Greg Sholette, Dirk Fleischmann, and Slavs & Tatars. The panel was moderated by John O’Brian.
3. More info relating to PAD/D can be found on Sholette’s website: <http://www.gregorysholette.com>. See also his essay “A Collectography of PAD/D,” also available on his site.
4. For more on Sholette’s concept of dark matter, see his book *Dark Matter: Art and Politics in the Age of Enterprise Culture*, New York: Pluto Press, 2011.
5. Deidre here makes reference to the ‘ready-made artist,’ a concept developed by Claire Fontaine which Jaleh Mansoor’s discussed previously in the conference. Deidre also refers to FAGs location in a converted garage.
6. *Exposition Universelle* aka the World’s Fair in Paris held in 1878.

# Position Paper #1 on Revolutionary Art

EMORY DOUGLAS

*“Revolutionary Art does not demand any more sacrifice from the revolutionary artist than what is demanded from a traitor (Negro) who draws for the oppressor. Therefore, the creation of revolutionary art is not a tragedy, but an honor and duty that will never be refused.” — EMORY DOUGLAS*

**REVOLUTIONARY ART BEGINS WITH THE PROGRAM THAT HUEY P. NEWTON** instituted with the BLACK PANTHER PARTY. REVOLUTIONARY ART, like the Party, is for the whole community and its total problems. It gives the people the correct picture of our struggle, whereas the Revolutionary Ideology gives the people the correct political understanding of our struggle. Before a correct visual interpretation of the struggle can be given, we must recognize that Revolutionary Art



Newspaper cover, Emory Douglas for  
*The Black Panther*, September 20, 1969, vol. III no. 22

is an art that flows from the people. It must be a whole and living part of the people's lives, their daily struggle to survive. To draw about revolutionary things, we must shoot and/or be ready to shoot when the time comes. In order to draw about the people who are shooting, we must capture the true revolution in a pictorial fashion. We must feel what the people feel who throw rocks and bottles at the oppressor so that when we draw about it—we can raise their level of consciousness to handgrenades and dynamite to be launched at the oppressor. Revolutionary Art gives a physical confrontation with tyrants, and also enlightens the people to continue their vigorous attack by educating the masses through participation and observation.



"All Power to the People," Emory Douglas for *The Black Panther*, March 9, 1969

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Through the Revolutionary Artist's observations of the people, we can picture the territory on which we live (as slaves): project maximum damage to the oppressor with minimum damage to the people, and come out victorious.

The Revolutionary Artist's talents are just one of the weapons he uses in the struggle for Black People. His art becomes a tool for liberation. Revolutionary Art can thereby progress as the people progresses because the People are the backbone to the Artist and not the Artist to the People.

To conceive any type of visual interpretations of the struggle, the Revolutionary Artist must constantly be agitating the people, but before one agitates the people as the struggle progresses one must make strong roots among the masses of the people. Then and only then can a Revolutionary Artist renew the visual interpretation of Revolutionary Art indefinitely until liberation. By making these strong roots among the masses of the Black People, the Revolutionary Artist rises above the confusion that the oppressor has brought on the colonized people, because all of us (as slaves) from the Christian to the brother on the block, the college student and the high school drop out, the street walker and the secretary, the pimp and the preacher, the domestic and the gangster: all the elements of the ghetto can understand Revolutionary Art.

The ghetto itself is the gallery for the Revolutionary Artist's drawings. His work is pasted on the walls of the ghetto; in storefront windows, fences, doorways, telephone poles and booths, passing buses, alleyways, gas stations, barber shops, beauty parlors, laundromats, liquor stores, as well as the huts of the ghetto.

This way the Revolutionary Artist educates the people as they go through their daily routine, from day to day, week to week, and month to month. This way the Revolutionary Artist cuts through the smoke-screens of the oppressor and creates brand new images of

Revolutionary action—for the total community. Revolutionary Art is an extension and interpretation to the masses in the most simple and obvious form. Without being a revolutionary and committed to the struggle for liberation, the artist could not express revolution at all. Revolutionary Art is learned in the ghetto from the pig cops on the beat, demagogue politicians and avaricious businessmen. Not in the schools of fine art. The Revolutionary Artist hears the people's screams when they are being attacked by the pigs. They share their curses when they feel like killing the pigs, but are unequipped. He watches and hears the sounds of foot steps of Black People trampling the ghetto streets and translates them into pictures of slow revolts against the slave masters, stomping them in their brains with bullets, that we can have power and freedom to determine the destiny of our community and help to build "our world."

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Revolutionary Art is a returning from the blind, whereas we no longer let the oppressor lead us around like watchdogs.

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Published in *The Black Panther* (Berkeley, January 24, 1970).





"Warning to America," Emory Douglas for  
*The Black Panther*, June 27, 1970



"We Shall Survive, Without a Doubt," Emory Douglas for  
*The Black Panther*, August 21, 1971





"Students Demand Black Studies Program," Emory Douglas for  
*The Black Panther*, May 11, 1969



Excerpt

# Revolution as an Eternal Dream

## The Exemplary Failure of the Madame Binh Graphics Collective

MARY PATTEN

### INTRODUCTION

The Madame Binh Graphics Collective (MBGC)—a women’s poster, printmaking, and street art collective active in New York City from the mid-1970s to the early 1980s—was the “graphic arm” of the May 19th Communist organization, a Marxist-Leninist “cadre” organization that was based in New York City from 1977 to 1983.<sup>1</sup> May 19th was a small collective of white anti-imperialists that traced its lineage from the Students for a Democratic Society (SDS), and the political tendency that emerged as the Weather Underground Organization (WUO)—a sector which has been ridiculed, sensationalized, and in recent years, both romanticized and feared.

The date May 19 marks the birthdays of both Ho Chi Minh and Malcolm X, as well as the anniversary of the death of Jose Martí, the “apostle and father” of Cuba’s struggle for independence from Spain. The invocation of May 19th situated us as following the leadership of Third World national liberation struggles, both inside the borders of the US (the Black Liberation struggle, the Puerto Rican independence movement, the Mexicano/Chicano and Native American struggles for land, water rights, and sovereignty) and internationally. We named the graphics collective after Madame Nguyen Thi Binh, who led the delegation of the Provisional Revolutionary Government of South Vietnam at the Paris Peace Talks in the early 1970s.

May 19th was resolutely not engaged in a party building process, so prevalent in the U.S. white left of the time, since we saw that as akin to declaring that white people in the U.S. could be part of a vanguard. We disapproved of “multinational” organizations where Black, white, Latino/a, Asian, and Native peoples worked together, because we believed that these mostly white-dominated forms continued the legacies of racism and white people’s assumption of leadership. Our larger project of revolutionary “war in amerikkka” could not have been more ambitious, or more delusional. We were on the margin of the margins, the periphery of the periphery: far left, or “ultra left”—in our intensely florid and dramatic politics. Our goal was to forge ourselves into what we described as “100 communist soldiers,” and nothing less... but I’m getting ahead of myself.

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The title of this essay refers to the Zapatistas’ phrase, “revolution is an eternal dream,” to connote both the perpetual desire for, and possibility of, revolution, but also the frailty of such dreams.<sup>2</sup> At a time when many artist/activists and leftist theorists and historians are reexamining the “legacies of 1968” (the revolutionary upheavals of the 1960s and 1970s), I’m interested in unearthing some of the complexity and paradoxes of our enterprise. I’d like to re-examine the wealth of work produced, and ask: what do these pieces of agit-prop tell us about a small part of 1970s history in the U.S.? How does tracing the work of a tiny collective of talented artists—who existed for a very brief moment on the fringes of the art world and on the fringes of the left—provide a useful lens to approach perennial debates about art and solidarity, art and politics? How did our work reverberate to the beat of agit-prop of the time, as well as against, and in spite of it? How and where did practices of freedom thrive? When and why did they collapse, and what can we learn?

## The World as Our Archive, Or: Whose Appropriations?

In early May of 1975, I worked with Tomie Arai, a project director at City Arts Workshop, in designing and painting a three-part mural banner to celebrate the Vietnamese victory. Leftist artists freely borrowed from each other in those days, across cultures and languages, dipping into a shared vocabulary of fists, dragons, masses, AK-47s, and metaphors of social transformation, like the bleeding rose. Sometimes design ideas were lifted wholesale, as in our quoting a poster by Rene Mederos for the Vietnam banner, or the Chicago Women's Graphics Collective's remake of José Gomez Fresquet's *El modelo y La vietnamita* (*The model and the woman from Vietnam*). The Cubans themselves borrowed from North American advertising, pop art, and from revolutionary artists such as the Black Panther Party's Emory Douglas. None of this was seen as postmodern appropriation, or a subversion of intellectual property rights, but as solidarity: assumed collective ownership of revolutionary ideas and methodologies.

Other examples include a poster from the Student Non-Violent Coordinating Committee (SNCC), the 1967 Cuban poster *NOW!* (designed by Jesús Forjans), and May 19th's *War in America*. Later, the Cuban artist Alfredo Rostgaard's *Hanoi Martes 13* inspired a 1980s update for an anti-U.S. intervention street visual. Art history is plundered too, as in a reworking of Goya's *3 de Mayo*, 1808 for an anti-intervention/solidarity with Nicaragua and El Salvador demonstration in Chicago in 1985.

The early years of the MBGC were characterized by a relatively open and porous creative process. The artists who instigated the collective were motivated to make a special contribution, through our skills, to our shared political project. We were already designing fliers, small posters, and banners on an ad-hoc and individual basis, but wanted to make an argument for a more concentrated and sustained graphic practice. The MBGC functioned as another "cell" of the organization, where we used our process to consolidate our ideological positions and loyalties. But the collective was also, in those early years, somewhat autonomous from the organization. We came into being not at the behest of a "central committee," but on our own volition. Although none of us would ever overtly argue this, the MBGC promised us a relatively free and independent space where we could practice what we loved, limited only by our own energies and exhaustion.

The collective designed and created limited editions of complex multicolor serigraphs as a fundraising tool, to gather what we called “material aid” for campaigns to free political prisoners of the Black Liberation movement, the Puerto Rican nationalist prisoners, to commemorate the Attica rebellion, and project the New Afrikan freedom struggle, a political tendency of the Black revolutionary nationalist agenda and program. We designed and produced countless flyers, stickers, pamphlets, buttons, offset posters, T-shirts and other propaganda, which were wheat-pasted and distributed in New York City and other parts of the east coast.

In all these projects, social realist influences loomed large in the quest for a “legible” style, which we defined as transparency, and skill in reproducing “reality.” It helped that several of us had figurative painting and drawing backgrounds. But we were also interested in the excess and bounty of the Chinese peasant paintings from Huhsien County, in the psychedelia of Cuban posters, and in the figural monstrosities of John Heartfield.

19 For a short while, our practice seemed to exemplify Mao Tse-tung’s call to “...let a hundred flowers bloom...”<sup>3</sup> We did not have a signature collective style. We developed a methodology, particularly with the more complex prints, where individual members would propose an idea for a poster along with a rough design and aesthetic approach. Everyone would offer feedback and critique, but there was no attempt to impose stylistic restrictions. Each design, each print was an occasion for different experiments with authorship within a collaborative structure.

We also taught silk-screening classes and workshops in design, drawing, banner-making and propaganda to women and to members of anti-racist, anti-imperialist and national liberation groups. We began working out of a small loft space on Atlantic Avenue in Brooklyn, where I had previously lived. When we lost our lease, we shifted production to a tiny apartment in Park Slope that Donna Borup and I shared. The bathroom doubled as a darkroom. When we were printing, we strung clotheslines throughout the space to hang prints, since we had no drying racks. I remember going to bed under rows of 18” x 24” posters, inhaling the fumes from drying mineral spirits/xylene as I dozed off. All our supplies were donated by the artists who worked with the collective—screens, squeegees, papers, inks, drawing and design materials, drafting tables, tabourets, flat files. Eventually our classes and fundraising events covered some of the cost of materials,

# THE MADAME BINH GRAPHICS COLLECTIVE



**SELF-DETERMINATION FOR THE BLACK NATION  
SOLIDARITY WITH NATIONAL LIBERATION STRUGGLES  
DEFEAT US-LED IMPERIALISM**

Madame Binh Graphics Collective brochure, NYC, 1979

but our labor was always donated. We didn't sleep much, worked crappy low-paying jobs to cover our rent and utilities, collected unemployment insurance when we inevitably got fired, and ate on the subway or in coffee shops. But for a time, we were in conversation and contact with many people who were not part of our internalized cadre life. Eventually this changed, as we cynically calculated every encounter as an organizing possibility, a chance to make another convert to our unique set of truths and beliefs.

### **Our Politics, Our Imagery, Ourselves**

In the late 1970s, the MBGC participated in an upsurge of activism in New York's art world, which had been relatively quiet since the ferment of the U.S.-Vietnam war. Artists Meeting for Cultural Change, the Anti-imperialist Cultural Union, Art Workers' Coalition, and the Black Emergency Cultural Coalition were all part of the landscape. "Action Against Racism in the Arts," catalyzed by an infamous exhibition at Artists Space in 1978 called "The Nigger Drawings," was an important organizing focus in this period.<sup>4</sup>

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Discussions and debates in the Coalition, which drew many notable artists and writers to its meetings—Adrian Piper, Cliff Joseph, David Hammons, Howardena Pindell, and Lucy Lippard among them—moved between proposals to target racism in art world institutions, and arguments to prioritize building anti-racist education and activism in U.S. society in general. During the mid-to-late 1970s, accelerating racist organizing and attacks by para-military white supremacist groups like the Nazis and KKK were on the rise, alarming and angering many Black and other Third World people and progressive whites. In 1981, the MBGC was invited by Group Material to create a mixed-media installation for one of their early projects, the last one to take place in a Lower East Side storefront. "Atlanta: an emergency exhibition" was organized to protest the epidemic disappearance and murders of twenty-nine Black children and teenagers in Atlanta, Georgia between 1979 and 1981.<sup>5</sup>

Lucy Lippard described our piece in a review for the *Village Voice*, later reprinted in her book *Get the Message? A Decade of Art for Social Change*:

The Madame Binh Graphics Collective's double piece is layered in space, on plastic sheets, juxtaposing genocide and white supremacy with African

liberation movements, moving from an Assata Shakur quote (“We are not citizens of America... we need a nation”) through the Atlanta parents and children and, up front, a Black solidarity march surging into the gallery, accompanied by a Malcolm X quote: “If a white man wants to be an ally, ask him what does he think of John Brown. You know what John Brown did? He went to war.”<sup>6</sup>

The second part of the piece was a large canvas that had been silk-screened with a repetitive grid of eye-popping day-glo red and green, inscribed with black text (“Stop the murders in Atlanta/Fight genocide and white supremacy...”), based on a sticker we’d designed which was intended to connote the red, black and green of the Black Liberation flag. Both the installation and the wall piece evidenced visual vernaculars that were in a conversation with artistic traditions and contemporary practices at the same time as transmitting didactic content.

The MBGC and our parent organization, May 19th, and the revolutionary Black nationalists whom we considered our leadership, advocated an armed struggle to free the land of five states in the southeastern U.S.—Louisiana, Mississippi, Alabama, Georgia, and South Carolina—the historic “Black Belt.”<sup>7</sup> Our concomitant call for whites to “...be like John Brown: he went to war” was the logical and “correct” response to the radical wing of the civil rights movement, and the Student Non-violent Coordinating Committee’s demand that anti-racist whites take responsibility for organizing in our own communities.<sup>8</sup>

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In May 19th and the MBGC, we were always imagining a cascading, ever-growing force of Black people whom we saw as central to the process of revolutionary change in the U.S.—seizing their own destinies and, in the process, rescuing us from ours. MBGC’s stationery, letterhead, and fliers for our classes and workshops included drawings of Assata Shakur, Malcolm X, Ho Chi Minh, and Black Panther (and former political prisoner) Geronimo Pratt. We placed a priority on those struggles that we saw as pitted against white settler regimes: Zimbabwe, Namibia, Azania/South Africa, and Palestine.<sup>9</sup>

We had a very hard time representing white people in struggle, because our analysis dictated that whites were almost irredeemably tied to the imperialist system. We viewed every chapter of the white working class struggle in the U.S., from the white-dominated labor movement to the racist “anti-draft” riots of the Civil War and World War I, as defined by white supremacy and betrayal. We saw

every expression of solidarity from the white-dominated left—from the CPUSA's (Communist Party, USA) short-lived support for self-determination for the Black nation in the 1930s, to our antecedents in Prairie Fire and the Weather Underground—as marred by racism. Just before the dissolution of the WUO, a superficially-conceived class politics manifested as the national Hard Times Conference in Chicago in 1976. This ideological shift was met with scathing criticism by Black and other Third World participants as multi-nationalist, economist, and racist. Not everyone but ourselves, everyone *including* ourselves: a burden that could only be overcome by ascribing to and participating in our vision of “war in amerikkka,” the willingness to sacrifice *everything* to become revolutionary allies. We saw this as an application of Marx and Engels’ idea of “class suicide,” updated by Amílcar Cabral for the era of national liberation struggles. An exception is evidenced by this image of white women demonstrating against “killer cops.” For a period, we believed that white women, especially white working class lesbians, were the “weak link” in the white oppressor nation, and thus the most likely to be allies of national liberation struggles. This was indicative of a short-lived perception that we needed to ground our politics in some sense of “self-interest” that had radical potential. It’s also easy to see how the bifurcated top/bottom design exemplified a careful avoidance of any intimation of “parity” between ourselves and revolutionary Third world movements.

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### Realism

The “struggle over color” is alternately funny, bizarre, and troubling.

In our work, the artists in the MBGC were alternately praised for overcoming our own racism enough to be able to “see” and therefore “represent” the faces and gestures of Black people, and criticized for white supremacy when we couldn’t predict the outcome of an offset-litho split-fountain or duotone: when land that was supposed to signify the rich homeland of the south for millions of descendants of slaves looked, in the words of one of the leaders of May 19th, “like shit.”

One of our New Afrikan comrades once told me that she’d never before met a white person who could draw or paint Black people. I was embarrassed and secretly pleased, but it nonetheless seemed like undeserved praise, since I attributed this not to politics, but to my ability to render forms and colors naturalistically. In the midst of the feedback session about *Southern Song*,<sup>10</sup> a particularly ambitious,



seven-color print, she joked that the colors of the land looked more like grassy Connecticut than the red earth of Georgia. Internally, this became fodder for more organizational criticism: first as evidence of my overly-familiar banter with someone whom I should have treated more respectfully; then of the always-dreaded, always-already there racism, an unwillingness to dig into, believe in, and really represent the five states of the nascent Black nation.<sup>11</sup>

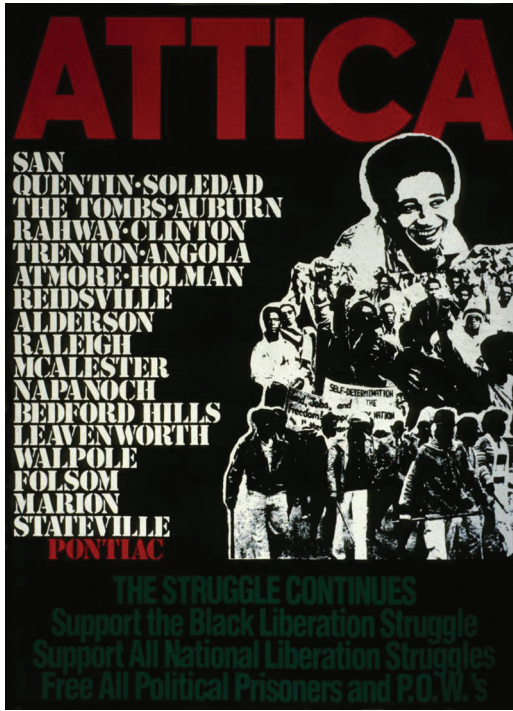
The *Pamberi ne Zimbabwe* poster was controversial because we used a flat burnt umber, with no modulation in hue or value, for the skin of the faces of the children, freedom fighters, and ZANU leader, Robert Mugabe. The color printed so dark that it absorbed the thin black ink lines that delineated their features. Rather than a design flaw, or bad color or paper choice, this incident was argued as evidence of our racism—in that we flattened and dehumanized the faces of Zimbabweans.<sup>12</sup>

In 1980, the MBGC organized one of our last real art world coalition efforts: “Art for Zimbabwe” at Just Above Midtown gallery in Soho. Works by over fifty artists—including Benny Andrews, Carl Andre, Tomie Arai, Rudolph Baranik, Camille Billops, Bob Blackburn, Ralph Fasanella, Louise Fishman, Leon Golub, Janet Henry, Ana Mendieta, Malaquias Montoya, Alice Neel, Howardena Pindell, Faith Ringgold, Juan Sanchez, Gregory Sholette, Nancy Spero, as well as many others, including “unknowns” such as ourselves—were auctioned to raise money for the liberation movement which soon after seized power in the former white settler colony of Rhodesia.

Our work in coalitions such as Action against Racism in the Arts provided the basis for undertaking such an ambitious project. We had made contacts, built a mailing list, and worked with a broad and diverse group of artists with whom we shared some basic political feelings, but who together represented a wide range of philosophies, political viewpoints, and aesthetic strategies, as well as markedly different “positions” (vis-à-vis the art world).

In spite of our prolific, if slightly frenetic practice, and large-scale efforts such as “Art for Zimbabwe”—which raised several thousand dollars, a significant amount in that period of time—the MBGC is absent from almost every account of the New York political art scene in New York in the 1970s.<sup>13</sup> This is due at least in part to our own sectarianism, and the self-imposed isolation of our political line.<sup>14</sup>

For the artists of the MBGC, the art world was not our home. We were uneasy interlopers, having rejected the nexus of gallery/museum/



*Attica: The Struggle Continues*, Madame Binh Graphics Collective  
(Laura Whitehorn lead designer), NYC, circa 1979-80

art collector as inherently elitist. No less overt, but often unspoken and unarticulated, was our belief in the impossibility of an art practice outside, or independent of, our all-consuming and demanding politics. Our role eventually became that of simple propagandists. The ambiguity of art-making, and any kind of open, creative process, was supplanted by unambiguous, urgent, and militant political speech.

Earlier, I discussed the beginnings of the MBGC, when we exercised a degree of autonomy in our creative process. We alternated designing our prints and posters, allowing them to bear the particular markings of style, drawing, and design of one individual, while the rest aided in conceptual development and production: Donna Borup created the design for the *Viva Puerto Rico Libre* poster, Laura Whitehorn the Attica poster, and I designed the Margaret Walker poster. There is a heterogeneity in these designs, from the varying uses of high-contrast



*Viva Puerto Rico Libre!*, Madame Binh Graphics Collective  
(Donna Borup lead designer), NYC, circa 1978-79

photo-images, typographic experiments, stenciled text and silhouetted forms, surrealist figures, and social realist collage. But the more we produced art by committee, where every aesthetic decision seemed legislated by the entire organization, the deader and duller the graphics became. Interestingly, this paralleled our own process of internalization, when politically we isolated ourselves to the point that we were basically talking to ourselves. One of my closest friends from those days remembers an ever-escalating spiral of activity, urgency, and exhaustion—the driving machine to will into being an army of white revolutionaries. Our internal “discourse” and political life became a relentless process of harsh, unyielding criticism and abject self-criticism whose terms were foreclosed from the beginning.

We also stopped practicing “care of the self” for the body of work of the collective.<sup>15</sup> Much of our work and our archives were eventually lost



*Southern Song* (Margaret Walker Poster), Madame Binh Graphics Collective  
(Mary Patten lead designer), NYC, 1980

or destroyed by the police. Several years after the Art for Zimbabwe auction, I remember searching for the piece that Carl Andre had donated—a grid of nine small copper squares that had been stored in its original small cardboard box. Someone in May 19th had purchased the piece for less than \$100, and then donated it back to the collective to sell for a better price someday. It was nowhere to be found. Another episode that particularly horrifies my librarian and archivist friends is the benefit auction where the MBGC sold our entire collection of political posters in 1981, in a strangely predictive gesture towards our own dissolution. Ironically, our decision to divest ourselves of this substantial archive ensured the continued existence of at least some of those prints and posters. A good number were purchased by Karen DiGia of the War Resisters' League, who eventually donated her collection to the Hampshire College Archives. Our willingness

to sacrifice our political and graphic “inheritance” for several hundred dollars, including original posters from Vietnam, Cuba, Mozambique, South Africa, Palestine, Iran, China, as well as radical movements in North America and Latin America, meant that at least some of the work escaped destruction or confiscation by the FBI, who raided our workshop and studio a year later. It also meant that the work did not succumb to rot and mildew in some storage locker, the sad fate of so many artifacts and documents from defunct and failed organizations.

At this point, we saw our former artist friends and associates as either objects of our perpetual “line struggle,” or comrades whom we needed to emulate—but ideologically, politically, and not artistically. Initially, we viewed artists, writers, colleagues and friends as individuals who were also allies; eventually, at our worst, we viewed them and the social networks we shared through an opportunistic lens. There are some humorous anecdotes, as when one of the artists from the MBGC went to the opening of a Ben Shahn exhibit in hopes of meeting the artist, only to be told that he had died some eight years earlier. Our relationship with the artist Jimmie Durham consisted primarily of inviting him, as a leader of the American Indian Movement, to lead teach-ins on Native American history and struggle for our cadre. But we didn’t debate art, politics, and aesthetics with him—a political organizer and leader who was also an artist radically experimenting with form and materials to de-center conventional notions of Native American identity and tradition. When the artist Rudolf Baranik brought his Pratt Institute class to the MBGC for a site visit, purportedly for a dialogue and exchange about political art practice, we spent the entire time lecturing him and his students on the necessity of supporting the Black Liberation Army. Uppermost in our thoughts was how we could we use such an encounter to advance our own political vision, and win new converts to it.

As “political artists,” trying to build an oppositional movement to U.S. society and culture, the artists in the MBGC had already stopped painting, drawing, making sculpture and prints, or whatever else we’d been pursuing as individuals. We worked “on our own art” only when it was expedient—to gather commissions for non-political prints or paintings, which we used to raise money for the organization or a particular campaign. For us, art had always been an instrument for social change. As we increasingly withdrew into the isolation of a sectarian and militaristic political line, art became as much a weapon to attempt

to obliterate our white skin privilege and identities as autonomous beings—artists, women, lesbians—while we sought to advance our self-defined micro-war against the U.S. government.

### How to Disappear Without a Trace

Any artist working collaboratively alongside or in negotiation with a “community in struggle” must live with and work through the tension between losing oneself in that struggle, that community, where fighting for the “greater good” tends to eclipse the particular, the singular, and the everyday. The manifestations of this might include anonymity, solidarity, clandestinity, or just focused and dedicated hard work. Those who choose this kind of political art practice find their lives intensely enriched and multiply connected to worlds beyond what they ever knew previously; worlds where possibilities beckon, and where “losing oneself” also means sacrifice, sometimes to the point of self-obliteration.

29 I have in mind two images: one, a newspaper photo of the monk Thich Quang Duc, whose self-immolation in protest against the Saigon government in 1963 became one of the key icons of the Vietnam war. It was literally burned into our consciousness, and made its way into numerous magazines, documentaries, and films, from Ingmar Bergman’s *Persona* on.

And another: *Assata Shakur is Welcome Here*, a poster that was put up in windows and storefronts in Harlem, Brownsville, Bedford-Stuyvesant, and the South Bronx, after her escape from prison in 1979. The poster is signed by the Republic of New Afrika.

The liberation of Assata Shakur is remembered as a signal moment in the annals of the Black Liberation movement. It may seem occult to those not involved in or touched by these struggles, but the possibility of an incarcerated freedom fighter escaping from prison in the U.S., with no cost of life, is practically unimaginable today. Even Shakur herself, in her autobiography, figures the escape as a kind of dream. Because of the dictates and necessity of a clandestine mentality, none of the actual actors are ever named, thanked, or acknowledged. That “naming” was only to occur in indictments by grand juries and persecution by the state.

The MBGC produced a number of anonymous works, or, as in this case, signed the poster “The Republic of New Afrika”—the name of the group for whom we made the poster, and who we were intent on





*Assata Shakur is Welcome Here*, Madame Binh Graphics Collective /  
Republic of New Africa, NYC, 1979-80

projecting. This is not so unusual: for years, anti-imperialist activist Yuri Kochiyama, an old friend and political associate of Malcolm X, designed calligraphy and flyers for revolutionary Black nationalist groups in New York City. Only people inside the movement knew that the hand behind these graphics belonged to Kochiyama, who never claimed authorship.

There is nothing wrong, and a lot “right” with this, in principle: it’s a solidarity gesture. But what needs to be scrutinized, in our case, is the act of inflating the apparent visible support that existed for certain revolutionary tendencies of the Black Liberation movement at the time, and in the process, the attempted erasure of our whiteness. Our insistence that white people had no escape route from the trap-pings of white privilege, no other avenue to becoming revolutionary, than to “go to war,” was an attempt to “disappear” into the imagined masses of the Black Liberation Struggle.<sup>16</sup>

Four of the key members of the MBGC were arrested in September of 1981 at JFK Airport at a demonstration against the Springboks, South Africa's rugby team<sup>17</sup> and were charged with criminal trespass, resisting arrest, and assaulting police. Soon after, one of our co-defendants was indirectly implicate in the Brinks robbery in Nanuet, New York, when a group identified with the Black Liberation Army and the Revolutionary Armed Task Force "expropriated" 1.6 million dollars from a Brinks truck. In the ensuing shootouts, Peter Paige, a Brinks guard, and two policemen, Waverly Brown and Edward O'Grady, were killed. Kathy Boudin, Solomon Brown, Judith Clark, and David Gilbert were arrested at the scene, and others—Kuwasi Balagoon, Sekou Odinga, Mutulu Shakur, Chui Ferguson, and Jamal Joseph among them—were captured later. "War in Amerikkka" was unleashed, but not the way we had envisioned. The F.B.I.'s newly organized Joint Terrorist Task Force mobilized against Black and white radical movements and organizations, including raids and arrests, dozens of conspiracy charges, a Federal grand jury, several Federal and state trials, imprisonment, and a shootout that left Mtysari Shabaka Sundiata dead. These disastrous events marked the beginning of the end for May 19th.

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Because of the connecting threads with Brinks, the five Anti-Springbok defendants were re-indicted on riot charges in late October, 1981, and our bail raised to \$100,000 each. We had already spent a week in jail in September in pre-trial detention. Now, because the New York District Attorney invoked RICO (the Racketeer Influenced and Corrupt Organizations Act)—a statute originally targeting organized crime—no one could contribute bail without having to endure a special administrative hearing to determine whether or not they were part of a "criminal organization" or if the money was linked to illegal activities. Because we resisted this transparent witch-hunt, we would spend a long time in jail before we were ever convicted.

Between 1981 and 1983, the MBGC effectively became an imprisoned collective working from the main New York City jail on Rikers Island. Even the daily grind of incarceration—controlled movement, constant noise, mindless and routine searches, provocations, and round-the-clock surveillance—did not stop our activism, or our graphic production. We created "prison art" with permitted materials—collages made from torn-up magazines, toothpaste substituting for



glue. We made portraits of fellow-prisoners, and drew pictures of their children and lovers from photographs they lent us. We mobilized a veritable cottage industry to make drawings, cards, paintings, and paper quilts for our annual “crafts sale for human rights” which now became a focal point of anti-repression and solidarity work. Our energies were also consumed with legal meetings, making propaganda for various defense committees, including our own, and against grand juries and other forms of state repression. We had now become political prisoners, formerly the idealized subjects of so much of our artwork.

### **No Special People**

At the same period that Hans Haacke was making his *U.S. Isolation Box, Grenada, 1983*<sup>18</sup> in response to the U.S. invasion of Grenada—a work that met with political and corporate censorship and media attacks—some of my friends and former political associates were bombing the U.S. Capitol building. I remember looking at the logo of the Red Guerilla Resistance at the top of the re-printed communiqué, and feeling a shock of recognition: the graphic style was deeply familiar. I felt a chill, similar to the fear I’d experienced when a stranger’s face in some city looked like that of someone I used to know, who was now in hiding... I avert my eyes: I must not give myself away, must not acknowledge the recognition or the encounter.

After the dissolution of the MBGC (which was never formally dissolved, nor simply “fell apart,” but just withered away), Laura Whitehorn went underground. She was later to be arrested in the mid-1980s in a Federal conspiracy case, known as the “Resistance Conspiracy Case.” Along with Alan Berkman, Tim Blunk, Marilyn Buck, Linda Evans, and Susan Rosenberg, Laura was charged with conspiracy “to influence, change, and protest policies and practices of the United States Government... through the use of violent and illegal means.” The Resistance Conspiracy 6 were charged with bombing the U.S. Capitol in the fall of 1983 (an action protesting the U.S. invasion of Grenada), and with bombing several military installations in Washington D.C. and the Israeli Aircraft Industries Building and South African consulate in New York City. No one was injured or killed in any of these bombings. Laura, Linda, and Marilyn eventually agreed to plead guilty to conspiracy and destruction of government property in a plea bargain with prosecutors, who then agreed to drop

bombing charges against Susan, Tim, and Alan, all of whom were already serving long prison terms. Alan had just been diagnosed with cancer, a huge motivation in agreeing to this plea-bargain.

Laura served fourteen years in prison before her release on parole in 1999, and is now a contributing editor of *POZ* magazine, an advocacy journal for people with HIV/AIDS. She continues to be active in prison work. Margo Pelletier spent years as an impoverished artist while working as a master printer for Robert Blackburn and others. Later she worked as a preparator for the Dia Art Foundation. Recently, with her partner Lisa Thomas, she made a film, *Freeing Silvia Baraldini*, about one of the leaders of May 19th. Wendy Grossman became an art historian specializing in African art. She is now an independent scholar and curator. Another MBGC-affiliated artist, Lisa Roth, moved to San Francisco, where she continued to work with the John Brown Anti-Klan Committee, as well as Prairie Fire and ACT UP. Lisa also became one of the main organizers of the Dyke March, and continues to work as a pro-bono designer for AIDS organizations. Eve Rosahn became a criminal defense attorney and eventually the supervising attorney of the Legal Aid Society's Parole Revocation Defense Unit. I moved to Chicago, and after seven years of independent art making and political activism with the Puerto Rican community and ACT UP Chicago, went to graduate school and eventually became a video maker, installation artist, and a professor. Donna Borup has been a fugitive since 1982.

33

In the fall of 1990, during my first semester of graduate school at the University of Illinois in Chicago, I showed a piece that I called *no special people*—from a quote by Tim Blunk, one of my co-defendants in the Anti-Springbok case.<sup>19</sup> The piece was a series of small black and white portraits of six of my comrades who were all in prison at the time, each blocked by a 6" x 9" steel rectangle, the approximate size of a cell window. The grey "plates" were then drilled into the paintings with 6" stove-bolts, making the painted heads difficult, although not impossible, to see. At my critique, visiting artist Thomas Lawson asked: "No one knows who these people are: what do they *represent*?" I was befuddled by the intent of the question, given all the theoretical debates about "representation" that were swirling around those halls and classrooms at the time. I was also exhausted from working all night to install the piece. But through my physical and conceptual fog, I heard the question as an accusation, to which there was only a dull,

despairing answer: here were these people buried alive for ten, twenty years or more, but they were nobodies. No one knew their names, who they were, or what they stood for.

Later, in developing this piece and extracting elements from it for *Prison Diary*, *Untitled/Conspired*, the video *Letter to a Missing Woman*, and a piece for the journal *WhiteWalls*, I wrote: "...I wanted to interrogate the 'official' accounts which condemned them to virtual life sentences as 'terrorist revolutionaries'... to smash pop-psychology explanations that dismissed them as white middle class kids who hated their parents, or were abused by them; as well as progressive/left versions that spurned them for their adventurism, foco-ism, and militarism—or captioned them as self-hating, anti-working class whites, motivated by a ridiculous romance with the Third World, and by overwhelming guilt."

I knew that my friends were special, exceptional—a sentiment I imagined most people shared, whether they supported or despised them. The idea of revolutionary will (or the lack of it) was a constant theme in the political circles I inhabited for years. The title, *no special people*, intended irony—but most viewers, like Lawson, had no idea who these prisoners were. The question of "what they represent" opened a void—and not only because their names never became household words, like those of the Red Army Fraction revolutionaries in Germany, whose blurred portraits by Gerhard Richter were the inspiration and reference for my piece. This is a continuing dilemma: confronting the painful truth that despite the risks and the sacrifices, the bravado and extremism, and the dire consequences of our political project, so much of our work, our efforts, and, more recently, our political prisoners, are invisible and seemingly irrelevant to contemporary social movements in the United States.

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Excerpt: *Revolution as an Eternal Dream: The Exemplary Failure of the Madame Binh Graphics Collective* (Half-Letter Press, 2011), pp. 11-12, 21-58.

## Notes

1. A self-defined “organization of revolutionaries,” united in commitment, ideology, and practice, and dedicated to revolutionary change. The concept is rooted in revolutionary communist left ideology, although not exclusively used by these movements.
2. The phrase was also used by my best friend, Ferd Eggan, for an audio and video archive he worked on from 2005 until his death in 2007.
3. “On the Correct Handling of Contradictions Among the People,” speech, 1957. In the mid-1950s, a kind of democracy of public political expression was encouraged by the Chinese Communist Party, which many assert was for cynical ends—to elicit dissent in order to identify, control, and squash it.
4. The show, a series of abstract charcoal drawings by Donald Newman (who at the time identified only as “Donald”) was met with outraged, vocal protests. Newman, who appeared publicly with charcoal smeared on his face, cited Patti Smith as inspiration for his view of the “artist as nigger.” Many believed that his provocation was purely cynical, and Lucy Lippard and Howardena Pindell called it an example of “esthetically motivated racism.” See Jeff Chang’s “On Multiculturalism,” in the 2007 *Grantmakers in the Arts Reader*.
5. Most of the Atlanta child murders remain unsolved to this day. Wayne Williams, then 22 years old, was captured, convicted, and sentenced to life imprisonment for two of the killings in 1981. In May 2005, Police Chief Louis Graham of DeKalb County, Georgia, ordered that four of the murder cases be reopened, and possible links emerged between the killings and the Ku Klux Klan. A year later, the investigation was dropped, and most cases remain “closed.” Despite this, widespread belief persists that Williams was framed, having provided a convenient scapegoat for the authorities.
6. “A Child’s Garden of Horrors,” *Get the Message? A Decade of Art for Social Change*, p. 252, Dutton, NYC, 1984.
7. The Republic of New Afrika and the New Afrikan Peoples’ Organization grew out of a larger militant Black Nationalist movement in the sixties and seventies that included not only the well-known and well-chronicled Black Panther Party, but also the Deacons for Defense, the Revolutionary Action Movement, DRUM (Dodge Revolutionary Union Movement), the National Black Human Rights Campaign, and others.
8. See James Forman’s *The Making of Black Revolutionaries* for an indispensable account of SNCC and the radicalization of the Black civil rights movement. See also *We Will Return in the Whirlwind* by Muhammad Ahmad, and prisoner-of-war Sundiata Acoli’s accounts, posted online at: <<http://www.thetalkingdrum.com/prison1.html>>
9. We referred to South Africa as “Azania,” taking our cue from the Pan-Africanist Congress, one of the revolutionary Black nationalist groups fighting against apartheid.
10. The title and text of *Southern Song* is taken from a poem by Margaret Walker, which we used with her permission. The imagery, derived from three separate photographs from the era of the WPA (Works Progress Administration)—one by Jack Delano (1941), another by Dorothea Lange (1937), a third by Marion Post Wolcott (1938), was appropriated and re-combined without anyone’s permission.

11. Sadly, this criticism was internalized by several of us such that we effectively stopped speaking with some of our comrades and friends, for fear of transgressing the inscrutable borders between familiarity and appropriately distant solidarity.
12. The color palette used by Cuban artist Alfrédo Rostgaard in his poster for the film *Cimarron*—green for an escaped slave's leg, against a purple background—demonstrates the advantages of shunning realism in favor of a more open-ended stylistic approach. I'm also reminded of a U.S. art world episode where color was used to make a pointed critique of racism, only to elicit a firestorm of outrage: David Hammons' billboard mural of a blonde blue-eyed Jesse Jackson, sited briefly on a street near the National Portrait Gallery in Washington, D.C. in 1989.
13. The single exception of which I am aware is Greg Sholette's "Fidelity, Betrayal, Autonomy: In and Beyond the Post Cold-War Art Museum" <[http://republicart.net/disc/institution/sholette01\\_en.htm](http://republicart.net/disc/institution/sholette01_en.htm)>.
14. Less rigid than dogma, but a more muscular concept than "agenda," political line is a general guide and shape of a shared ideological world-view which can be applied to a specific set of material realities, social problems, or crises.
15. A reference to Michel Foucault's Volume 3 of *The History of Sexuality*, and his conceptualization of "selfcare" as an ethical principle.
16. I am not using the word "imagined" pejoratively: possessing an "imaginary" is crucial for any project. However, there was a serious disconnect between what we thought constituted radical consciousness, and thus the subjective predisposition to revolt. An interesting, if problematic, analysis of our political views and relationships can be found in *False Nationalism, False Internationalism*, a semi-clandestine publication printed in 1985.
17. Because they were seen as cultural ambassadors of apartheid, the Springboks had been blocked from competing anywhere internationally, with the notable exceptions of the U.S., the United Kingdom, and New Zealand. All three countries were sites of numerous demonstrations and actions.
18. "[A] precise reconstruction of... (isolation boxes) used by the U.S. army only a few months before in blatant disregard of the Geneva Convention..." See "The Art of Exhibition" by Douglas Crimp, in *October*, Autumn 1984, M.I.T. Press.
19. The original quote was, "there are no special people, only different circumstances."

Excerpt

# Posters: Advertisement, Art, Political Artifact, Commodity

SUSAN SONTAG

**IT HAS BECOME ROUTINE FOR OBSERVERS OF GRAPHIC DESIGN TO CALL** *for criticism able to situate graphic production in the wider matrix of culture, but this has rarely been achieved as convincingly as in Susan Sontag's essay on Cuban revolutionary posters. Sontag (b. 1933), one of the United States' best-known cultural critics, visited Cuba and, in 1969, wrote about the country—controversially—in the left journal Ramparts. Asked by Ramparts's art director Dugald Stermer to contribute an introduction to his large-format collection of Cuban posters, Sontag delivered a forensic, partly historical analysis of the medium, showing how a capitalist invention, which began as means of encouraging “a social climate in which it is normative to buy,” ended up becoming a commodity itself. She relates this popular new Cuban art form designed to raise and complicate consciousness*

*to developments in film, literature, and fine art, before turning to the problematic position of the non-Cuban viewer. Posters, Sontag concludes, are substitutes for experience; collecting them is a form of emotional and moral tourism, and Stermer's book is implicated in a tacit betrayal of the revolutionary use and meaning of images now consumed as just another dish on the left-liberal bourgeois menu.* — RICK POYNOR

[...]

## II.

In capitalist society, posters are a ubiquitous part of the decor of the urban landscape. Connoisseurs of new forms of beauty may find visual gratification in the unplanned collage of posters (and neon signs) that decorate the cities. It is an additive effect, of course, since few posters to be seen outdoors nowadays, regarded one by one, give any aesthetic pleasure. More specialized connoisseurs—of the aesthetics of infestation, of the libertine aura of litter, and of the libertarian implications of randomness—can find pleasure in this decor. But what keeps posters multiplying in the urban areas of the capitalist world is their commercial utility in selling particular products and, beyond that, in perpetuating a social climate in which it is normative to buy. Since the economy's health depends on steadily encroaching upon whatever limits people's habits of consumption, there can be no limit to the effort to saturate public space with advertising.

A revolutionary communist society, which rejects the consumer society, must inevitably redefine, and thereby limit, poster art. In this context, only a selective and controlled use of posters makes sense. Nowhere is this selective use of posters more authentic than in Cuba, which has, by revolutionary aspiration (abetted by, but not reducible to, the cruel economic scarcities imposed by the American blockade), repudiated mercantile values more radically than any communist country outside of Asia. Cuba obviously has no use for the poster to inspire its citizens to buy consumer goods. That still leaves a large place for the poster, though. Any modern society, communist no less than capitalist, is a network of signs. Under revolutionary communism, the poster remains one principal type of public sign: decorating shared ideas and firing moral sympathies, rather than promoting private appetites.

As one would expect a large proportion of the posters in Cuba have political subjects. But unlike most work in this genre, the purpose of

the political poster in Cuba is not simply to build morale. It is to raise and complicate consciousness—the highest aim of the revolution itself. (Leaving out China, Cuba is perhaps the only current example of a communist revolution pursuing that ethical aim as an explicit political goal.) The Cuban use of political posters recalls Mayakovsky's vision in the early 1920s, before Stalinist oppression crushed the independent revolutionary artists and scrapped the communist-humanist goal of creating better types of human beings. For the Cubans, the success of their revolution is not measured by its ability to preserve itself, withstanding the remorseless hostility of the United States and its Latin American satraps. It is measured by its progress in educating the "new man." To be armed for self-defense, to be on the slow arduous road to some degree of agricultural self-sufficiency, to have virtually abolished illiteracy, to have provided the majority of people with an adequate diet and medical services for the first time in their lives—all these remarkable accomplishments are just preparations for the "avant-garde" revolution Cuba wishes to make. In this revolution, a revolution in consciousness that requires turning the whole country into a school, posters are an important method (among others) of public teaching.

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Posters have rarely voiced the avant-garde of political consciousness, any more than they have been genuinely avant-garde aesthetically. Left-revolutionary posters usually occupy the middle and rear portions of political consciousness. Their job is to confirm, reinforce, and further disseminate values held by the ideologically more advanced strata of the population. But Cuban political posters are not typical. In most political posters, the level of exhortation has not greater amplitude than a few simple emotive words—a command, a victory slogan, an invective. The Cubans use posters to convey complex moral ideas (notably some posters made for COR, like "Crear consciencia . . ." and "Espíritu de trabajo . . ."). Unlike most political posters, the Cuban posters sometimes say a great deal. And, sometimes, they say hardly anything at all. Perhaps the most advanced aspect of Cuban political posters is their taste for visual and verbal understatement. There seems no demand on the poster artists to be explicitly and continuously didactic. And when didactic, the posters—in happy contrast to the Cuban press, which seems seriously to underestimate the intelligence of people—are almost never strident or shrill or heavy-handed. (This is hardly to argue that there is no proper place for bluntness in political art, or that stridency always betrays intelligence. One of the most



important means of changing consciousness is to give things their proper *names*. And naming may, in certain historical situations, mean name-calling. Broadcasting relevant invective and insult, like the French posters from May 1968 which pointed out “*C’est lui, le chienlit*” and “CRS=SS,” had a perfectly serious political use in de-mystifying and delegitimizing repressive authority.)

In the Cuban context, however, such stridency or heavy-handedness would be an error, as the poster makers often avow. The posters mostly keep to a tone which is sober and emotionally dignified while never detached, while being put to most of the high-keyed uses political posters conventionally have in revolutionary societies actively engaged in ideological self-transformation. Posters mark off important public spaces. Thus, the vast Plaza de la Revolución, which can hold a million people for a rally, is largely defined by the huge colorful posters on the sides of the tall buildings bordering the Plaza. And posters signal important public times. Since the revolution each year is given a name in January (1969 was “The Year of the Decisive Effort,” referring to the sugar harvest), and a Poster announcing this is put up all over the island. Posters also supply a set of visual commentaries on the main political events in the course of the year: they announce days of solidarity with foreign struggles, publicize rallies and international congresses, commemorate historical anniversaries, and so forth. But despite the plethora of official functions they fill, the posters have a remarkable grace. At least some political posters establish an astonishing degree of independent existence as decorative objects. As often as they convey a particular message, they simply express (through being beautiful) *pleasure* at certain ideas, moral attitudes, and ennobling historical references. For just one example, look on p. 22 at the poster “Cien Años de Lucha 1868-1968.” The sobriety and refusal to make a statement in this poster is quite typical of what the Cubans have done. Of course, even the brief text of a poster can convey an analysis, not just a slogan but a genuine piece of political analysis, like the Paris posters from May warning people against the ideological poisons of the press, radio, and television—one showed a crude drawing of a television set, above which was written “*Intox!*” The Cuban posters are much less analytic than the posters from the recent French revolution; they educate in a more indirect, emotional, graphically sensuous way. (Of course, Cuba lacks a tradition of intellectual analysis comparable to the French.) Rare are the political posters which do not involve some degree of

moral flattery of their audience. The Cuban political posters flatter the senses. They are more stately, more dignified than the French posters from May 1968—which cultivated, for reasons of practical exigency as well as ideological motives, a naive, improvised, youthful look.

That posters of this deliberate aesthetic ambition appear frequently in Cuba, even that any are made at all, should hardly be taken for granted. The look that the Cuban posters aim at, and usually achieve, requires—besides talented artists—careful technical work, good paper, and other costly facilities. It is perhaps comprehensible that even a country coping with such severe economic shortages might allocate so much time and money and scarce paper to do political posters (and other forms of political graphics—like the exuberant layout of *Tricontinental* magazine, done by Alfredo Rostgaard, who makes most of the OSPAAAL posters). But the important educational role of political graphics in Cuba hardly explains altogether the high level, and expensive means, of Cuban poster art. For the Cuban poster is certainly not exclusively political, nor even (like the poster output of North Vietnam) mainly so. Many posters have no political content at all, and these include some of the most expensively and carefully produced posters—those done to advertise films. Advertising Cultural events is the task of most of the altogether nonpolitical posters. In appealing, sometimes whimsical and sometimes dramatic, images and playful typography, these posters announce movies, plays, the visit of the Bolshoi Ballet, a national song contest, a gallery exhibit, and the like. Thus Cuban poster artists apparently perpetuate one of the earliest and most durable poster genres: the theatrical poster. But there is an important difference. The Cubans make posters to advertise culture in a society that seeks *not* to treat culture as an ensemble of commodities—events and objects designed, whether consciously or not, for commercial exploitation. Then the very project of cultural advertising becomes somewhat paradoxical, if not gratuitous. And indeed, many of these posters do not really fill any practical need. A beautiful poster made for the showing in Havana of, say, a minor movie by Alain Jessura, every performance of which will be sold out (because movies are one of the few entertainments available), is a luxury item, something done in the end for its own sake. More often than not, a poster for ICAIC by Tony Reboiro or Eduardo Bachs amounts to the creation of a new work of art, supplementary to the film, rather than to a cultural advertisement in the familiar sense.



*Comunismo no es crear conciencia con el dinero sino crear riqueza con la conciencia*  
(Communism is not creating conscience with money but creating wealth with conscience);  
reprinted from *The Art of Revolution: 96 Posters from Cuba*, p. 18

The élan and aesthetic self-sufficiency of the Cuban posters seem even more remarkable when one considers that the poster is itself a new art form in Cuba. Before the revolution, the only posters to be seen in Cuba were the most vulgar types of American billboard advertising. Indeed, many of the pre-1959 posters in Havana had English texts, addressing themselves not even to the Cubans but directly to the American tourists whose dollars were a principal source of Cuba's earnings, and to the American residents, most of them businessmen who controlled and exploited Cuba economy. Cuba, like most other Latin American countries—the weak exceptions are Mexico, Brazil, and Argentina—had no indigenous poster tradition. Now, the best posters made anywhere in Latin America come from Cuba. (The efflorescence of Cuban poster art in recent years is hardly known, however, due to the isolation of Cuba from the non-communist world imposed by American policy. Writing as recently as 1968, Hutchinson does not exempt Cuba from his general dismissal of Latin America as a place where posters of high quality originate.) What accounts for the extraordinary burst of talent and energy in this art form in particular? Needless to say, other arts beside the poster are practiced with great distinction in Cuba today—notably, prose literature and poetry, with flourishing traditions that long pre-date the revolution, and the cinema, which, like poster making, had no roots at all. But perhaps the poster provides, better than any other form at this time, an ideal medium for reconciling (or at least containing) two potentially antagonistic views of art. In one, art expresses and explores an individual sensibility. In the other, art serves a social-political or ethical aim. To the credit of the Cuban Revolution, the contradiction between these two views of art has *not* been resolved. And in the interim, the poster form is one where the clash is not so sharp.

Posters in Cuba are done by individual artists, most of whom are relatively young (born in the late 1930s and early 1940s) and some of whom, notably Raúl Martínez and Umberto Peña, were originally painters. There seems to be no impulse to make posters collectively, as they are made in China (along with most other art forms, including poetry) or as they were by the revolutionary students of the Ecole des Beaux Arts in Paris in May 1968. But while Cuban posters, whether signed or unsigned, remain the work of individuals, most of these artists use a variety of individual styles. Stylistic eclecticism is perhaps one way of blurring the latent dilemma for the artist in a revolutionary

society of having an individual signature. It is not easy to identify the work of Cuba leading poster makers: Beltran, Peña, Rostgaard, Reboiro, Azcuy Martinez, and Bachs. As all artist moves back and forth between designing a political poster for OSPAAAL one week and a film poster for ICAIC the next week, his style may change sharply. And this eclecticism within the work of individual poster artists characterizes, even more strikingly, the whole body of posters made in Cuba. They show a wide range of influences from abroad which include the doggedly personal styles of American poster makers like Saul Bass and Milton Glazer; the style of the Czech film posters from the 1960s by Josef Flejar and Zdenek Chotenovsky; the naive style of the *Images d'Epinal*; the neo-Art Nouveau style popularized by the Fillmore and Avalon posters of the mid-1960s; and the Pop Art style, itself parasitic on commercial poster esthetics, of Andy Warhol, Roy Lichtenstein, and Tom Wesselman.

Of course, the poster makers have an easier situation than some other artists in Cuba. They do not share in the burden inherited by literature, in which the pursuit of artistic excellence is partly defined in terms of a restriction of the audience. Literature, in the centuries since it ceased to be a primarily oral and therefore public art, has become increasingly identified with a solitary act (reading), with a withdrawal into a private self. Good literature can, and often does, appeal only to an educated minority. Good posters cannot be an object of consumption by an elite. (What is properly called a poster implies a certain context of production and distribution, which excludes work, like the pseudo-posters of Warhol, produced directly for the fine arts market.) The space within which the genuine poster is shown is not elitist, but a public—communal—space. As they testify in numerous interviews, the Cuban poster artists remain very conscious that the poster is a public art, which addresses an undifferentiated mass of people on *behalf* of something public (whether a political idea or a cultural spectacle). The graphics artist in a revolutionary society doesn't have the problem the poet has, when the poet uses the singular voice, the lyrical *I* the problem of *who* is speaking and being spoken for.

Beyond a certain point, however, the place of the artist in a revolutionary society—no matter what his medium—is always a problematic. The modern view of the artist is rooted in the ideology of bourgeois capitalist society, with its highly elaborated notion of personal individuality and its presumption of a fundamental, ultimate antagonism

between the individual and society. The further the notion of the individual is driven, the more acute becomes the polarization of individual versus society. And for well over a century, the artist has been precisely the extreme (or exemplary) case of the “isolated individual.” The artist, according to the modern myth, is spontaneous, free, self-motivated—and frequently drawn to the role of the critic, or outsider, or disaffected nonparticipant. Thus, it has seemed self-evident to the leadership of every modern revolutionary government, or movement, that in a radically reconstructed social order the definition of the artist would have to change. Indeed, many artists in bourgeois society have denounced the confinement of art to small elite audiences (William Morris said: “I don’t want art for a few, any more than education for a few, or freedom for a few.”) and the selfish privatism of many artists’ lives. The criticism is easy to agree to in principle, hard to translate into practice. For one thing, most serious artists are quite attached to the “culturally revolutionary” role they play in societies which (they hope) are moving toward, but have not yet entered, a revolutionary situation. In a prerevolutionary situation, cultural revolution mainly consists of creating modes of negative experience and sensibility. It means making disruptions, refusals. The role is hard to give up, once one has become adept at it. Another particularly intransigent aspect of the artists identity is the extent to which serious art has appropriated for itself the rhetoric of revolution. Work that pushes back the frontier of negativity is not only defined, throughout the modern history of the arts, as valuable and necessary. It is also defined as revolutionary, even though, contrary to the standards by which the merits of politically revolutionary acts is measured—popular appeal—the avant-garde artist’s acts have tended to confine the audience for art to the socially privileged, to trained culture consumers. This cooption of the idea of revolution by the arts has introduced some dangerous confusions and encouraged misleading hopes.

It is natural for the artist—who is, so often, a critic of his society—to think when caught up in a revolutionary movement in his own country, that what he considers revolutionary in art is akin to the political revolution going on, and to believe that he can put his art at the service of the revolution. But so far there exists, at best, an uneasy union between revolutionary ideas in art and revolutionary ideas in politics. Virtually all the leaders in the great political revolutions have failed to see the connection at all, and indeed quickly sensed in revolutionary

(modernist) art a disagreeable form of oppositional activity. Lenin's revolutionary politics coexisted with a distinctly retrograde literary taste. He loved Pushkin and Turgenev. He detested Russian Futurists, and found Mayakovsky's bohemian life and experimental poetry an affront to the revolution's high moral ideals and spirit of collective sacrifice. Even Trotsky, far more sophisticated about the arts than Lenin, wrote (in 1923) that the Futurists stood apart from the revolution, though he believed they could be integrated. As everyone knows, the career of revolutionary art in the Soviet Union was extremely short-lived. The final fling of "formalist" painting in post-revolutionary Russia was the Moscow group exhibition " $5 \times 5 = 25$ " in 1921. The decisive step away from nonrepresentational art was taken that year. As the decade wore on, the situation worsened steadily, and the government banned the Futurist artists. A few of the great avant-garde geniuses of the 1920s were allowed to continue working, but under conditions which promoted the coarsening of their talents (like Eisenstein and Djiga Vertov). Many were intimidated into silence; others chose suicide or exile; some (like Mandelstam, Babel, and Meyerhold) were eventually sent to death in labor camps.

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In the context of all these problems and disastrous historical precedents, the Cubans have taken a modest tack. The debate on Cuban graphic art in the July 1969 issue of *Cuba Internacional*, cited later in this book by Dugald Stermer, goes over the traditional problems raised by the task of reconceiving art in a revolutionary society, of determining what are the legitimate freedoms and responsibilities of the artist. One-sided options are condemned; pure utilitarianism as well as pure aestheticism, the frivolity of self-indulgent abstractness as well as the aesthetic poverty of banal realism. The usual civilized pieties are advanced: the wish to avoid sledge-hammer propagandism but to remain relevant and understandable. It is the same old discussion. (For a more ample discussion, with reference to all the arts, see issue #4, from December 1967, of *Unión*, the magazine published by the Union of Writers and Artists.) The analysis is not particularly original. What is impressive, and heartening, is the Cuban solution; not to come to any particular solution, not to put great pressure on the artist. The debate continues, and so does the high quality of the Cuban posters. Comparisons with the poster art of the Soviet Union for more than forty years—indeed with the public propagandistic art of all the countries of Eastern Europe—puts in an almost monotonously favorable



light the Cuban government's achievement in resisting an ethically and esthetically philistine treatment of its artists. The Cuban way with artists is pragmatic, and largely respectful.

Admittedly, one cannot take the relatively happy relation of the poster artists to the revolution as uniformly typical of the situation of artists in Cuba. Among all the Cuban artists, the poster makers have a particularly easy time integrating their identity as artists with the demands and appeals of the revolution. Every society in the throes of revolution puts a heavy demand on art to have some connection with public values. The poster maker has no fundamental difficulty in acceding to this demand, posters being both an art form and also an extremely literal means of creating values. After the poster, the art form that seems almost as comfortable with this demand is the cinema—as evidenced by the remarkable work of Santiago Alvarez and the young directors of feature films. With other art forms, the situation is less unequivocal. As relatively permissive toward artists as the Cuban Revolution is, more individual voices (even among artists whose commitment to the revolution is unquestionable) have run into opposition. Last year, ugly pressures were brought to bear on Hubert Padilla, probably the best of the younger poets. It should be mentioned that during Padilla's ordeal, which included being attacked in the press, temporarily losing his government job, and having his book, after it received a prize from the Casa de las Americas, printed with a preface criticizing the award of the prize to him, there was never any question of refusing the print his book, of censoring his poetry—much less of jailing him. One hopes, and has good reason to believe, that the Padilla case is an exception; though it is perhaps significant that Padilla was not totally vindicated and did not get his job back, until Castro personally intervened in the matter. Lyric poetry, the most private of arts, is perhaps the most vulnerable in a revolutionary society as poster making is the most adaptable. But this is hardly to say that only poets can be frustrated in Cuba. The conflict between aesthetic and sheerly practical, even more than ideological, considerations has created problems even for the other public arts—for example, architecture. Probably, Cuba simply cannot afford buildings like the School of Fine Arts in the suburbs of Havana done by Ricardo Porr in 1965, which is one of the most beautiful modern structures in the world. The priority now given to the design of, say, aesthetically banal low-cost prefabricated houses over the construction of another original, glamorous, and expensive



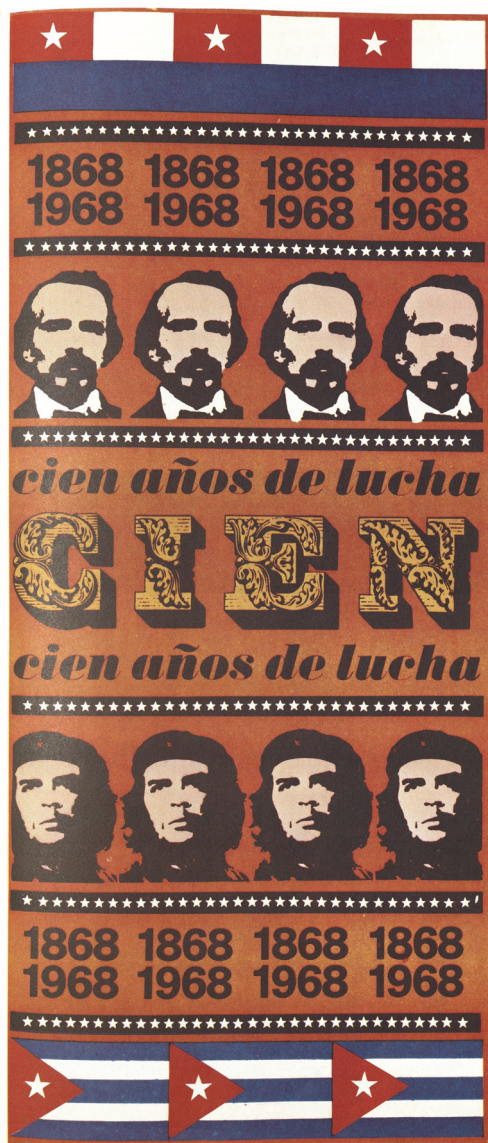
building like that one is hardly unreasonable. But the conflict of utility (and economic rationality) versus beauty seems hardly to have affected the policy toward posters—perhaps because poster production represents much less of all expenditure, and seems more obviously useful; and because “individuality” is traditionally a less important norm of poster esthetics than it is in modern literature, cinema, or architecture.

In their beauty, their stylishness, and their transcendence of either mere utility or mere propaganda, these posters give evidence of a revolutionary society that is not repressive and philistine. The posters demonstrate that Cuba has a culture that is alive, international in orientation, and relatively free of the kind of bureaucratic interference that has blighted the arts in practically every other country where a communist revolution has come to power. Still, one cannot automatically take these attractive aspects of the Cuban Revolution as all organic part of revolutionary ideology and practice. It could be argued that the relatively high degree of freedom enjoyed by Cuban artists, however admirable, is not part of a revolutionary redefinition of the artist, but does no more than perpetuate one of the highest values claimed for the artist in bourgeois society. More generally, the liveliness and openness of Cuban culture does not mean that Cuba necessarily possesses a revolutionary culture.

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Cuban posters reflect the revolutionary communist ethic of Cuba in one obvious respect, of course. Every revolutionary society seeks to limit the type, if not the content, of public signs (if not actually to assure centralized control over them)—a limitation that follows logically on the rejection of the consumer society, with its phony free-choice among goods clamoring to be bought and entertainments demanding to be sampled. But are the Cuban posters “revolutionary” in any further sense than this? As has already been noted, they are not revolutionary as that idea is used by the modernist movement in the arts. Good as they are, the Cuban posters are not artistically radical or revolutionary. They are too eclectic for that. (But perhaps no posters are, given the tradition of stylistic parasitism in poster-making of all genres.) Neither can they be considered manifestations of a politically revolutionary conception of art, beyond the fact that many though hardly all of the posters illustrate the political ideas, memories, and hopes of the revolution.

Cuba has not solved the problem of creating a new, revolutionary art for a new, revolutionary society—assuming that indeed a revolutionary



*Cien Años de Lucha* (One Hundred Years of Struggle);  
reprinted from *The Art of Revolution: 96 Posters from Cuba*, p. 15

society *needs* its own kind of art. Some radicals, of course, believe that it does not, that it is a mistake to think that a revolutionary society needs a revolutionary art (as bourgeois society had bourgeois art). In this view, the revolution need not and should not reject bourgeois culture since this culture, in the arts as well as the sciences, is in fact the highest form of culture. All that the revolution should do with bourgeois culture is democratize it, making it available to everyone and not just a socially privileged minority. It is an attractive argument, but unfortunately too unhistorical to be convincing. Undoubtedly, there are many elements of the culture of bourgeois society that should be retained and incorporated into a revolutionary society. But one cannot ignore the sociological roots and ideological function of that culture. From a historical perspective, it seems much more likely that, precisely as bourgeois society achieved its remarkable “hegemony” through the splendid achievements of bourgeois culture, a revolutionary society must establish new, equally persuasive and complex forms of culture. Indeed, according to the great Italian Marxist Antonio Gramsci—the foremost exponent of this view—the very overthrow of the bourgeois state must wait until there is first a nonviolent revolution in civil society. Culture, more than the strictly political and economic institutions of the state, is the medium of this necessary civil revolution. It is, above all, a change in people’s perceptions of themselves, which is created by culture. It is self-evident to Gramsci that the revolution demands a new culture.

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In Gramsci’s sense of a change of culture, Cuban poster art does not embody radically new values. The values represented in the posters are internationalism, diversity, eclecticism, moral seriousness, commitment to artistic excellence, sensuality—the positive sum of Cuba’s refusal of philistinism or crude utilitarianism. These are mainly *critical* values, arrived at by rejecting two opposing models: the vulgar commerciality of American poster art (and its imitations in the billboards multiplying throughout Western Europe and Latin America), on the one side, and the drab ugliness of Soviet socialist realism and the folkloric and hagiographic naivete of Chinese political graphics, on the other. Nevertheless, the fact that these are critical values, those of a society in transition, does not mean they cannot be, in a stronger or special context, also revolutionary values.

Talking about revolutionary values in the abstract, without being historically specific, is superficial. In Cuba, one of the most powerful

51 revolutionary values is internationalism. The promotion of internationalist consciousness plays almost as large a role in Cuba as the promotion of nationalist consciousness plays in most other left-revolutionary societies (like North Vietnam, North Korea, and China) and insurgent movements. The revolutionary clan of Cuba is profoundly rooted in its *not* settling for the achievements of a national revolution, but being passionately committed to the cause of revolution on a global scale. Thus Cuba is probably the only communist country in the world where people really care about Vietnam. Ordinary citizens, as well as public officials, frequently make a point of belittling the severity of their own struggle and hardships, comparing them with those endured for decades by the Vietnamese. Among the mammoth posters that dominate the great Plaza de la Revolucion in Havana, equal prominence is given to a poster of Che, a poster honoring the struggle of the Vietnamese people, and a poster hailing the goal of ten million tons for the 1970 sugar harvest. Those posters which illustrate Cuba's own revolutionary history are not intended simply to inspire patriotic feeling, but to demonstrate the Cuban link with international struggle. Equal in importance on the political calendar to the days commemorating the martyrdoms in Cuba's own history are the days of solidarity with other peoples, for each of which a poster is designed. (Examples, in this book, are posters for the days of solidarity with the people of Zimbabwe, of the United States' black colony, of Latin America, and of Vietnam.) An inverse measure of this theme of solidarity is the fact that the Cuban political posters rarely divide the world into black and white, friends and enemies—like the “Love the Fatherland” posters in East Germany, or the Vietnamese poster images of the American “pirate aggressor.” The imagery on the Cuban political posters is almost always affirmative, without being sentimental. Practically none are devoted to invective or caricature. As few of them resort to crude exhortation, practically none depend on Manichean moral polarizing.

Thus, even the very eclecticism of the Cuban poster artists has a political dimension, in that it too reaffirms Cuba's distinctive refusal of national chauvinism. The claims of the nationalist versus the internationalist perspective is perhaps the most acute issue in Cuban art today. In almost all the arts, there is a sharp division of attitude on this issue, which tends to run—like so many conflicts these days—along generational lines. The rule seems to be that whatever the art form, the older generation tends to be nationalistic, that is, folkloric,

more “realistic,” while the younger generation tends to be internationally minded, avant-garde,” abstract.” In music, for instance, the split is particularly severe. The younger composers are drawn to Boulez and Henze, while the older composers press for a distinctively Cuban music based on Afro-Cuban rhythms and instrumentation and the *danson* tradition. But in the poster, as in the cinema, such a split hardly exists—a fact which may have helped to make these art forms particularly distinguished in Cuba now. Nobody from an older generation is making movies, because the only movies made before 1959 were stag films (Cuba was North America’s principal supplier). In less than a decade, the new Cuban film industry has already turned out several very good feature-length fiction films and some impressive short films and documentaries. All Cuban films reflect a diverse range of foreign influences, both from the European art cinema and the American underground. And all Cuban poster art, also lacking any roots prior to the revolution and similarly free of a conflict between older and younger artists, is international in influence.

Contrary to what older artists in Cuba often allege, it is internationalism—not nationalism—in art which best serves the revolution’s cause, even its secondary task of building a proper sense of national pride. Cuba suffers profoundly from a complex of underdevelopment, as the novelist Edmundo Desnoes has called it. This is not just a national neurosis, but a real historical fact. One cannot overestimate the damage influenced on Cuba by American cultural, as well as economic, imperialism. Now, though isolated and besieged by the United States, Cuba is open to the whole world. Internationalism is the most effective and most liberating response to the problem of Cuba’s cultural lag. The fact that the theaters in Havana play Albee as well as Brecht is neither a sign that the Cubans are still hung-up on bourgeois art nor a symptom of revisionist soft-mindedness (as a similar-looking cultural policy is in nonmilitant Yugoslavia). It is a revolutionary act for Cuba, at this historical moment, to continue to accommodate works of bourgeois culture from all over the world, and to draw on the aesthetic styles perfected in bourgeois culture. This accommodation does not mean that the Cubans don’t want a cultural revolution, but only that they are pursuing this goal in their own terms, according to their own experience and needs. There can be no universal recipe for cultural revolution. And in determining what a cultural revolution would mean for a given country, one must take into particular account the available

resources of the national past. Cultural revolution in China, with its magnificent culture stretching back through the millennia of history, must necessarily have different norms than a cultural revolution in Cuba. Apart from the strong survivals of Yoruba and other African cultures, Cuba possesses only the bastardized remnants of the culture of oppressors—first the Spanish, then the Americans. Cuba has no long, prideful national history to look back on, as do the Vietnamese. The history of the country is little else than the history of one hundred years of struggle, from Marti and Maceo to Fidel and Che. Becoming international is then Cuba's indigenous path to cultural revolution.

This concept of cultural revolution is, of course, not the usual one. Far more common is the view which assigns to art in a revolutionary society the task of purifying, renewing, and glorifying the culture. Such a demand on art is a familiar part of the program of most fascist regimes, from Germany and Italy in the 1930s to the Greek colonels today, as well as of Soviet Russia for over forty years. In its overtly fascist form, this project is usually conceived along strictly nationalist lines. Cultural revolution means national purification: eliminating unassimilable, dissonant art from the nation's cultural past and foreign corruptions of the country's language. It means national self-renewal, that is, reconceiving the nation's past so that it seems to lend support to the new goals proposed by the revolution. Such a program for cultural revolution always criticizes the old bourgeois culture of the prerevolutionary society as being both elitist and essentially empty, ephemeral, or formalist. This culture must be purged. A new culture is summoned to take its place, one that all citizens will be capable of appreciating, whose function will be to increase the individual's identification with the nation, to simplify consciousness in the hope of reducing private disaffection (by reducing the dissonance of ideas and moods and styles in the country), and to promote civic virtue.<sup>1</sup> This, perhaps the most common notion of cultural revolution, is the policy not only of fascist revolutions, but, all too often, of societies that have mounted revolutions from the left. But genuine left-revolutionary societies and movements have, or ought to have, a quite different notion of cultural revolution. The proper goal of a left-wing cultural revolution is not to increase national pride, but to transcend it. Such a revolution would not seek to systematically revive old cultural forms (nor practice selective censorship of the past), but to invent new forms. Its purpose would not be to renew or purify consciousness, but to change it—to raise or educate people to a new consciousness.

According to the view of some radicals, the only authentic forms of revolutionary art are those produced (and experienced) collectively; or at least, it is felt, revolutionary art forms cannot wholly originate from the work of a single individual. In this view, the organizing of collective spectacles would be the quintessential form of revolutionary art—from the spectacles celebrating the Goddess of Reason devised by Jacques-Louis David during the French Revolution to the long Chinese film epic of the early 1960s, *The East is Red*. But the example of Cuba, which has pretty much rejected the organization of spectacles as a valuable form of revolutionary activity, leads one to question this view. Spectacle, the favorite public art form of most revolutionary societies, whether of the right or the left, is implicitly understood by the Cubans as repressive. What replaces a taste for revolutionary spectacle is the fascination with the scenario of revolutionary action. It may be the scenario of a great public project, like the anti-illiteracy campaign in 1960, the settling by militant youth of the Isle of Pines, and the 1970 sugar harvest. (In such projects, the whole population, as far as it is feasible, participates—but not as something seen, something organized for the eye of a viewer.) Or it may be the scenario of an exemplary struggle by an individual, in the history of Cuban liberation, or by a movement abroad with whose agon the Cubans identify and by whose victories they feel morally nourished. What interests the Cubans, as a resource for political art, is the dramatically exemplary aspect of radical activity. The dramatically valid spectacle may be the life and death of Che, or the Vietnamese struggle, or the ordeal of Bobby Seale. For radical activity can take place anywhere, everywhere—not just in Cuba. This is the fundamental dramaturgic identification that fuels their internationalism.

In this political conception, poster art plays a particularly useful, compact role. Political posters in Cuba give a lexicon of the important scenarios—the struggle of blacks in the United States, the guerrilla movement in Mozambique, Vietnam, and so forth, down a long list—which are going on right now. The retrospective themes of many of the Cuban posters are no less international in orientation. A poster asking people to remember the victims of Hiroshima has the same purpose as a poster recalling the martyrs of the Moncada assault in 1956 which launched the Cuban revolution. Political posters in Cuba function to enlarge moral consciousness, to attach the sense of moral responsibility to an *increasing* number of issues. This enterprise may be



regarded as impractical, gratuitous, even quixotic for a small, beleaguered island of seven million people barely managing to subsist under the American siege. The same spirit of gratuitousness is revealed, in a specific instance, in the decision to make beautiful posters advertising cultural events which everyone wants to see and will attend anyway. One only hopes the Cuban genius for the impractical moral ambition, for limited, seemingly arbitrary, yet extravagant gratifications of the sense—from the posters to the Coppelia ice-cream palaces—can be sustained, that it will not diminish. For just this taste for the gratuitous gives life in Cuba a feeling of spaciousness, despite all the severe internal and external restraints; and gives the Cuban Revolution, more than any other communist revolution in progress, its inventiveness, youth, humor, and extravagance.

### III.

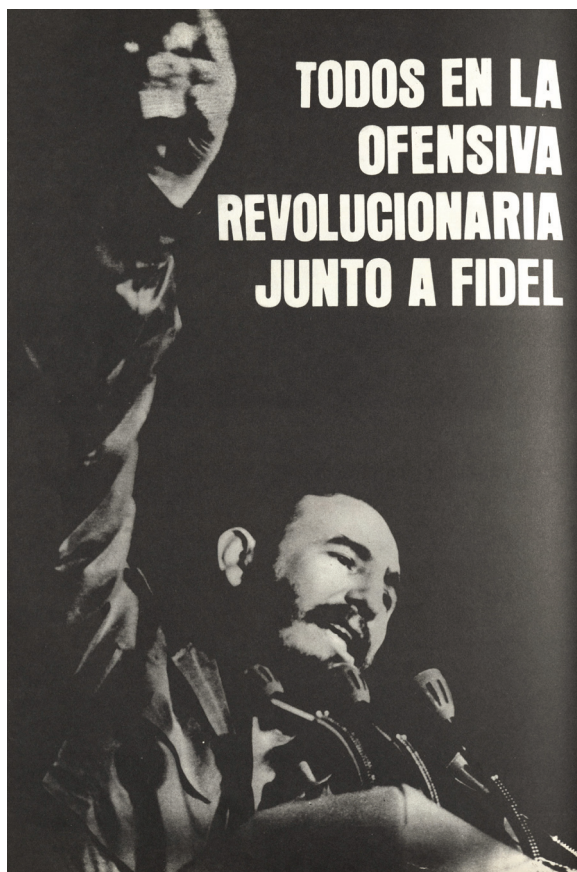
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If the task of a cultural revolution and of conceiving a politically revolutionary role for artists is full of difficulties and contradictions *within* the context of all ongoing political revolution, the prospects for a genuine cultural revolution outside (or before) a political one are even more problematic. The history of virtually all the ostensibly revolutionary movements in art and culture to have arisen in non- or prerevolutionary societies is hardly encouraging. It is, more or less, simply the history of cooption. The fate of the Bauhaus movement is only one example, among many, of how revolutionary forms of culture arising within bourgeois society are first attacked, then neutralized, and finally absorbed by that society. Capitalism transforms all objects, including art, into commodities. And the poster—including the revolutionary poster—is hardly exempt from this iron rule of cooption.

At the present time, poster art is in a period of renaissance. Posters have come to be regarded as mysterious cultural objects, whose flatness and literalness only deepen their resonance, as well as inexhaustibly rich emblems of the society. In recent years, the eye of film-makers has turned more and more to posters. They appear as magical, partly opaque references; think of the use of posters as key objects in almost all Godard's films. They are cited as eloquent and exact sociological and moral evidence; a recent example is Antonioni's tour of Los Angeles billboard fantasies in the early part of *Zabriskie Point*. (This new, enriched role of the poster in movie iconology since 1960 has little to do with the traditional use of the poster in cinema narrative—to

convey briefly some necessary information—that begins with the shot of the poster of Irma Vep, played by Musidora, in Feuillade's *Les Vampires* [1915].) But the extent to which poster images come to be more and more frequently incorporated within other arts is only one, fairly specialized, index of interest. Posters have appeared increasingly interesting not only as points of reference, but as objects in themselves. Posters have become one of the most ubiquitous kinds of cultural objects—prized partly because they are cheap, unpretentious, “popular” art. The current renaissance of poster art derives its strength less from any more original type of production or more intensive public use of posters than from the astonishing surge of interest in collecting posters, in domesticating them.

The current interest differs in several ways from the first wave of poster collecting, which started two decades after posters began to appear. First, it is simply much bigger in scale, as befits a later, more advanced stage in the era of mechanical reproduction. Poster-collecting in the 1890s may have been fashionable, but it was hardly, as it is now, a mass addiction. Second, a much broader range of posters is being collected. The collections of the 1890s tended to be from the collector's own country. Recent poster collections tend to be ostentatiously international. And it is hardly accidental that the beginning of the craze for collecting posters, in the mid-1950s, coincides with the rising tide of postwar American tourism in Europe, which has now made regular trips across the Atlantic as banal a prerogative of middle-class life here as vacations at American seaside resorts had been in an earlier age. This archetypal public object, once collected by only a small band of connoisseurs, has now become a standard private object in the living rooms, bedrooms, bathrooms, and kitchens of the voting American and European bourgeoisie. In such collections, the poster is not simply—as it once was—a new, exotic kind of art object. It has a more special function. As poster art is itself usually parasitic on other forms of art, the new fashion of collecting posters constitutes a meta-parasitism—on the world itself, or a highly stylized image of it. Posters furnish a portable image of the world. A poster is like a miniature of an event: a quotation—from life, or from high art. Modern poster-collecting is related to the modern phenomenon of mass tourism. As collected now, the poster becomes a souvenir of an event. But between the poster of El Codobes or the great Rembrandt retrospective hanging on the wall and the photographs the middle-class tourist took



*Todos en la Ofensiva Revolucionaria Junto a Fidel (All Together on the Revolutionary Offensive with Fidel); reprinted from *The Art of Revolution: 96 Posters from Cuba*, p. 24*

of his summer vacation in Italy mounted in an album, there is one important difference. Somebody had to be there to take the photographs; nobody had to go to Seville or Amsterdam to buy the poster. More often than not, the collector never actually visited the art exhibit or attended the bullfight advertised in the posters he has hanging on his wall. The posters are, rather, substitutes for experience. Like the photographs taken by a tourist, the poster functions as a souvenir of an event. But the event is often which has taken place in the past and which the collector first learns about when he acquires the poster. Since what the poster illustrates is often not part of his personal history, the collection becomes instead a set of souvenirs of imaginary experiences.

What spectacles and events and people one has chosen to hang in miniaturized form on one's wall does not merely constitute a facile kind of vicarious experience. It is also, plainly, a form of homage. By means of posters, everyone can easily and quickly select a personal pantheon—even if he cannot be said to have created it, since most poster buyers are confined to choosing among the numerically limited, already selected assortment of mass-produced posters offered for sale. What posters one chooses to nail up in his living room indicates, as clearly as his choice of a painting might have in the past, the *taste* of the owner of the private space. It is, sometimes, a form of cultural boasting—a particularly cheap example of a use to which culture has traditionally been put in all class societies: to indicate or affirm or lay claim to a given social status. Often the purpose is more cool, less pushy than this. As a cultural trophy, the display of a poster in one's private space is, at the very least, a clear means of self-identification to visitors, a code (for those who know it) by which the various members of a cultural subgroup announced themselves to each other and recognize each other. The display of good taste in the old bourgeois sense has given way to the display of a kind of calculated bad taste—which, when it accords with or is just in advance of fashion, becomes a sign of good taste. One does not necessarily lend one's approval to the subjects represented in the posters hanging oil his walls. It suffices that one indicates all awareness of the worldly value, with some nuances, of these subjects. In this complex sense posters become, when collected, a cultural trophy. Far from indicating any simple approval or identification with the subject, the range of posters displayed in someone's private space may mean no more than a kind of lexicon of nostalgia and irony.

As might be expected, even in the relatively brief history of the modern revival of poster collecting, the choice of the kind of posters to hang is subject to marked changes in fashion. The bullfight posters and posters of Paris art exhibitions, almost ubiquitous a decade ago, evidence rear-guard taste now. Some time ago these were overtaken by Mucha posters and by old movie posters (the older the better; Saul Bass posters from the 1950s are too recent). Then came the vogue of posters advertising exhibits by American not European artists (for example, the famous posters of Warhol, Johns, Rauschenberg, and Lichtenstein shows). After that came the rock ballroom posters, which were succeeded by the head posters, for looking at when stoned. Starting in the late 1960s, a major part of collecting interest has shifted

to radical political posters. It seems odd, at first, that the radical political poster has such apparently diverse uses. It appeals to the populations of economically under-developed, ex-colonial societies, many of whom can barely read. It also appeals to the most literate young people in the most advanced industrial nation, the United States, who have challenged the preeminence of discursive language in favor of more emotive, nonverbal forms of saying.

In the succession of poster fashions it is rare for one type of poster to displace another. Rather, the interest in a new poster subject is added on to the already existing interest in others. So the audience grows. Every big city in America and most major cities in Europe now have numerous places where posters can be bought. The head shop is one type of outlet common in the United States; its distinctive, if narrow, mixture of wares includes—besides posters—cigarette papers, pipes, roach holders, strobe and op lights, peace symbol jewelry, and buttons printed with satiric, insolent, or obscene slogans. Posters are now sold in the rear of discount bookstores and some metropolitan drug stores.

59 For more serious or at least more affluent collectors, stores like Posters Original Unlimited in New York City stock only posters; these come from all over the world. Recently, though, the mass printing of large blow-ups of photographs has somewhat cut into the poster market, while serving much the same function. These poster-size photographs are even cheaper, and therefore more widely sold, than the mass-reproduced reprint runs of posters. Perhaps, too, the poster-size photograph is inherently more attractive than a poster to many younger people—members of a generation marked by its profound experiences of non-verbal psychic states, notably through rock music and drugs—because it is a pure image: direct, frontal. The photograph posters are more neutral, more low-keyed, simply by virtue of always being black-and-white, than posters, which have colors. Posters still carry some residual traces of their origin in, and influences by, high arts such as painting. But the big blow-up photographs of famous people that are now being hung up on the wall, poster fashion, are about as neutral and impersonal as any image can be (though the image is of a person), and carry not the slightest stigma of art.

In collecting posters, there seems to be no risk of cultural indigestion. As in the crowded, haphazard arrangements of public space for which posters are originally designed, each poster in the collector's casual private space is innocent of its neighbor. A reprint of a poster

from the Russian Revolution, bought at a Marboro bookstore, may hang alongside a poster sold at the Museum of Modern Art of its Magritte show several years ago. The same eclecticism, the same disregard of any notion of compatibility, marks the use of poster-size photographs. These are almost all photographs of celebrities, a category into which Huey Newton is fitted as easily as Garbo. Radical political leaders have the same status as movie stars. Though one comes from the world of politics and the other from the world of entertainment, both are celebrities, both are beautiful. This standard, of popularity or glamour, by which photographs are selected for reproduction in poster-size and marketed is reflected in their use. The poster is an icon—as it is in Cuba, where practically every home and office building has at least one poster of Che. But in the contemporary style of collecting posters (and poster-size photographs) almost uniform throughout the capitalist world, from Boston to Berlin, from Madison to Milan, the icons represent many kinds of admiration. These juxtapositions, whereby Ho Chi Minh is in the bathroom and Bogart is in the bedroom, while W. C. Fields hangs next to Marx over the dining room table, produces a kind of moral vertigo. Such morally startling collages indicate a very particular way of viewing the world, now endemic among the educated young bourgeois of America and Western Europe, that is one part sentimentality, one part irony, one part detachment.

Thus, collecting posters is related to tourism in yet another way than the one already mentioned. Modern tourism may be described as a means for a kind of symbolic appropriation of other cultures which takes place in a brief time, conducted in a state of functional alienation from (or nonparticipation in) the life of the country visited. Countries are reduced to places of “interest,” and these are listed in guidebooks and graded. This procedure allows the tourist, once he has touched on these principal places, to feel he has actually had contact with the country visited. That specifically modern (indeed post-World War II) way of traveling which is modern mass tourism is something quite different from foreign travel as understood in earlier periods of bourgeois culture. Unlike travel in its traditional forms, modern tourism turns traveling into something more like buying. The traveler accumulates countries visited as he accumulates consumer goods. The process involves no commitment, and one experience never contradicts or excludes or genuinely modifies the one that came before or will come after. This is exactly the form of the modern avidity for the poster.

Collecting posters is a species of emotional and moral tourism, a taste for which precludes, or at least contradicts, serious political commitment. The collecting of posters is a way of anthologizing the world, in such a fashion that one emotion or loyalty tends to cancel out another. Events and human beings represented in a poster are miniaturized or scaled down in a stronger sense than the literal, graphic one. The desire to miniaturize events and people incarnated in the current vogue of poster-collecting in bourgeois society is a desire to scale down the world itself, particularly what is alluring and disturbing in it.

61 In the case of radical political posters, this miniaturization of the events or persons incarnated in poster-collecting represents a subtle or not so subtle form of cooption. The poster, at its origins a means of selling a commodity, is itself turned into a commodity. The same process is taking place in the publication of this book—which involves a double reproduction (and miniaturization) of the Cuban posters. First, an anthology is made of the available Cuban posters. Then, those which have been chosen are reproduced in a scaled-down size. This group of posters is then converted into a new medium, a book, which is prefaced, typographically packaged, printed, distributed, and sold. The present use made of the Cuban posters is thus at least several steps away from its original use, and involves a tacit betrayal of that use. For, whatever their ultimate artistic and political value, the Cuban posters arise from the genuine situation of a people undergoing profound revolutionary change. Those who produce this book, those like most people who will buy it and read it, live in counter-revolutionary societies, societies with a flair for ripping any object out of context and turning it into an object of consumption. Thus, it would not be altogether just to praise those who have made this book. Especially Cuba's foreign friends, as well as those who merely lean toward a favorable view of the Cuban Revolution, should not feel altogether comfortable as they look through it. The book is itself a good example of how all things in this society get turned into commodities, into forms of (usually) miniaturized spectacle and into objects of consumption. It is not possible, say, simply to regard the "contents" of this book with sympathy, because the notion that the Cuban posters make up the book's content is really a spurious one. However much those who have made this book may like to think of it simply as presenting the poster art of Cuba, to a wider audience than ever before, the fact remains that the Cuban posters reproduced in this book have thereby been converted into something



other than what they are—or were ever meant to be. They are now cultural objects, offered up for our delectation. They have become one more item in the cultural smorgasbord provided in affluent bourgeois society. Such feasting eventually dulls all capacity for real commitment, while the left-liberal bourgeoisie of such countries is lulled into thinking that it is learning something, having its commitments and sympathies extended.

There is no way out of the trap, of course, as long as we—with our unlimited resources for waste, for destruction, and for mechanical reproductions—are here, and the Cubans are there. No way out is possible as long as we are curious, as long as we remain intoxicated with cultural good, as long as we live inside our restless, negative sensibilities. The corruption embodied in this book is subtle, scarcely unique, and in the sum of things hardly even important. But is a real corruption nevertheless. *Caveat emptor*, Viva Fidel.

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Originally published in Dugald Stermer, *The Art of Revolution: 96 Posters from Cuba* (New York: McGraw-Hill, 1970). Text taken here from: *Looking Closer 3*, Michael Bierut, ed. (Allworth Press, New York, 1999), pp. 196-218.

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## Notes

1. A concise, and little known, example of this idea of cultural revolution is the speech Pirandello gave in Rome in October 1935, in the presence of Mussolini, at the inauguration of the new theatrical season at the Teatro Argentina. It can be found in the *Tulane Drama Review*, no. 44. ... A less emphatically nationalist form of this right-wing conception of cultural revolution is used by conservatives, like Andre Mairaux during his tenure as Minister of Culture under De Gaulle. For a devastating analysis of Mairaux's conception of bringing elite culture to the masses, and of the ideological purposes of the Gaullist conservative politics of culture, see the essay by Violette Morin, "Le culture majuscule: Andre Mairaux," in *Communications*, no. 14, 1969.

# ***Sex in an Epidemic as AIDS Archive Activism***

**An Interview with  
Jean Carlomusto**

**ANN CVETKOVICH**

**AS A LONGTIME AIDS ACTIVIST AND MEDIAMAKER, JEAN CARLOMUSTO** has been at the forefront of a movement noted for its innovative use of video as an integral part of activism. Cultural theorist and ACT UP member Douglas Crimp has used the term “cultural activism” to describe the video camera’s ubiquitous presence at demonstrations, as well as the sophisticated use of graphic design and print culture by AIDS activists.<sup>1</sup> Carlomusto was a member of the Testing the Limits and DIVA-TV video collectives, which used newly available video technologies not only to document and more widely publicize direct action, but to create new forms of media activism by extending the life of a demonstration and its messages.<sup>2</sup> *Testing the Limits: NYC* (1987) documented early responses to AIDS activism as well as the formation

of ACT UP in 1987. DIVA-TV, a collective affiliated with ACT UP, produced videos about key ACT UP actions, including *Target City Hall* (1989) and *Stop the Church* (1990), which served to publicize and promote the tactics of direct action. Carlomusto also worked at Gay Men's Health Crisis (GMHC), where she and Gregg Bordowitz produced the *Living With AIDS* cable television series, which made cultural production integral to providing health care and social services. GMHC's *Safer Sex Shorts* (1989), for example, presented safe sex in openly erotic ways that embraced pornography, *SIM*, and cruising. Another GMHC video, *Doctors, Liars, and Women* (1988), showcased Carlomusto's work with the ACT UP Women's Caucus by focusing on their demonstration against *Cosmopolitan* magazine for its claim that women are not at risk for AIDS through heterosexual intercourse.

Jean Carlomusto's most recent video, *Sex in an Epidemic* (2010) (with Shanti Avirgan as associate producer), draws quite literally on her longtime career as an AIDS media activist by reusing footage from this archive in order to keep it alive and sustain its meanings.<sup>3</sup> Using a personal archive of tapes she made for *Testing the Limits*, DIVA-TV, and GMHC (as well as from other sources such as the Lesbian Herstory Archives collection of tapes by the video activist group the Love Collective), Carlomusto revisits early responses to the AIDS crisis in the gay male community that led to the invention of safer sex and to a remarkable AIDS activist movement in order to claim this history as central to understanding contemporary sexual politics. Especially compelling is the reminder of how frightening and devastating the early years of the health crisis were, when people were dying with no idea why and with no information about how to halt the transmission of what had not yet even been named as a virus. Carlomusto also uses the retrospective power of archival documentary to provide a broad context for this moment and to link past and present. She situates the history of safer sex in relation to the post-World War II sexual revolution in the United States and the feminist reproductive rights movement, connects the early AIDS crisis to debates over sex education and abstinence-only policies during the Clinton and Bush administrations, and explores the legacies of AIDS activism in contemporary struggles over HIV/AIDS prevention that are now global in scope. She seeks to make the history of queer sexual activism central to a politics of prevention justice that remains relevant now not only in the battle against HIV/AIDS, but in efforts to create more honest

and open sexual cultures. In addition to making more visible a history that is in danger of being forgotten, she articulates a vision of a queer sexual politics in which public sex education could continue to benefit from the insights of early AIDS activism. *Sex in An Epidemic* also has a memorial function, preserving the images and the work of those who struggled to create safer sex; to this end, Carlomusto uses footage she taped for GMHC's oral history project, which includes interviews with key GMHC leaders that are especially valuable, because many of them have since died. Carlomusto's emotional investment in the archival footage contributes to its political and historical value.

65 Less to be expected, perhaps, is that *Sex in an Epidemic* also shows the influence of the more personal body of work that Carlomusto has produced alongside of and in dialogue with her activist media, including *L Is for the Way You Look* (1990), about lesbian visibility, *To Catch a Glimpse* (1997), about the secret of her grandmother's death from a botched abortion, *Shatzi Is Dying* (2000), about the death of her dog and burnout from AIDS activism, and *Monte Cassino* (2003), about her Italian father's experience of bombing in Italy during World War II.<sup>4</sup> This autoethnographic work manifests a queer commitment to the historical significance of personal experience, and Carlomusto often uses both personal and public archives in the videos, incorporating material such as family photographs because it is emotionally meaningful. The influence of Carlomusto's more personal work is present in *Sex in an Epidemic's* efforts to keep the history of AIDS activism alive, not just as a fading or distant memory, but as a vital resource, by reusing and recirculating its substantial documentary archive. She practices a version of what Alex Juhasz has called "queer archive activism," creating a new generation of AIDS media activism by recontextualizing and reviving earlier media.<sup>5</sup>

Our conversation, which took place on June 25, 2009 and is transcribed here, underscores *Sex in an Epidemic's* argument that people having sex and then talking about it in public constitutes a form of nongovernmental politics. As a lesbian and a feminist with a pro-sex sensibility, Carlomusto describes the powerful appeal of gay male sex cultures that are open about sexuality. At the heart of *Sex in an Epidemic* is the insistence that this early moment remains relevant, that we have not yet learned how to grapple with the challenges that were faced by gay men encountering not only an epidemic, but homophobia and fear of sex, and who drew on intimate experience and

semipublic sexual networks to figure out what to do in the absence of any publicly available information. Men such as Richard Berkowitz, one of the early advocates of how to have sex in an epidemic, were hustlers and club goers who figured out that there is lots of sexual activity that is not dangerous sex, and that promiscuity and sex are not the same thing. (In 1983, Berkowitz coauthored with Michael Callen and Joseph Sonnabend the pamphlet *How to Have Sex in an Epidemic* that provides crucial inspiration for Carlomusto.) *Sex in an Epidemic* chronicles the grassroots efforts through which they were able to take this message to others, forging a cultural activism in which pornography met social work in support groups where men could reclaim sex at a time when it seemed to be taken away from them. They used forms of cultural activism—safer-sex comics, film screenings, and media that Carlomusto herself produced—in order to make a public culture out of the knowledge derived from their intimate lives. Carlomusto uses the documentary history of *Sex in an Epidemic* to suggest that these lessons created by gay men in stigmatized and vulnerable social positions remain relevant to the present, when ordinary people continue to make significant interventions to change people's daily sexual practices. She creates a queer version of what sexual knowledge and education might look like.

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A key concept promoted by Carlomusto in the video is prevention justice, the rallying cry of CHAMP (Community HIV/AIDS Mobilization Project), one of the organizations influenced by ACT UP that Carlomusto documents in the closing section of *Sex in an Epidemic*. "Prevention justice" is a broad term for the complex systemic changes required fully to address and eliminate AIDS, including a politics of safer sex that acknowledges the messiness of sex, rather than trying to eradicate it, and that continues to find ways to create media that are sexy and affectively meaningful. CHAMP shows the influence not only of AIDS activism of the late 1980s and early 1990s, but also of the global AIDS activist movement of 2000 and beyond, which was catalyzed by the World AIDS Conference in Durban in 2000 and the United Nations Special Session on HIV/AIDS in 2001, both of which inspired new transnational coalitions dedicated to making treatment for HIV/AIDS and health care available across global economic divides.<sup>6</sup> At a 2007 demonstration in Atlanta, CHAMP held up puzzle pieces that named the interlocking elements of a program for HIV/AIDS prevention, including free condoms, syringe exchange,

racial justice, housing for all, equity for women, drug policy reform, economic justice, honest sex ed, prevention in prisons, valuing LGBT lives, health care for all, a national AIDS strategy, research, harm reduction, and immigration rights. *Sex in an Epidemic* performs the important work of remembering a lineage of queer AIDS activist work that aims to destigmatize sex and that continues to have relevance now, even as it must be transformed by work in a range of different communities, including people of color, prisoners, and those outside the U.S.

I was delighted to interview Carlomusto in order to let her speak for herself, just as she has enabled others to speak and be witnesses and in order to create another form of activist archive. Presenting Carlomusto's newest work in this format also seemed especially appropriate because it was an opportunity to follow up on my previous interviews with her as part of an oral history project on lesbians in ACT UP.<sup>7</sup> In that earlier project, I wanted to create an archive of lesbian participation in ACT UP so as to prevent the loss of that history, and I also wanted to suggest the ongoing legacies of activism by asking Carlomusto and others how their work and lives continued to be affected by their involvement in AIDS activism into the following decade. The genre of the interview allowed me to explore the personal and affective investments in activism that might not be apparent in more public forums, such as demonstrations and documentary media. Interviewing Carlomusto about *Sex in an Epidemic* provided an opportunity to continue that conversation by exploring how she continues to make use of AIDS activist media some twenty years after some of the footage was originally filmed, not only in order to make history, but in order to make new activist interventions.

**ANN CVETKOVICH:** Why did you want to make *Sex in An Epidemic [SE]*, and how does it emerge from your history as an AIDS media activist?

**JEAN CARLOMUSTO:** I always wanted to do a piece about the early safer-sex movement. In 1986, I started volunteering for GMHC [Gay Men's Health Crisis]. I was the projectionist for *Chance of a Lifetime*, an early safer-sex video produced by Ray Jacobs in 1985 for GMHC, which eroticized safer sex and drew on pornography for inspiration. I had so much fun projecting the film for weekend workshops in the auditorium of the High School for the Humanities, where the projector screen felt like a locus of all the sexual fear, anxiety, and hope of the

moment. People were talking about sex, and in a very loving way. They were saying we can do this, this isn't going to end our sex lives, we can still be sexual, we just have to think about ourselves and each other. We have to talk about sex and find ways to make it safer. It was an amazing achievement.

I learned about all these sexual practices that I didn't know before. Part of the men's process was to think about all the things you can do that aren't sucking and fucking. All of a sudden, they would talk about shrimping ... do you know what that is? [*Laughter.*] Sucking on toes. There were all these great practices, and it was just so cool to be honest about them. I felt like I owed a debt to that kind of thinking.

I also wanted to witness what went on. Joey Leonte, who was the director of publications for GMHC, was the one who hired me. He was one of three bosses I had at GMHC who died eventually of AIDS. He was always very special to me, because he recruited me out of NYU when GMHC had no equipment, no anything. [*Sex in an Epidemic* includes footage of Leonte talking about GMHC's low-cost production and distribution of safer-sex comics and of Jesse Helms condemning them on the floor of the Senate.]

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The debates within the community in the beginning of the epidemic were intense. The conflicts between people who wanted to close the bathhouses or keep them open or the differences in politics between Richard Berkowitz and GMHC were at some points very acrimonious. [Berkowitz is a hustler turned safer-sex activist who features prominently in *Sex in an Epidemic* and whose pamphlet *How to Have Sex in an Epidemic* was one of the first publications to promote the idea that abstinence was not the only way to prevent HIV.] I tend not to want to get involved with the internal politics. I wanted to tell the story and bring out the differences, but not to judge anybody harshly, because, frankly, I think they're all heroes. I think in that atmosphere anyone who came to the forefront and offered comfort or help to people who were scared shitless, who's to judge them?

*SE* emerges from my life in the context of the epidemic; it's a collection of material from the period during which I was really active in AIDS activism. But I also wanted to bring this historical material into dialogue with current politics and activism around HIV prevention. I can't believe it's 2009 and we have only just perhaps shrugged off the yoke of abstinence policies. The last segment of *SE* looks at prevention justice in a more honest way. Prevention justice is the big net that takes



in comprehensive health education, abstinence, talking honestly about sex, the fact that if people don't have access to condoms, the advice to use them is impossible. If people don't have a home, they are not going to come up with the resources to practice safer sex, if part of their ability to sleep somewhere on any given night is dependent on their ability to trade sex. I see current discussions around HIV prevention as part of a larger continuum of discussion around social-justice issues.

**AC:** One of *SE*'s important points is the connection between early HIV/AIDS activism, especially safer-sex activism, and contemporary abstinence policies. When people debate comprehensive versus abstinence sex education in schools, they don't necessarily bring queer activism or HIV/AIDS activism into those discussions, and the fact that you're linking them is important.

**JC:** We always get left out as the nutty aunt who can't be trusted in public.

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**AC:** For example, as you tell it, the history of sex education in the 1990s and following under Clinton and Bush, such as the forced resignation of Jocelyn Elders from the position of surgeon general in 1994, has important precursors from the 1980s.

**JC:** So few people have ever seen the clip of the statement in support of masturbation as part of sex education that led to Elders's resignation. I really wanted to get the actual clip of her remarks, which were made at the United Nations on World AIDS Day. Shanti Avirgan [Carlomusto's associate producer] is the one who got it from the UN. I had been trying to assemble the clip of what she actually said from fragments (it's not on YouTube) in order to show how Elders was completely undermined and unfairly treated by the media. [Following the clip, *Sex in an Epidemic* includes a collage of the media coverage in which the word "masturbation" is repeated over and over, suggesting how Elders's comments were wrenched out of context in sensationalizing ways.] What she was talking about is just as important today, since only 5 percent of sex education programs are comprehensive.

**AC:** In addition to trying to capture an important moment in the history of the HIV/AIDS epidemic and gay men's responses to it, *SE*

also does a great job of contextualizing that history and connecting it to other issues, such as feminist reproductive politics and contemporary sex-education politics. Can you elaborate on why this early safe-sex activism is so important to other forms of sexual politics?

**JC:** That's one reason I wanted to begin *SE* with some landmarks of the sexual revolution and political issues that have always caused consternation around people's sexuality, such as the Kinsey Report, women's access to abortion, and Masters and Johnson talking about people having sex. The subtext of the whole film is our society's reluctance to talk honestly about sex—they won't deal with it. George Bush didn't want to talk about sex, he wanted to talk about abstinence. He thought the problem is that people have too much sex outside of the confines of marriage. This view negates the sexual lives of so many people.

I wanted to show the continuity between this problem and the early battles we had to fight around AIDS and safer sex. For example, GMHC decided that a great way to reach men was through safer-sex porn. They came up with a very cheap way to do this with eight-page comic books featuring an eroticized fantasy cartoon. Jesse Helms hit the Senate floor three days after over eight hundred thousand queers marched to Washington for rights. He came out with a bill prohibiting any federal money going to anything that promotes sodomy or a homosexual lifestyle and it passed ninety-two to two. This was in 1987, when HIV/AIDS was going through the roof, and we could have saved so many lives if we could have just allowed people to speak honestly to their communities. I'm not saying we're trying to put pornography out everywhere, but the model here was that community-based education works, and it needs to be specific for the populations that are affected. We needed general discussions, but we needed other things, too. This has been the political landscape for talking about sex. No one in government wants to talk honestly about sex or about what it's going to take to lessen drug use in this country.

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**AC:** *SE* suggests that this earlier history remains relevant to the present and what you call "prevention justice." It remains counterintuitive to most people that pornography might be a model for safe-sex education or that the experiences of someone such as Richard Berkowitz working as a hustler might be an important source of knowledge that can feed into our public-health programs.

**JC:** Yes, there are many people out there, making low or no salaries, who come from communities that have come up with great interventions. Waheedah Shabazz-El [a member of ACT UP Philadelphia who is one of the current AIDS activists featured toward the end of *Sex in an Epidemic*] tells the story of how she was not feeling well one day and went to the doctor and was told she had full-blown AIDS. She looked around her community—she is Muslim—and wondered about the rise in HIV rates and started to think about intervention. One of the things she knew is that a lot of people in prison have HIV, and she wanted to make sure that people in the Philadelphia jail system would have condoms provided to them, because there was an ordinance passed in 1987 that condoms should be available. It was awful that this very ordinance was being ignored by law enforcement.

**AC:** I'd like to hear more about how this project continues the work of your other video projects, including not just the activist ones, but the more personal ones, and particularly about how you use your own video archive to make *Sex in an Epidemic*.

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**JC:** I just spent the entire day moving my archive, which consists of tapes in white cardboard boxes. It makes me aware of the preciousness of archival material, because as I get older and the tapes get older, there's a lot of history that I don't think should ever be lost. That's why I try to make use of archival materials, especially if I feel the preciousness of their passing.

*SE* has my sensibility in it, even though I'm less present than in some of my other videos. The way I used the archival footage to go back and forth between Larry Mass and Larry Kramer reminds me of *L Is for the Way You Look* and the story about Dolly Parton at the Reno show. [In *L Is for the Way You Look* (1991), Carlomusto investigates new forms of lesbian visibility and queer fandom by documenting her friends' responses to seeing Dolly Parton in the audience at a performance by the lesbian comic Reno at P.S. 122 in New York.] One person's story either validates or contradicts the next person's, and a kind of narrative is made.

It's also present in the montages, such as the one in which Richard Berkowitz is talking about it being the end of the world. (I think it's 1982.) He has just had a lump biopsied, and he is miserable, and he

puts on Nina Simone's great rendition of "Everything Must Change" from her album *Baltimore*. It's the saddest song of impermanence. I wanted to use archival material from the LOVE collective, which was a fabulous lesbian collective from late 1970s and early 1980s that documented life as it was in New York City at that time. It's a great collection that is housed at the Lesbian Herstory Archives, but a lot of the tapes have never been transferred from three-quarter-inch (which is also known as Umatic tape), and they are in archival danger. I thought it was apropos to use that footage in a segment about fear of mortality.

**AC:** In an earlier conversation, you mentioned "the desire to relive a time through the sadness of its passing."

**JC:** For many of us who were coming of age during that time (or perhaps coming to a late coming of age), there was a real happiness and joy we felt about being honest and out there about who we were. This was such an important time in our lives for coming to an awareness of the power of community, but that power and joy got tied into a lot of grief and sadness when we saw many of our friends die. When you go back and look at some of these images of people in their prime, you can't help but know that so many of the guys in this footage aren't alive. It becomes like watching ghosts of the past. There's a ghostly feeling that is inherent in the moving image. That's why horror films are such a popular genre. There is a ghostliness when you see someone move and speak and you know they're dead. In *To Catch a Glimpse*, I used the comment made by one of the first people to see Lumiere's cinema in 1885—"When this device is made available to the public, everyone will be able to photograph those dear to them, not just in their static form, but with their movements and with speech on their lips; then death will no longer be absolute."

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**AC:** How does *SE* serve a memorial function? In the closing credits, for example, you dedicate the work to AIDS educators who have passed, with additional clips of some of those who have been featured earlier in the video: Joey Leonte, Bob Cecchi, Michael Callen, Jed Mattes, Ray Jacobs, Ortez Alderson, Richard Dunne, Michael Shernoff, and Rodger McFarlane.

**JC:** I've been making this tape for over ten years. I've wanted to make this piece for a long time because so many fabulous AIDS educators that I knew who were dead had struggled up until they got sick to try to prevent people from getting HIV. And they were doing something really amazing because they were trying to do that without making anybody feel bad about themselves. That to me was the magic of what they did. They changed a lot of behavior because they went out into the community and they were who they were and they had a message that was relevant to the men they were speaking to. They had some innovative things that they tried because they knew these guys—they were these guys. They figured guys grew up on porn, so let's make some safer-sex porn.

73 **AC:** I think that conception of safer sex activism as emerging from everyday practices is one way that *Sex in an Epidemic* implicitly defines nongovernmental politics. In our earlier conversation, you said that filling the streets with public emotion is the first step in any radical change—that it isn't going to happen in a government office. You talked about showing the power of people gathering in the streets in the GMHC archival footage from a 1987 candlelight vigil in New York, which you described as emotionally charged material for you.

**JC:** I keep going back to that footage—I've used it in *Shatzi Is Dying* and some other tapes. These vigils were being held everywhere; that was not the only candlelight vigil where people were standing on the streets with candles in their hands at dusk. I keep on going back to that footage because I found that so moving. The footage that I took that day in New York of that candlelight vigil in 1987 was emblematic of the kinds of mass grief that we took into the street as part of what would boil over that year into activism.

**AC:** The focus on safe-sex intimacy in *SE* suggests that change begins with ordinary people and their daily practices, more so than in government policies.

**JC:** I think about the demonstration against *Cosmopolitan* magazine by the women in ACT UP and how we were shocked by how much of an impact we had. We were four or five lesbians in ACT UP who

were having dinner, and one person walked in and said isn't this an awful article [about how heterosexual women are not at risk of HIV transmission through vaginal intercourse], and we started organizing. Maxine Wolfe [one of the founders of the ACT UP Women's Caucus, who is interviewed in *Sex in an Epidemic*] had an important role here, because she was such an experienced activist. Through her leadership, she provided really strong ideas about what was good in terms of organizing. We were going to talk to the doctor first before we ever protested to see if he would publish a retraction. We would have been really happy with that, but he wouldn't budge. So then the next step was planning this action, and all of a sudden, the media happened to pick it up, and then the next thing you knew it was on *Nightline* and it was on *Donahue*, and it became a national issue and change happened. Eventually, a retraction was printed, and we had a lot of time to talk about women and AIDS and risk. That was a good action, because it wasn't just about protest, it was about raising awareness.<sup>8</sup>

**AC:** You made an interesting point about people being able to make a difference even when they were scared, such as gay men inventing safer sex in the early days of the AIDS crisis or Waheedah Shabazz being willing to speak out, despite being in a vulnerable position.

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**JC:** The fear and stigma of the early days was so pervasive. It's amazing that people such as Michael Callen and Steven Berkowitz and Joseph Sonnabend had the guts even to put a theory forward and say you can still have sex but care for one another. And use condoms.

I noticed people in ACT UP who were often doing truly outrageous things would talk about fear beforehand or having nothing to lose. The transition from having the emotion to actually doing something is very liberating. I remember someone getting up at an ACT UP Oral History videotaping, and he spoke about how he went to the governor's office and picked up the phone and he couldn't believe he was speaking from the governor's office.

**AC:** What are your goals for the distribution and reception of *Sex in an Epidemic*? I like how you use Maxine Wolfe's statement at the end of the film to put forward the idea that we don't need to be living with AIDS and that we could be imagining a world without AIDS.

**JC:** I would like *Sex in an Epidemic* to be a companion piece to a growing movement of people who want to reignite a discussion around HIV prevention in this country. We must get HIV prevention back on the agenda. It's really important that we bring down the numbers. Over fifty-six thousand people a year are getting newly infected with HIV and it's not necessary. I think it would be great if we could finally find a cure and stop the disease from spreading.

I hope this video becomes a resource for universities to use. I've been teaching now for a long time, over twenty years, and I don't see that many students are really informed on the issues or have a knowledge of the history of HIV. We need to have something less superficial so that they feel invested, so that it's not just "Use a condom," so that they understand it a little more deeply. It's not just about HIV; it's about being able to talk honestly about sex ... and about not having sex. It's really important to be more open and honest about a variety of expressions.

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75 Published in *Sensible Politics: The Visual Culture of Nongovernmental Activism*, eds. Meg McLagan Yakes McKee (New York: Zone Books, 2012), pp. 245-256.

## Notes

1. For a foundational discussion of the importance of cultural activism, including video and other media, to AIDS activism, see Douglas Crimp (ed.), *AIDS: Cultural Analysis/Cultural Activism* (Cambridge, MA: The MIT Press, 1988), as well as Douglas Crimp and Adam Rolston (eds.), *AIDS DemoGraphics* (Seattle: Bay Press, 1991), which documents ACT UP's distinct visual graphics. Other important discussions of AIDS media activism include Alexandra Juhasz, *AIDS TV: Identity, Community, and Alternative Video* (Durham: Duke University Press, 1995), and Roger Hallas, *Reframing Bodies: AIDS, Bearing Witness and the Queer Moving Image* (Durham: Duke University Press, 2009). For a discussion of the distinctive role of affect in AIDS activism, see Deborah Gould, *Moving Politics: Emotion and ACT UP's Fight Against AIDS* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2009).
2. These videos and many others are archived in the Royal S. Marks AIDS Activist Video Collection at the New York Public Library.
3. *Sex in an Epidemic* (2010) is distributed by Outcast Films, <http://www.outcast-films.com>. It had its world premiere at the NewFest in New York City in June 2010, followed by a screening at Frameline in San Francisco, also in June 2010.



4. For more on Carlomusto's work, see Ann Cvetkovich, *An Archive of Feelings: Trauma, Sexuality, and Lesbian Public Cultures* (Durham: Duke University Press, 2003), and Julianne Pidduck, "Queer Kinship and Ambivalence: Video Autoethnographies by Jean Carlomusto and Richard Fung," *GLQ* 15.3 (2009), pp. 441-68.

5. Alexandra Juhasz, "Video Remains: Nostalgia, Technology, and Queer Archive Activism," *GLQ* 12.2 (2006), pp. 319-28.

6. See, for example, the video by Anne-Christine D'Adesky, Shanti Avirgan, and Ann T. Rosetti, *Pills, Profits, and Protest: Chronicle of the Global AIDS Movement* (2005) and the work of Health GAP (Global Access Project) (<http://www.healthgap.org>), and, in South Africa, Treatment Action Campaign (<http://www.tac.org.za>).

7. See *An Archive of Feelings*. Carlomusto has also been interviewed for the ACT UP Oral History Project (<http://www.actuporalhistory.org>), which now includes over one hundred interviews with AIDS activists that are available online and itself constitutes an important new activist media project for preserving and mobilizing the history of AIDS activism.

8. For this section of *Sex in an Epidemic*, Carlomusto uses footage from *Doctors, Liars, and Women: AIDS Activists Say No to Cosmo* (1988), the video she made with Maria Maggenti for the GMHC Living With AIDS series. She also showcases the work of the ACT UP Women's Caucus by including video documentation of the Shea Stadium action, in which, during a baseball game, they held up signs promoting safer sex. Carlomusto thus includes material that is drawn directly from her own experience as an AIDS activist, particularly experience that focuses on lesbian involvement in AIDS activism. For more on this aspect of ACT UP's history, see my *An Archive of Feelings*.

# Occupying Then and Now

AN INTERVIEW WITH JOSH MACPHEE AND  
LAURA WHITEHORN WITH *UPPING THE ANTI*

*Throughout this interview the participants refer to several images produced by the Madame Binh Graphics Collective, several of which are reprinted alongside Mary Patten's essay in this reader (see pages 16–36).*

**JOSH MACPHEE STARTED MAKING POSTERS FOR PUNK BANDS WHEN HE** was in high school. Twenty years later, he's part of Justseeds, a not-for-profit, artist-owned and operated cooperative with members in a dozen cities across the US, Mexico, and Canada. He edited *Celebrate People's History: The Poster Book of Resistance and Revolution* (The Feminist Press, 2010), a collection of over 100 posters by some 80 artists and non-artists, commemorating historic events, individuals, and acts of resistance. With his partner, video artist Dara Greenwald, Josh

collaborated on a variety of projects, including “Signs of Change,” an exhibit featuring art from the archives of social movements, followed by *Signs of Change*, a book about the show (AK Press, 2010).

Laura Whitehorn, a sometimes artist and full-time radical since the late 1960s has played a small part in the history Josh celebrates. In 1985, she was arrested with five other activists and spent 14 years in prison on charges of bombing the US Capitol Building and other government sites in protest of the invasion of Grenada and other US aggressions. A few years after her release, Laura met Josh and they struck up a lively political friendship. Laura contributed a poster to *Celebrate People's History* that honours Assata Shakur.

Motivated by *Celebrate People's History*, Josh and Laura engaged in the following dialogue with Susie Day while Dara was ill with a virulent cancer and unable to take part. Dara died on January 9, 2012. Dara's work and thought, so much a part of her life with Josh, are present here. We dedicate this piece—exploring unanswerable questions on art and politics—to her.

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***Let's start with how you first began making activist art.***

**JOSH:** *Celebrate People's History* started 14 years ago when my roommate, a Chicago public school teacher, lamented the lack of educational materials that teach progressive, grassroots, social justice history. In the US, we learn a history from above, not the history of masses of people. I was coming at it as more of a street artist, feeling like there wasn't a lot on the street that was intellectually provocative. The first poster we did was a design based on a linoleum print I made in celebration of Malcolm X's birthday. We used this quote: “Armed with the knowledge of our past we can charter a course for the future.” In a way, that's become the motto of this project.

**LAURA:** Before I went to prison, in the 1970s, I was part of the Madame Binh Graphics Collective.<sup>1</sup> We were rooted in certain politics; our goals were socialist revolution and supporting national liberation struggles. We tried to get a very clear message across about these struggles. But at the same time I didn't really see myself as an artist. That changed when I was in prison, where I drew more than ever before. When I made art by myself, it was a way of saying: “I'm still a human being, even



Molly Fair and Laura Whitehorn, *The Escape of Assata Shakur* in *Celebrate People's History*

though I'm in prison." But I still find there's more power in creating something with a group because of the change that goes on.

***Describe the Madame Binh Graphics Collective (MBGC).  
How did it promote that change?***

**LAURA:** The MBGC was approximately four people, with additional people helping us screenprint at night. Two of the four had gone to art school and the others were just artistically inclined leftists. Posters were our main form, besides leaflets and t-shirts. We limited the text on most posters to three words.

I think some of our most effective posters were the least artistic. I'm proudest of ones like the little offset poster we made with press type that says, "Assata Shakur is Welcome Here."<sup>2</sup> We made it with members of the Republic of New Afrika. It was right after Assata Shakur had been liberated from prison in New Jersey, and there was this huge search for her that turned into an attack on Black communities particularly in Harlem, by the cops. They went into one apartment building in the middle of the night, lined people up in the hallway, and examined the women to see if they had some scar that Assata was supposed to have. They were terrorizing people. We printed a few thousand posters and distributed them to Harlem stores and around Columbia University and other parts of New York and New Jersey. That poster challenged people to form some kind of security for this woman, who was actually widely loved. It tried to intervene in something that was already going on.

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**JOSH:** From talking to you and reading *Revolution as an Eternal Dream*,<sup>3</sup> Madame Binh's relationship to the movement seemed like a graphic designer's to a client. You get an assignment, and then you fulfill their desires...

**LAURA:** I don't agree with you. We were working for an ideal, that's true. Well, some posters were like that, but the Assata poster was not. It was something created with some of our Black comrades to say, "Let's express something that his community embraces." In some of the weaker Madame Binh posters, you can tell it's more art-by-committee—it's this image of struggle.



"ARMED WITH THE KNOWLEDGE  
OF OUR PAST WE CAN CHARTER  
A COURSE FOR OUR FUTURE.  
ONLY BY KNOWING WHERE  
WE'VE BEEN CAN WE KNOW  
WHERE WE ARE AND LOOK TO  
WHERE WE WANT TO GO."  
X

IN MEMORY  
EL HAJJ MALIK SHABAZZ  
MAY 19<sup>TH</sup> 1925 - FEBRUARY 21<sup>ST</sup> 1965  
CELEBRATE PEOPLES' HISTORY



Josh MacPhee, *El Hajj Malik Shabazz* in *Celebrate People's History*

**JOSH:** “There’s got to be red, green, and black...”

**LAURA:** “And we can’t leave women out, so there’s got to be a woman...” That was not as successful as projects when everyone would get excited about an idea that one person had, and then we’d build on it.

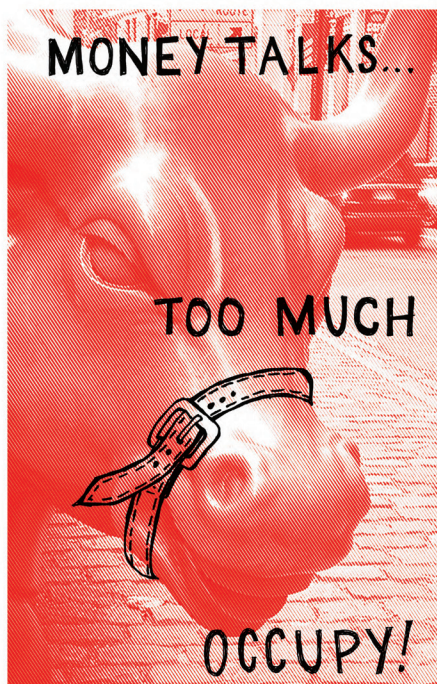
Working in a collective, as opposed to working as individual artists, should involve the process of people changing, artists changing. Part of the problem for me in the MBGC was that we didn’t have enough respect for our individual selves; we saw everything in terms of oppression. Who cared whether we became “different people” as artists and human beings? We had to produce a better product to advance the Revolution.

But unlike Justseeds and *Celebrate People’s History*, it was possible for the MBGC to make a point and raise issues because we were working in a period of tremendous upheaval and resistance. We had already been through the Civil Rights movement, then the Black Power movement, and the Vietnam War; when we set out to make art, we were handed the world situation. All we had to do was comment on it and say, “Support this.” The point of Justseeds as a collective and *Celebrate People’s History* as a collective work is more about creating ideas than creating the struggle. You’re not saying, “Here are the ideas you should support,” but “Let’s start changing so we can take it to the streets.”

*Celebrate People’s History* was part of building the Occupy movement. When you put out those posters for Occupy Wall Street, they were part of advancing the movement. You were expressing a larger demand that Wall Street should shut up. You know, the Bull with the belt around its mouth?<sup>4</sup>

**JOSH:** That poster was directly inspired by the popular OWS tool of writing on the backs of pizza boxes. The writing and muzzle were hand-drawn, like the signs; it’s like graffiti on the bull. The cops had put barriers around the actual bull statue, so I was just graffiti-ing on its representation. The hand-drawn part was trying to capture that unique individual hand, not mass-produce a slogan.





Josh MacPhee, *Money Talks... Too Much*, 2011

*How is each of you involved in the Occupy movement?*

**JOSH:** From the beginning, my involvement was limited because my primary role in life now is that of a caregiver. But I immediately began making graphic work and putting it online to be downloaded.

For me, the graphic work was about channeling what I felt people were saying in a broad sense, and then attempting to put my own political spin on it. I had lots of conversations with people about slogans that pushed the boundaries of issues being discussed at OWS. That led to my getting involved in the Design Working Group.<sup>5</sup> I designed a couple of early instructional flyers that got handed out at the park, like: "This is how you get to the info table." Then I agitated for doing a poster edition of the *Occupied Wall Street Journal*.<sup>6</sup> The idea was to collect images from people involved in the moment around the world and put thousands of copies into the hands of people in the streets.

My desire has never been to replace or supersede the cardboard signs at the park. I love those signs and I'm really sad they got

supplanted. You can't undervalue the role those strange backs of pizza boxes played, because there are so few venues in our lives where we're encouraged to express ourselves in any way that's meaningful.

**LAURA:** The main thing I've been doing is participating in collective teach-ins on prisons. We immediately hooked up with the People-of-Color Caucus, which wanted to work on that. I'm learning all this process stuff I didn't know. I've been down there every week. I love being there, even though sometimes it's cold, it's wet, and the police are intimidating.

I remember the teach-ins, especially in college around the Cuban missile crisis and the war in Vietnam, as serious educational speeches and debates. But this is more about using the people's mic. One person will say, "More Black men in prison than at the height of slavery"; "Women giving birth in shackles"; "Scores of political prisoners." Then they get repeated. It's a democratic process.

I marched with some students today and I didn't mind that they were demanding lower tuition for themselves. It never occurred to me, as it would have in the past, "Oh, that's just for them. Why don't they demand something more collective?" Something about the Occupy movement transforms individual demands into collective ones.

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*How would you two compare the artwork that has sprung up around the Occupy movement with the art that emerged from past political groups?*

**JOSH:** The goal of a modern artist, alone in their studio, cutting their ear off or whatever, is self-expression in and of itself, and that has value. But my goal is not to impose my self-expression on the world; it's to work with larger groups of people to see what collective expression looks like. In the *People's History* model, we take a series of individual voices, place them all together, and see what all the interconnections and dissonances produce.

But what I think is harder, so you see it less often, is the suppression of the individual voice in order to craft a collective voice that's unique and connected to people on the move. What this collective process produces can be very different from art that is more traditional. There's something fundamentally different about creating

culture outside a mass movement versus being part of a large mobilization. I mean, the *People's History* posters are very much informed by the anti-globalization movement. But when there isn't a movement, you functionally are an artist trying to make art about politics.

**LAURA:** About your political ideas.

**JOSH:** Yes, and when there's a movement, there's another option: to dissolve your individual artistic identity into the mobilization and create a cultural product that emerges out of a broader collective desire and articulation.

The most striking thing about Zuccotti Park during those first weeks was that a good quarter of the park was covered by cardboard signs, all done by different individuals. Taken one by one, a lot of them were really nutty—they didn't make any sense alone. You could only begin to understand them in their entirety.

85 **LAURA:** Though I saw one that was brilliant, that everyone's quoted, which was: "I'll believe corporations are individuals when the state of Texas executes one."

**JOSH:** Sure, there were really cogent, sound-bitable individual signs. But part of what I think made the Occupy experience a movement—at least in New York—was that it provided a place for hundreds, if not thousands, of people to articulate their individual ideas around what was happening to them on these pieces of blank cardboard. Such an extremely heterogeneous articulation had a force that none of the individual signs possibly could—even the best of them. You could not encapsulate their entirety into a handful of words or a handful of pictures. You needed to take literally dozens and dozens of pictures to get a sense of what was going on. It's a political laboratory like I've never seen in my lifetime.

### *At what point does art become propagandistic?*

**JOSH:** There's a concept of art as somehow autonomous from social contexts. That may be a nice dream; I don't think it's possible. For the most part, contemporary art is marshaled to generate money.

It's an industry like any other. If art is going to be marshaled by default for capital, then why not try to marshal some of it in opposition to capital?

Within contemporary art, I would say there's a bias against politically engaged work. One can be political, as long as the politics are opaque and it's difficult to understand the artist's intentions. I've gone to a number of art events recently where people have apologized for producing political or social art projects, because they supposedly don't have the aesthetic staying power of other artwork. But I think the work looks like crap in 99 percent of the Chelsea gallery shows I walk into. Bad art is surely not the sole purview of the political! There's plenty of nonpolitical work that is absolutely not sublime in any way. At the same time, there's plenty of political work that is also effective as "art."

**LAURA:** Some years ago, I went to the Drawing Center in Manhattan and saw a show of drawings by Vietnamese people caught up in the war.<sup>7</sup> They were encouraged to draw what was happening.

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**JOSH:** I have a book of some of those, *Vietnam Behind the Lines: Images from the War 1965-1975*.<sup>8</sup> In Vietnam, people produced posters on the front lines, where they mixed dirt into the ink to make it last longer and hand painted posters over and over again. When I was in Germany, I found a book of Polish anti-Nazi posters from World War II—they're rudimentary, stenciled posters made on the front. Very similar. There's an efficiency that's very powerful when you see these drawings now; the production is not separate from the message.

**LAURA:** People have sometimes done work like that in the struggle to contain AIDS. But having been in Vietnam right after the war, I saw the country when it was still destroyed. In order to keep morale up and communicate with each other, people created art that was really effective and beautiful.

### *What did you do in Vietnam, Laura?*

**LAURA:** I was part of a four-women delegation, invited by the Women's union of Vietnam in 1975. We went in July, two months after the US

was kicked out. We were in the North and we saw the beginnings of an attempt to continue the socialist structures and rebuild after the war. We brought posters we had made with us and gave them to the groups we met with.

People were really touched—we got a huge reaction to these schmatta-looking posters we’d silkscreened, one colour on a piece of paper that probably disintegrated three minutes later. I came back with a much more developed sense of the importance of those political posters and art. To them, it meant there was an image of what they were going through, of their struggle, of their strength, in the heart of their enemy’s territory. And that, to them, was an amazing thing.

**JOSH:** What caught me about the Vietnamese posters in the book was that if you look closely, just about every image has some US plane or helicopter in the background with flames coming out of it. It’s almost like *Where’s Waldo?*—where’s the F-15 being shot down?

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### *Would you call that propaganda?*

**JOSH:** I would. This might be where we disagree. I mean, I didn’t live through that period of struggle, so I have no love for the Stalinist North Vietnamese government—there was a whole counterrevolution happening within the Vietnamese Revolution.

To me, propaganda is instrumentalized culture—and I think that under our current conditions, all culture is instrumentalized. So to me it’s moot. The popular perception of propaganda is Nazi posters or “Buy US War Bonds.” But “I’m Lovin’ It” is McDonalds propaganda.

**LAURA:** Oh yes. But do you consider your work propaganda?

**JOSH:** If people call it that, fine. The assumption that propaganda is bad creates an invisible shield around the fact that the realm where visual communication and ideological projection meet dominates our cultural landscape. Everything we see is propagandistic, yet it’s perceived as benign. It’s “just advertising.”

**LAURA:** What I saw in Vietnam were almost mythic images. The art lionized heroism and sacrifice, and it was beautiful. It was moving.

You're right, Josh, there were always B-52s that were being shot down. The images in Vietnam were not, "Poor us. Look at our children running down the street burning with napalm." They were of tiny Vietnamese women dragging these huge planes, taking them apart, and making them into different things. They were beautiful images of women working together, romanticized, similar to Chinese peasant art in phases of the Revolution there. And I felt the purpose they served was to say, "You know what? It's worth it. We're fighting for something beautiful and strong."

The Madame Binh Collective reproduced images of Vietnamese heroines, of the anti-feudalist struggle. But at the time, most of the images made in this country by artists in the anti-war movement were of victimization—which were also true—like the My Lai Massacre.

***Isn't it objectifying to produce images of either victory or victimization?***

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**LAURA:** That's one of the roles of political art. You want to expose some of the real brutality. There's a poster Emory Douglas<sup>9</sup> made for the San Francisco 8.<sup>10</sup> We heard for months: Emory Douglas is making a poster! Some of my friends from the Defense Committee were there when the poster was finally presented. It's of a Black, hooded body being tortured, with cattle prods put to the genitals.<sup>11</sup> This is exactly what happened to some of the Panthers in New Orleans; in fact, that's what produced the informant in this case, who was destroyed by weeks of torture.

My friend on the Committee said that when the poster was revealed, all the white people went, "Oh *no!* I don't want to look at that," and all the Black people, a lot of whom were former Panthers, said, "That's fabulous!" There were utterly spontaneous reactions.

**JOSH:** Dara and I developed a working theory, doing research for *Signs of Change*,<sup>12</sup> that the cultural production of movements does a series of things. One of them is to communicate internally. So the billboards in Vietnam were for communicating with the Vietnamese; they don't necessarily have the same meaning outside. Another purpose is to communicate with the outside world. There are different, discrete, sometimes overlapping intentions and meanings. I think there's a tendency to collapse them all or to expect that any one cultural work will serve all purposes.

**LAURA:** Right. And some of the drawings in the Vietnamese show were done by fighters—they're almost what we might call occupational art therapy. When these poorly armed groups of guerrillas were preparing to be bombed or maybe die the next day, they would do these pen-and-ink drawing of each other the night before. I'm not sure some of that art was ever meant to be displayed.

**JOSH:** It speaks also to the Emory Douglas question. In some ways, the image trumped the argument about whether or not it was the best one to broadcast the SF8 struggle to the outside world. It was equally if not more important that their experience was validated internally.

### *Who do you see as an audience for your work?*

**JOSH:** A lot of my peers and I came to politics through punk rock music and through the idea that we can create our own culture. We had our own bands, we made our own magazines, and we booked our own concerts. We created a world for ourselves that was very different from the world we had to exist in during high school. You'd go to school and drudge through eight hours, then you'd go to this other world that you'd created. One of my friend's parents had a copy shop, and we would get out the pasting machine, run the copiers, and make publications. We'd have artwork, collages, poetry, and record reviews in them; we were making fanzines.

I came to politics through that culture, and I still treasure its existence. But I also think it becomes a cocoon that remains under the control of the larger world that contains the same repression and limits that everyone had to live under. At a certain point, I thought, "I don't know if I want to pretend I'm so different from people who don't have Mohawks or identify with my subculture." Because, in fact, I have much more in common with them than I have differences.

The last ten years have been a struggle to figure out how to emerge from the counterculture with lessons learned from that experience. How do I move all that knowledge to a place where it really gets tested but still try to move the centre to my margins, rather than the other way around? How does somebody reach a broader audience and bridge those gaps? It's really hard. There are amazing things about a subcultural identity, but there's also a kind of built-in—I don't know if inferiority complex is the right term—but a sense of limits.



**LAURA:** There's a contradiction at every point. Capitalism is adept at co-opting any system. We're caught in this: "Are we too radical? Is our art too confrontational? Too jaggedy?"

**JOSH:** I'm not sure that's the question right now for me. The question is not, "Am I going to be included?" The question is, "Uh-oh, I'm *going* to be included—what does that mean?" We're being co-opted, so how do we negotiate that? How do we ensure our labour retains its critical edge?

**LAURA:** But don't you think that's a function of history? When I went to the "Signs of Change" show, I was completely floored because there were so many people seeing those posters we made, people who, in the '70s when they saw the Madame Binh posters, wouldn't have given us the time of day. They called us "far-left"—we supported Black militancy. So tragedy plus time is comedy? Politics plus time is "Right-On-I-Was-There!" But when art is trying to change people, it has to confront some values. MOMA is not about to show Palestinian art or anti-Zionist art.

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**JOSH:** The Guggenheim gave Emily Jacir a prize and her own solo show.<sup>13</sup> We're in a new moment. There's a struggle going on within the ruling class. There are the Obama types who are confident in ideological control and believe that civil society functions largely as a siphon: within unions, art museums, etcetera, people's frustration and discontent can be channeled into productive efforts. But you also have the Tea Party people who clearly don't feel that way. They're this throwback to an old style of power.

**LAURA:** But the only thing about *Celebrate People's History* is that it takes art not only out of the museum, out of the gallery, but out of the artist. When I went to the first launch party of *People's History* and heard people talking about making their posters, everyone was so passionate. They were studious and said, "I made this poster because it's important for people to know about the history of the oppression of women in this colonial situation," or they'd say, "This is my issue! I want to change this!" It was what I think revolutionary democracy is like—messy and all over the place. When I made my poster, I re-learned the power of artistic creation—imagination, passion, principle, personality. All those things that challenge the stranglehold of capitalism on creativity. Who owns it? Who gets to say it?



Still from StreetRec's *Retooling Dissent*, 2002

***What about radical artists taking over the mass media occasionally?***

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**JOSH:** I have mixed feelings about that. I've worked in activist art groups that had some ability to get into the mainstream news. I don't know if you remember the World Economic Forum in 2002 in New York. We had a group in Chicago that brought these giant six- or seven-foot heads of Bush, Cheney, Wolfowitz, and Rumsfeld. Cheney had an oil mustache; they all had tattooed teardrops coming out of their eyes, showing that they publicly recognized themselves as murderers, and Bush's lips were sewn shut. Those images were in *Newsweek* and on the covers of newspapers around the world.

Three-quarters of us said, "That was a success. We need to do that again." But I actually felt the opposite. When our goal became getting into the mass media, it destroyed the group in a lot of ways. At the same time, there's increasingly less mass media and more overlapping micro-media, like Facebook and people getting news online. Hollywood movies are still mass, but decreasing numbers of people watch mainstream news on TV, and increasing numbers get their news from a hodge-podge of other sources. Maybe they watch *The Daily Show* one night, and the next day they read *The New York Times*, and the next day they look at the *Guardian UK* on their phone.

But people may be starting to understand that there's a law of diminishing return with this new technology. When the printing press

was developed and dissident Protestants during Reformation started passing out political tracts, they didn't stop preaching, right? But now, if there's email, people feel they don't need to make flyers. Then we get Facebook and we don't have to send email anymore. But look at what's successful in the larger world: Starbucks, McDonalds, big Hollywood movies. They put billboards up for a reason—because they still work. They have print ads in magazines—they don't abandon older strategies, they add newer strategies to their existing arsenal.

**LAURA:** Older societies used storytelling, like African griots.<sup>14</sup> But in terms of competition in a capitalist world, we're at a disadvantage. When you send an email, you don't change because you don't actually talk to people.

**JOSH:** That's why, if a group wants to make propaganda, I advocate that they actually show it to people. With the internet, people can say, "I made a poster and it's going around the world." Just because it gets picked up by a couple of other places on the Web doesn't mean it's effective at communicating what you think it's communicating.

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**LAURA:** I'm thinking about all the times I've seen people wearing Che images and wondered, "Do you really know who Che was?" You know, that cynical thing about the marketing of Che's images?

There's a connection between what Che stood for, which has been transformed since his death into meaning everything great about human creativity and love and struggle. Despite the marketing, that can't be wiped out.

**JOSH:** For lack of a better phrase, I think there's a double-edged sword here. Within the context of the OWS upheaval, Che t-shirts embody broad conceptions of revolution and human spirit and such. But I think the flipside is that they simultaneously, because of commodification, fail us on another level. We're no longer able to see Che as a real person and look at his successes and failures—or those of the larger Cuban struggle—in any critical way that lets us learn from those experiences, because Che isn't tethered to any specific moment or political context. While I value the Cuban Revolution in many ways, we definitely disagree about Che's legacy, so to me this transcendence from historical specificity means that his authoritarianism,

his brutality, his complete and utter failure agriculturally, his dismantling of the unions—we can go down the list—he’s now liberated from those things as well.

**LAURA:** So how would you create art about a martyr? About someone who was killed?

**JOSH:** That’s difficult, and I haven’t successfully done it. I think there’s a tendency within the more vulgar, programmatic Marxism that says that things must happen historically in a certain way. But if that were true, a lot of things in *People’s History* posters couldn’t coexist in the same time-screen because they don’t necessarily agree with each other. Other than in the broadest sense, for example, Sacco and Vanzetti aren’t in the same lineage as the Brown Berets, who aren’t in the same lineage as the Plowshares Movement. These are different paths that intersect at different points. The fact that all these things are messy and complicated leads to outcomes no one would have guessed. To me, that’s the opposite of the images of Che.

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**LAURA:** I don’t know. I think part of what people revere about Che is his spirit of self-transformation, from a member of the bourgeoisie to a revolutionary. Che’s whatever people want him to be when they wear his t-shirt.

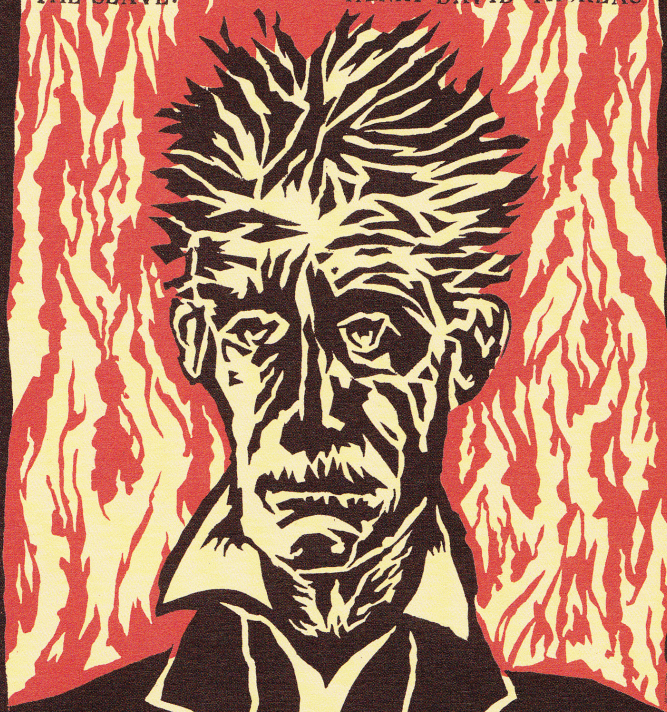
**JOSH:** And that, to me, is a problem. At the point where these people become symbols, they lose connection to their histories. The posters in *Celebrate People’s History* have dates and information that connect them to specific historical moments. This can make them “didactic” and “educational,” which are traits often seen as bad. But on another level, we’re trying to salvage this history from being a buffet for designers to get new ideas for t-shirts.

**LAURA:** It’s very funny that you’re so much more cynical than I am, and I’m this old activist.

**JOSH:** Initially, in the Design Working Group at OWS, there was a big debate about branding. A whole crew of people wanted to brand the moment because, to them, that’s what success is. I argued vehemently against it. My argument didn’t stop the branding so much as

"...IT WAS HIS [JOHN BROWN'S] PECULIAR DOCTRINE THAT A MAN HAS A PERFECT RIGHT TO INTERFERE BY FORCE WITH THE SLAVEHOLDER, IN ORDER TO RESCUE THE SLAVE. I AGREE WITH HIM. THEY WHO ARE CONTINUALLY SHOCKED BY SLAVERY HAVE SOME RIGHT TO BE SHOCKED BY THE VIOLENT DEATH OF THE SLAVEHOLDER, BUT SUCH WILL BE MORE SHOCKED BY HIS LIFE THAN BY HIS DEATH. I SHALL NOT BE FORWARD TO THINK HIM MISTAKEN IN HIS METHOD WHO QUICKEST SUCCEEDS TO LIBERATE THE SLAVE."

-HENRY DAVID THOREAU



**JOHN BROWN**  
**MAY 9<sup>TH</sup>, 1800 - DEC 2<sup>ND</sup>, 1859**  
**CELEBRATE PEOPLE'S HISTORY**



the group's ability to corral all the disparate people into a singular visual narrative. So the success of the movement is that it can't be branded in a clear, traditional marketing sense.

One thing my OWS work has done is make me more confident about creating things that speak to our individual experiences with capitalism, which isn't just about how Wall Street is extracting X dollars from Y people, but how I and most of the people I know spend increasing amounts of "personal" time on electronic devices. We're sitting on the toilet taking a shit, but we're also sending emails to people. Functionally, we're always at work.

**LAURA:** That is totally going to change how I feel the next time I get an email from you.

*Laura, you're an activist, and Josh, if you're not an artist, then you're a cultural worker. You share the same basic politics—but how did you each choose your path?*

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**LAURA:** The reason I'm a revolutionary—why I made that choice in the '60s—is because I love people. And capitalism, colonialism, and racism imprison and divide people; they make us less than we could be.

**JOSH:** When I was younger, I did a lot of political activism and I wasn't that good at it. I'm better at what I do now, so it makes sense to put my energy where there's greater effect.

But I'm ambivalent about revolution. I feel increasingly ambivalent in general. I think we can be better, there's absolutely no question about that. And I think there's very little that human beings can't accomplish if we actually learn to work together, rather than compete for individual gain. But I'm pretty open as to how we get there.

I look at history and I see that the things that have been relatively successful are often a strange mish-mash of all kinds of different perspectives and people and initiatives. The certainty that one line of political thought is the way just doesn't seem historically tenable to me. It's not how things happen. Things happen because thousands of people are doing thousands of things, and there's a sort

of explosive chaos that produces different opportunities. You never know what those opportunities are going to be before you enact those politics.

Things like posters, t-shirts, street performances, film or audio can seem marginal—and then something like Egypt or Wisconsin happens. This is the centre of the universe right now, people producing culture to liberate themselves.

***Laura, is it more important to you to do nuts-and-bolts activism than art?***

**LAURA:** My vision of socialism—which I still believe in firmly, whether it’s worked so far in the world or not—is that it frees people to be collectively what they’re impassioned about individually. What I mean by revolution is not different from what Josh is saying about mass chaos, thousands of people moving something. I just think there have to be some guiding goals, which change as you get there.

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Josh, you’re one of the best organizers I know, because you trust people, even when you disagree with them. And I think that’s why *Celebrate People’s History* is so successful. It’s a revolutionary act in itself.

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Published in *Upping the Anti* #14 (Toronto, 2012), pp. 53-71.

## Notes

1. Madame Binh, now the Vietnamese Minister of Education, was a revolutionary leader during the war on Vietnam.
2. Assata Shakur, African-American revolutionary, was a leader in the Black Panther Party and the “Soul of the Black Liberation Army.” Imprisoned after a 1973 confrontation with police on the New Jersey Turnpike (in which she was shot by police), she escaped in 1979. In 1984 she was granted political asylum in Cuba. She continues to be targeted by US law enforcement.
3. Mary Patten, *Revolution as an Eternal Dream: The Exemplary Failure of the Madame Binh Graphics Collective* (Chicago: Half Letter Press, 2011).
4. “Money Talks ... Too Much. Occupy,” poster by Josh MacPhee, 2011.



See, [http://justseeds.org/josh\\_macphee/04moneytalks.html](http://justseeds.org/josh_macphee/04moneytalks.html).

5. Occupy Wall Street Design Working Group, creating in New York City, Fall 2011, is still active: <https://facebook.com/OWSdesign?sk=wall>.

6. *The Occupy Wall Street Journal*, poster edition, <http://occuprint.org/Info/OWSJ> and <http://flickr.com/photos/akinloch/6338651280/>.

7. "Persistent Vestiges: Drawing from the American-Vietnam War." The Drawing Center: New York, NY, November 5 – December 21, 2005. [http://drawingcenter.org/exh\\_past.cfm?exh=82](http://drawingcenter.org/exh_past.cfm?exh=82).

8. Jessica Harrison-Hall, ed., *Vietnam Behind the Lines: Images from the War 1965–1975* (London: British Museum Press, 2002).

9. Emory Douglas was the Minister of Culture for the Black Panther Party; his artwork was featured in the Party's newspaper. He remains a graphic artist and lives in San Francisco.

10. In January 2007, eight former Black Panthers were charged in the 1971 shooting death of a police officer in San Francisco. The case, based largely on evidence from the tortured confessions of some of the suspects, never came to trial. Two defendants pled guilty to voluntary manslaughter; charges against the others were dropped.

11. "Free the SF8," poster by Emory Douglas, 2008. See, [http://freethesf8.org/Emory\\_Douglas\\_poster.html](http://freethesf8.org/Emory_Douglas_poster.html).

12. "Signs of Change," an archive assembled by Dara Greenwald and Josh MacPhee, includes over 350 posters, prints, photographs, films, and videos exploring global struggles for liberation and human rights. It was exhibited in 2009 at Exit Art, a cultural center in New York City. Much of the show can now be seen in *Signs of Change: Social Movement Cultures, 1960s to Now*, Greenwald and MacPhee, eds. (Oakland: AK Press, 2010).

13. Emily Jacir is a Palestinian conceptual and performance artist whose work depicts the plight of the Palestinian people. In 2008 she won the Solomon R. Guggenheim Foundation's Hugo Boss Prize. <http://nytimes.com/2009/02/13/arts/design/13jaci.html>.

14. Griots are part of the West African oral tradition, conveying history through storytelling, praise singing, poetry, and music.

Stills from:

# *Pen Up the Pigs*

KELLY GALLAGHER

12MIN VIDEO | 2014

**SYNOPSIS:** Through cut-out animation, the natural and human world confront each other through kinetic and violent motion, frame by frame. Animals clash, tearing each other apart, mirroring the human world where a historical look at the connections between the violence of slavery and modern day racist, mass incarceration are explored. In moments of struggle, as people fight back against racism and their oppression, the natural world responds as animated cut-out flowers grow frantically, pollinated by the militant resistance of the oppressed, as gardens of new life are born out of struggles to destroy white supremacy. From skies to cityscapes to deserts, various landscapes serve as backdrops for the collisions of the animal and human worlds. Nature celebrates radical resistance with flowering life, gesturing towards life

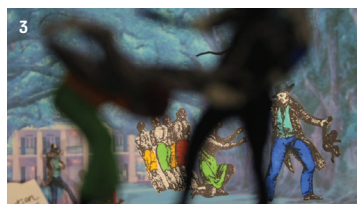
that is possible when people fight back against the violence of oppression, racism, and white supremacy.

In *Aesthetics and its Discontents, Problems and Transformations of Critical Art*, Jacques Rancière states: “If collage has been one of modern art’s major techniques, the reason is that its technical forms obey a more fundamental aesthetico-political logic. Collage, in the broadest sense of the term is the principle of a ‘third’ political aesthetics. Before combining paintings, newspapers, oilcloths or clock-making mechanisms, it combines the foreignness of aesthetic experience with the becoming-art of ordinary life. Collage can be realized as the pure encounter between heterogeneous elements, attesting en bloc to the incompatibility of two worlds... Conversely, *collage can present itself as that which brings to light the hidden link between two apparently foreign worlds...*”

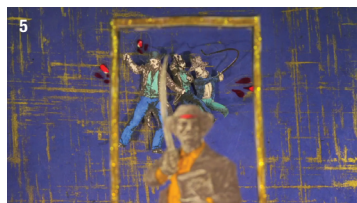
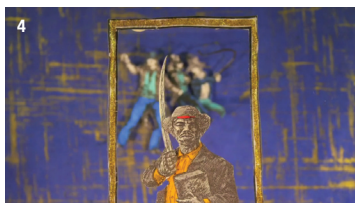
The film may viewed in full at [PURPLERIOT.COM](http://PURPLERIOT.COM)



*Fig 1: “The revolution will not be televised.” By beginning the film with Assata Shakur, speaking to the audience from a television set, we are tuned into an understanding of the demand for revolutionary struggle and resistance to be paid attention to. While our government makes a point to criminalize this revolutionary, “Pen Up the Pigs,” makes Shakur the keynote speaker of this film, demanding the audience’s respect and attention to her testimony and experience.*



*Fig 2 & 3:* In Figure 2, we see a modern day police officer, clubbing a black protestor. In Figure 3, the camera has racked focus and attention to the scene behind the police officer, where a slave-owner is whipping his slaves. As Rancière notes, collage (especially and uniquely here in animated form), highlights and calls direct attention to the links between the two worlds. The police officer is understood as a racist, modern day slave-patroller.



*Fig 4 – 7:* In Fig 4 and 5, Nat Turner takes righteous vengeance against the slave-owners shown in the previous scene. By destroying them with his sword, they fall into the depths of hell. Turner, conversely, ascends into the heavens/sky. While a bird sails by (momentarily reminding us of freedom), Turner's act of resistance pollinates new life, as his soul becomes a blossoming flower.

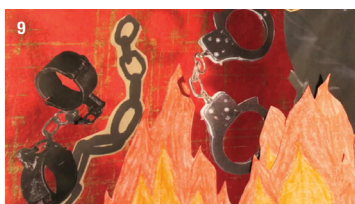


Fig 8 & 9: The slave chains of the past descend into a fiery hellscape, while a Pig-faced police officer howls awfully, calling upon the slave chains of the present to ascend. Police handcuffs rise out of the flames, passing their previous, historical forms.

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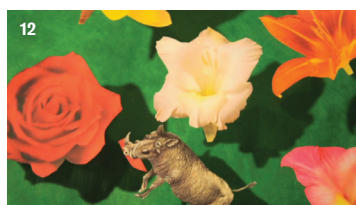
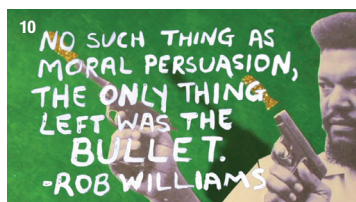
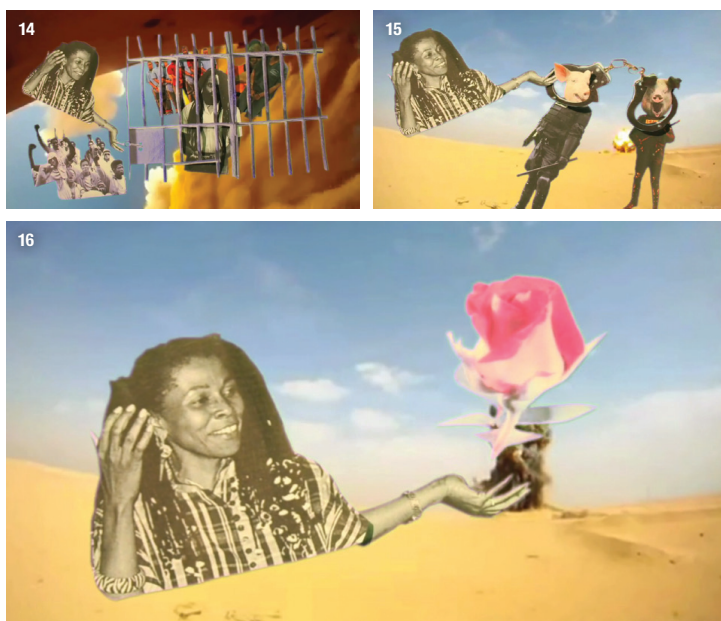


Fig 10 – 13: Anti-pacifist, black revolutionary Rob Williams' words fill the screen: "No such thing as moral persuasion, the only thing left was the bullet." As the scene unfolds, Williams' gun fires bullets, which become animated blossoming flowers. Filthy pigs and hogs enter this garden of resistance, as it were, and eat from the flowers only to find that doing so brings them immediate death.



*Fig 14 – 16:* Coming full circle and returning to the woman that called our attention to revolution at the beginning of the film, we come back to Assata Shakur. Shakur, along with men from the Attica prison rebellion, join collective forces to unlock the incarcerated men and women, which include Mumia Abu-Jamal, Marissa Alexander, and CeCe McDonald. Traversing our way through the film between past and present, histories and futures, we arrive at the “Penning Up” of the pigs. Shakur’s militancy and resilience, along with the collective power of joining forces with others, allows for her to unlock the racist prison gates, and go out into the world to catch the pigs and lock them up in return. After detaining two pigs (Fig 15), and flinging them into jail, we see that new life is born once again (the same rose that was born of Nat Turner) from persevering struggle.

# Art of the Possible

FULVIA CARNEVALE & JOHN KELSEY  
IN CONVERSATION WITH JACQUES RANCIÈRE

**FULVIA CARNEVALE:** Your work has taken a very particular trajectory. It starts with archival research on workers' struggles and the utopias of the nineteenth century and ends up in the field of contemporary art, aesthetics, and cinema. Do you see ruptures or continuity on your philosophical path?

**JACQUES RANCIÈRE:** I'm not a philosopher who has gone from politics to aesthetics, from liberation movements of the past to contemporary art. I have always sought to contest globalizing thought that relies on the presupposition of a historical necessity. In the 1970s I conducted research in early-nineteenth century workers' archives\* because the May '68 movement had highlighted the gap between Marxist theory and



the complex history of the actual forms of workers' emancipation. I did it to counter the return to Marxist dogmatism on the one hand and, on the other, the liquidation of the very thought of workers' emancipation in the guise of a critique of Marxism. Later I weighed in on questions of contemporary art, because the interpretation of twentieth century art movements also found itself implicated in this manipulation of history. Contemporary art was taken hostage in the operation of the "end of utopias," caught between so-called postmodern discourse, which proclaimed the "end of grand narratives," and the reversal of modernism itself, as modernist thinkers ended up polemicizing against modernism, ultimately condemning emancipatory art's utopias and their contribution to totalitarianism.

It's always the same process: using defined periods and great historical ruptures to impose interdictions. Against this, my work has been the same, whether dealing with labor's past or art's present: to break down the great divisions—science and ideology, high culture and popular culture, representation and the unrepresentable, the modern and the postmodern, etc.—to contrast so-called historical necessity with a topography of the configuration of possibilities, a perception of the multiple alterations and displacements that make up forms of political subjectivization and artistic invention. So I reexamined the dividing lines between the modern and postmodern, demonstrating, for example, that "abstract painting" was invented not as a manifestation of art's autonomy but in the context of a way of thinking of art as a fabricator of forms of life, that the intermingling of high art and popular culture was not a discovery of the 1960s but at the heart of nineteenth-century Romanticism. Nevertheless, what interests me more than politics or art is the way the boundaries defining certain practices as artistic or political are drawn and redrawn. This frees artistic and political creativity from the yoke of the great historical schemata that announce the great revolutions to come or that mourn the great revolutions past only to impose their proscriptions and their declarations of powerlessness on the present.

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**CARNEVALE:** Has your work been received differently by the philosophical public, as it were, than by the contemporary art audience?

**RANCIÈRE:** Personally, I don't speak for philosophers. I don't speak for the members of a particular body or discipline. I write to shatter the

boundaries that separate specialists—of philosophy, art, social sciences, etc. I write for those who are also trying to tear down the walls between specialties and competences. This was the case with certain philosophers in the '60s and '70s, but it isn't the case today, and it is generally not what academia promotes. On the other hand, the contemporary art world may be more receptive, because contemporary art is, quintessentially, art defined by the erasure of medium specificity, indeed by the erasure of the visibility of art as a distinct practice. So what I have tried to theorize, under the name of the aesthetic regime of art, is the general form of this paradox wherein art was defined and institutionalized as a sphere of common experience at the very moment that the boundaries between what is and isn't art were being erased. Moreover, if my work has garnered special interest in contemporary art, it may be because I have tried to create a little breathing room with respect to the established divisions between modernity, the end of modernity, postmodernity, and so on. By complicating those relationships, by reestablishing an element of indeterminacy in the relationship between artistic production and political subjectivization, I have tried to free artists, curators, and other actors implicated in this world from the atmosphere of guilt wrought by the historical mission of art—a mission at which it would necessarily fail—or, alternatively, from a utopia of art that would have led to totalitarianism.

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**JOHN KELSEY:** And was your idea of “equality” the notion of the equality of intelligences that you put forward in *The Ignorant Schoolmaster* [*Le Maître ignorant* (1987)]—a means of moving between early modern revolutionary discourses and the open question of subjective emancipation through contemporary art practices today?

**RANCIÈRE:** The very idea of Art—of the aesthetic experience—as defining a specific sphere of experience was born in the late eighteenth century under the banner of equality: the equality of all subjects, the definition of a form of judgment freed from the hierarchies of knowledge and those of social life. This equality that Kant, Schiller, and Hegel spoke of is neither equality in a general sense nor the equality of revolutionary movements. It is a certain sort of equality, a certain form of the neutralization of hierarchies that in other respects govern sensible existence. This aesthetic equality mingled with or confronted others. The idea of the equality of intelligences—which

I borrowed from Joseph Jacotot, an early-nineteenth-century university professor whose largely forgotten educational philosophy inspired *The Ignorant Schoolmaster*—is a criterion that allows us to test the various thoughts and practices that lay claim to equality. It is clear, from this point of view, that art in and of itself is not liberating; it either is or isn't depending on the type of capacity it sets in motion, on the extent to which its nature is shareable or universalizable. For example, emancipation can't be expected from forms of art that presuppose the imbecility of the viewer while anticipating their precise effect on that viewer: for example, exhibitions that capitalize on the denunciation of the "society of the spectacle" or of "consumer society"—bug bears that have already been denounced a hundred times—or those that want to make viewers "active" at all costs with the help of various gadgets borrowed from advertising, a desire predicated on the presupposition that the spectator is otherwise necessarily rendered "passive" solely by virtue of his looking. An art is emancipated and emancipating when it renounces the authority of the imposed message, the target audience, and the univocal mode of explicating the world, when, in other words, it stops *wanting* to emancipate us.

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**CARNEVALE:** Let's return to the question of aesthetics and politics, terms paired with increasing frequency of late and with which your work is so closely associated. How did this odd couple become so fashionable?

**RANCIÈRE:** It's not a question of fashion. It represents a shift in the traditional formulation of the relationship between art and politics. In the time of politically engaged art, when critical models were clearly agreed upon, we took art and politics as two well defined things, each in its own corner. But at the same time, we presupposed a trouble-free passage between an artistic mode of presentation and the determination to act; that is, we believed that the "raised consciousness" engendered by art—by the strangeness of an artistic form—would provoke political action. The artist who presented the hidden contradictions of capitalism would mobilize minds and bodies for the struggle. The deduction was unsound, but that didn't matter so long as the explanatory schemata and the actual social movements were strong enough to anticipate its effects. That is no longer the case today. And the passage to the pairing of "aesthetics and politics" is a way of taking this into account: We no longer think of art as one independent sphere

and politics as another, necessitating a privileged mediation between the two—a “critical awakening” or “raised consciousness”... Instead, an artistic intervention can be political by modifying the visible, the ways of perceiving it and expressing it, of experiencing it as tolerable or intolerable. The effect of this modification is consequent on its articulation with other modifications in the fabric of the sensible. That’s what “aesthetics” means: A work of art is defined as such by belonging to a certain regime of identification, a certain distribution of the visible, the sayable, and the possible. Politics, meanwhile, has an aesthetic dimension: It is a common landscape of the given and the possible, a changing landscape and not a series of acts that are the consequence of “forms of consciousness” acquired elsewhere. “Aesthetics” designates this interface. But this interface also signifies the loss of any relationship of cause and effect between “representations” considered artistic and “engagements” considered political. At the heart of what I call the aesthetic regime of art is the loss of any determinate relationship between a work and its audience, between its sensible presence and an effect that will be its natural end. Now we must examine the very terrain of the sensible on which artistic gestures shake up our modes of perception and on which political gestures redefine our capacities for action. I am neither a historian of art nor a philosopher of politics, but I work on this question: What landscape can one describe as the meeting place between artistic practice and political practice?

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**CARNEVALE:** We have a diagnosis you might not agree with: As soon as there are political subjects that disappear from the field of actual politics, that become obsolete through a number of historical processes, they are recuperated in iconic form in contemporary art. Many contemporary artists and curators seem to share, for example, a certain nostalgia for the countercultures of earlier generations. We are thinking of all the things centered around the labor movement, for instance, not only in the work of Jeremy Deller but also in that of plenty of other artists who use this sort of iconic code Rirkrit Tiravanija, Sam Durant, Paul Chan. How do you explain this process? Is it a delayed reaction of contemporary art in relation to the present or is it a form of absorption?

**RANCIÈRE:** We have to go beyond too simple a relationship between past and present, reality and icon. Your question presupposes a certain idea of the present: It accredits the idea that the working class has

disappeared, that we can therefore speak of it nostalgically or in terms of kitsch imagery. Artists might reply that this is a vision borrowed from the dominant imagery of the moment and that, furthermore, the reexamination of the past is part of the construction of the present. The question then is whether by reconstructing a strike from the Thatcher era, Jeremy Deller is proposing a break in relation to the dominant imagery of a world where there would otherwise be nothing but high-tech virtuosos or the occasional amused glance at the past, which is complicit with this vision. The retrospective glance at the counterculture of the past in fact covers two problems: first, the relationship to the militant culture of the years of revolt, which is not necessarily nostalgic. It is, rather, acidic in the work of Sam Durant, for example, to say nothing of the work of Josephine Meckseper, who tries to show protest culture as a form of youth fashion. Second, the relationship to popular culture, which seems to me to be the object of a new mutation. In the era of Pop art and the Nouveaux Réalistes, we gladly used popular “bad taste” to destabilize “high culture.” Martin Parr’s photographs of kitsch follow in this tradition. But there is a more positive attempt today to give form to a continuity between artistic creativity and the forms of creativity manifested in objects and behaviors that testify to everyone’s capacities and to our inherent powers of resistance. Works like Jean Luc Moulène’s photographic series *Objets de grève* [Strike Objects, 1999-2000] or the installation *Menschen Dinge* [The Human Aspect of Objects, 2005] created at the Buchenwald Memorial by Esther Shalev-Gerz around objects repurposed and refashioned by detainees of the camp are just two examples—examples that suit my argument perhaps too well. In any case, this way of relating to popular culture or to countercultures from the point of view of the capacities they set in motion and not the images they convey seems to me to be the real political issue of the present.

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**KELSEY:** Or maybe contemporary art *is* the official scene now. We could argue that many artists today promote the belief that certain modes of resistance are now obsolete. But in what ways do you see contemporary artists opening this question of the constitution of our world? Do any examples come to mind?

**RANCIÈRE:** I would rather talk about dissensus than resistance. Dissensus is a modification of the coordinates of the sensible, a spectacle or a

tonality that replaces another. Sophie Ristelhueber photographs barricades on Palestinian roads. But she doesn't photograph the great concrete wall that petrifies the gaze. She photographs from a distance, from above, the little handmade barricades made of piled stone, which look like rock slides in the middle of a tranquil landscape. That's one way of keeping one's distance from the shopworn affect of indignation and instead exploring the political resources of a more discreet affect-curiosity. Alfredo Jaar made an installation about the massacres in Rwanda, but he didn't show the bodies. He showed the eyes of a woman in which the spectacle of the massacre had been fixed, or the consoling gestures of two children. Pedro Costa made three films—*Ossos* [1997], *In Vanda's Room* [2000], and *Colossal Youth* [2006]—concerning the fate of a group of marginalized drug addicts in a slum in Lisbon. In *Vanda's Room* bulldozers can be heard throughout the film demolishing the neighborhood. Costa tries to highlight all the sources of beauty concealed within this miserable world, all the capacities of speech and thought that exist in these drifters, who shuttle between odd jobs and drug use. In this way, he blurs the established relationships between the popular and the noble, between documentary and fiction. These are a few examples—not models to imitate but illustrations of what “dissensus” might signify: a way of reconstructing the relationship between places and identities, spectacles and gazes, proximities and distances. When asked about the relationship between the necessities of engagement and the risks of escape, Paul Chan spoke of an “empathetic estrangement,” referring to Brecht. As for me, I would speak of a lightening, an alleviation, rather than a distancing. The problem, first of all, is to create some breathing room, to loosen the bonds that enclose spectacles within a form of visibility, bodies within an estimation of their capacity, and possibility within the machine that makes the “state of things” seem evident, unquestionable.

**KELSEY:** Hybrid forms, “open works,” multimedia, multitasking, “relational aesthetics,” artists who also write or curate, etc., not to mention positioning all these new forms and behaviors within traveling group shows—these are some of the contemporary, “democratic” means by which competences and specificities are redistributed in the art world today. But it's not so easy to locate the point at which this kind of mobilization of activities becomes challenging to the existing order or its need for shows.

**RANCIÈRE:** Radical challenges to the existing order don't depend solely on artists. But in fact the precincts of art lend themselves more readily today than other fields to a redistribution of roles, which is to say, to a redistribution of competences as well. The artist and his productions move between several statuses. The precincts of art are visited by populations that construct their own pathways through the art and appropriate artists' work according to their own needs. Disparate and polymorphous artists, like the militant-student-professor-artist-curator, elaborate circuits and logics that divert or reroute the simple institutional and market circuit. And we must not limit the precincts of art to galleries, museums, and fairs, which are only the most visible venues: There are also art schools, which train both the favored artists of tomorrow and the activists of altermondialism; there are forums for the discussion and presentation of work, research projects and fieldwork financed by various institutions; there are activist artists who live in squats, actors who work as social educators, parallel circuits of musicians, video makers, and Internet artists developing all over the place. This is a world in search of something, a world that asks what it means to make art today and therefore crossbreeds competences, combining media—photography, text, video, drawing—a world that puts the status of art alongside precarious forms of freelance work rather than in the great activist tradition and that therefore is also less sensitive to the nihilism that has afflicted the intellectual class. This “multi-mediality,” this uncertain circulation between craft and activism, may engender a certain amount of uncertainty or naiveté. But it is also the terrain of political reflection and debate—a bit more tonic than that found on the official political stage. And one cannot confuse it with the commotion of the great multimedia spectacle or with the market's need for “spectacle.” The “needs” of the market fluctuate, and today it seems to be betting on “the return of painting” over the development of hybrid forms. The idea of emancipation implies that there are never places that impose their law, that there are always several spaces in a space, several ways of occupying it, and each time the trick is knowing what sort of capacities one is setting in motion, what sort of world one is constructing.

**KELSEY:** I would say that no matter how nonspecific their practices or the products they make, all artists today still have a very specific job to do. The professional artist's task is to produce and circulate



values as efficiently as possible. Art fairs and museums demand this professionalism. So I guess this is a question about the specificity of art as a profession...

**RANCIÈRE:** Yes, but precisely “to produce and circulate values” does not in and of itself define a profession. There are many ways to produce value and many professional competences that fail to produce it. If we shift our gaze from the darlings of the art market, we see that an artist today makes several types of work and has several types of income. In this respect he is closer to the general condition of labor. The movement of freelance artists and entertainment-industry workers in France translates this mixed reality well. We do not live in a world defined by a single law. The practices that give rise to commodification also define the cross circuits and modes of appropriation with respect to market circulation.

111 **CARNEVALE:** In any case, it's not a question of extracting oneself from market circulation. Does anyone still believe in the search for exteriority in relation to the commodity today? Antonio Negri, for example, argues precisely that there is no possibility of standing outside the market, and through this Marxist reading he concludes that transformation therefore must arise from within capitalism itself. But in any case, there is no true outside. Do you believe that an aesthetic practice that critiques and subverts the becoming-merchandise of art is still possible?

**RANCIÈRE:** To ask, How can one escape the market? is one of those questions whose principal virtue is one's pleasure in declaring it insoluble. Money is necessary to make art; to make a living you have to sell the fruits of your labor. So art is a market, and there's no getting around it. For artists as for everyone else, there's the problem of knowing where to plant one's feet, of knowing what one is doing in a particular place, in a particular system of exchange. One must find ways to create other places, or other uses for places. But one must extricate this project from the dramatic alternatives expressed in questions like, How do we escape the market, subvert it, etc.? If anyone knows how to overthrow capitalism, why don't they just start doing it? But critics of the market are content to rest their own authority on the endless demonstration

that everyone else is naive or a profiteer; in short, they capitalize on the declaration of our powerlessness. The critique of the market today has become a morose reassessment that, contrary to its stated aims, serves to forestall the emancipation of minds and practices. And it ends up sounding not dissimilar to reactionary discourse. These critics of the market call for subversion only to declare it impossible and to abandon all hope for emancipation. For me, the fundamental question is to explore the possibility of maintaining spaces of play. To discover how to produce forms for the presentation of objects, forms for the organization of spaces, that thwart expectations. The main enemy of artistic creativity as well as of political creativity is consensus—that is, inscription within given roles, possibilities, and competences. Godard said ironically that the epic was for Israel and the documentary for Palestinians. Which is to say that the distribution of genres—for example, the division between the freedom of fiction and the reality of the news—is always already a distribution of possibilities and capacities: To say that, in the dominant regime of representation, documentary is for the Palestinians is to say that they can only offer the bodies of their victims to the gaze of news cameras or to the compassionate gaze at their suffering. That is, the world is divided between those who can and those who cannot afford the luxury of playing with words and images. Subversion begins when this division is contested, as when a Palestinian filmmaker like Elia Suleiman makes a comedy about the daily repression and humiliation that Israeli checkpoints represent and transforms a young Palestinian resistance fighter into a manga character. Think also of the work of Lebanese artists like Walid Raad, Khalil Joreige, Joana Hadjithomas, Tony Chakar, Lamia Joreige, and Jalal Toufic, who, through their films, installations, and performances, blur the interplay between fact and fiction to establish a new relationship to the civil war and to the occupation, by way of the subjective gaze or the fictive inquiry, making “fictional archives” of the war, fictionalizing the *détournement* of a surveillance camera to film a sunset, or playing with the sounds of mortar shells and fireworks, and so on. This very constructed, at times playful, relationship to their history addresses a spectator whose interpretive and emotional capacity is not only acknowledged but called upon. In other words, the work is constructed in such a way that it is lip to the spectator to interpret it and to react to it affectively.

**CARNEVALE:** In “The Emancipated Spectator,” a talk you gave in Frankfurt in 2004, you say that emancipation “begins when we dismiss the opposition between looking and acting and understand that the distribution of the visible itself is part of the configuration of domination and subjection.” That is, of course, linked to this idea of the distribution of the sensible, but how does this type of looking that you are describing now allow us to disengage from various types of actions through other processes of subjectivization or through the transformation of objects? Do you see this more as a process of subjectivization or as a materialist process of action on the environment?

**RANCIÈRE:** I am trying to reexamine the idea that certain types of material arrangements have automatic effects in terms of subjectivization or, on the contrary, political alienation. For example, one condition typically thought necessary for the politicization of art is the becoming-active of the spectator. This way of thinking already implies a judgment namely, that to be a spectator means to be passive. But to look and to listen requires the work of attention, selection, reappropriation, a way of making one’s own film, one’s own text, one’s own installation out of what the artist has presented. What artists and curators present are places where one circulates differently between things, images, and words; there are tempos, a slow pace, a pause; there are arrangements of signs, a bringing together of distant things, schisms within united things. We should not simply ask how representations will translate into reality. Artistic forms are not purely subjective while political acts are objective realities. A political declaration or manifestation, like an artistic form, is an arrangement of words, a montage of gestures, an occupation of spaces. In both cases what is produced is a modification of the fabric of the sensible, a transformation of the visible given, intensities, names that one can give to things, the landscape of the possible. What truly distinguishes political actions is that these operations are the acts of a collective subject offering itself as a representative of everyone, and of the capacity of everyone. This type of creativity is specific, but it is based on modifications to the fabric of the sensible, produced in particular by artistic reconfigurations of space and time, forms and meanings. In any case, a process of subjectivization is certainly a “materialist process of action on the environment.”

**KELSEY:** You use the word *police* to identify all the social and political forces that constantly try to keep things, activities, and people in their proper places. Police is whatever impedes the crossing of boundaries and disciplines. But doesn't it sometimes seem that in our times "police" might describe instead the forces that demand and facilitate constant circulation, that promote the efficiency of a boundary crossing that no longer produces problems for the existing order? A circulation where nothing really moves? In any case, some might say these are the conditions under which contemporary art attempts to define and think itself.

**RANCIÈRE:** There are two questions. One has to do with the concept of the police in general, the other with the way one might describe the forms of power currently at work in our societies. I myself say that the catchphrase of the police is "Move along! There's nothing to *see*." The police define the configuration of the visible, the thinkable, and the possible through a systematic production of the given, not through spectacular strategies of control and repression. Which also means that policing is exerted through all sorts of channels in the social body as well as through the managerial organisms of the state and the market. That said, your question refers to the somewhat too easily accepted thesis that today everything is becoming liquid; that soon the only thing capitalism will produce is life experiences for narcissistic consumers; and that the state's only function will be to usher in the great flood. One has even read—in Zygmunt Bauman's writings, for example—hallucinatory declarations that states now restrain themselves from any will to military expansion and control, and that while they may sometimes send "smart" missiles discreetly over populations, that is only to open the floodgates wide to new "fluid, global, and liquid" powers. Frankly, the people of the Middle East would be happy if that were true, and undocumented immigrants would be really happy if the police "obliged" them to cross borders en masse. The truth is that we live in a world of absolutely material things produced by forms of work that are closer to sweatshop labor than to high-tech virtuosity. In this world, the borders are as solid as the inequalities, and, until there's proof to the contrary, the United States doesn't envision tearing down its wall but adding a thousand miles to it. The truth is, above all, that the police order is always at once a system of circulation and a system

of borders. And the practice of dissensus is always a practice that both crosses the boundaries and stops traffic. In this sense, there is a whole school of so-called critical thought and art that, despite its oppositional rhetoric, is entirely integrated within the space of consensus. I'm thinking of all those works that pretend to reveal to us the omnipotence of market flows, the reign of the spectacle, the pornography of power. I think of the statufication of media icons à la Jeff Koons's *Michael Jackson and Bubbles* [1988]. I think of Paul McCarthy and Jason Rhoades's spectacular 2002 installation *Shit Plug*, which placed the excrement of visitors to Documenta 11 in containers to show us the gigantic waste of the society of the spectacle and to reveal the participation of art in the empire of merchandise and spectacle. I think of all these recycled objects mixed with advertising imagery, quotations of social realist imagery, fairy tales, and video games that go from fair to fair, to the four corners of the world. If there is a circulation that should be stopped at this point, it's this circulation of stereotypes that critique stereotypes, giant stuffed animals that denounce our infantilization, media images that denounce the media, spectacular installations that denounce the spectacle, etc. There is a whole series of forms of critical or activist art that are caught up in this police logic of the equivalence of the power of the market and the power of its denunciation. The work of dissensus is to always reexamine the boundaries between what is supposed to be normal and what is supposed to be subversive, between what is supposed to be active, and therefore political, and what is supposed to be passive or distant, and therefore apolitical. That is what I was just saying about Pedro Costa's films. I was also thinking of the portfolio of images by Chris Marker published recently in these pages ["The Revenge of the Eye," *Artforum*, Summer 2006]—pictures of French students in the spring of 2006 protesting against a law that would have made working conditions for young people less secure. By proceeding in two modes, through filming and through manipulated screen captures from the video footage, Marker created a sort of fabulous population out of groups of real protesters. I'm thinking in particular of an image of a group of young people in hooded sweatshirts. During the riots in the Parisian *banlieue* in the fall of 2005, these hoods, covering the heads of Arab and black youth, became a stigma: They were compared both to terrorists' masks and to Muslim girls' veils. The hoods became the symbol of a population locked up inside its own idiocy. Now, in "The Revenge of the Eye," they transform the

young people into medieval monks, bringing to mind Saint Francis's companions in Rossellini's film. The protestors become a "fabulous" population in Deleuze's sense. It's as if the capacity of art brought to bear on the figures were actually a property of the figures themselves. That's an example of a reversal of perspective. And I think what art can do is always a matter of the reversal of perspectives. Police consists in saying: Here is the definition of subversive art. Politics, on the other hand, says: No, there is no subversive form of art in and of itself; there is a sort of permanent guerrilla war being waged to define the potentialities of forms of art and the political potentialities of anyone at all.

**KELSEY:** When I saw those Chris Marker images, I immediately thought of police surveillance methods. Identifying individuals in a crowd of demonstrators, isolating their faces—it's a similar technique.

**RANCIÈRE:** It's not a technique for identifying individuals. It's a tactic for blurring identities. The ambition here isn't to locate individuals but to blur roles, to extricate characters from their documentary identity in order to give them a fictional or legendary cast.

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**KELSEY:** Speaking of surfaces, you have described the modernist surface as a paratactical space, or a site of exchange, where language, images, and actions collide and transform one another. In a hyperactive world of surfaces, can we still say that the surface is a public or common space? Or would you say that the nature of the surface has changed in the meantime?

**RANCIÈRE:** Contrary to the modernist thesis, the surface has not been a boundary, isolating the purity of an art, but, rather, a place of slippage between various spaces. Mallarmé gives a persuasive example of this when he defines dance as a form of writing on the surface of the floor and seeks to transpose this choreographic writing to the written page. The great artistic effervescence that modernism wanted to bend to its paradigm of separation was on the contrary determined by this slippage of surfaces from one to another: the page, the canvas, the musical score, the dance floor. Today the "surface" has a bad reputation: The Marxist critical tradition that called for seizing the reality hitherto concealed from us morphed, by way of Debord and Baudrillard, into

the idea that there is nothing behind the surface, that it is the place where all things are equivalent, where everything is equivalent with its image, and every image with its own lie. Thus the dogmatism of the hidden truth has become the nihilism of the ubiquitous lie of the market. And suddenly we valorize all these installations that monumentalize the screen or place it in a dark cube and thus allow us to uncover its lie once again. But the media screen is not flat. The anchorman who occupies its surface ceaselessly reports on the depth of a world that he unfolds and refolds, a “profound” world that testifies to him and that he confiscates. Critical pretension then risks constructing a space homologous to that of the consensual police. On the other hand, surfaces of cinematic projection in theaters or museums might exert a critical function with respect to the depth of the media, by returning the image to the fragility of its surface and letting it linger over fragments of the world and discourse about the world where conflict and injustice take time to appear and express themselves. I think of the time that a filmmaker like Chantal Akerman takes to glide along the wall of a Mexican border in her film *De l'autre côté* [From the Other Side, 2002] or to allow the discourse of those who want to leave and the discourse of those who are defending their space against them to unfold. Here the screen performs a separating function that maintains the border in question precisely, the border that, by crossing it constantly, the to-and-fro of information makes disappear. The flattening of the surface takes on the function of a divide. It's not an overwhelming subversion. But the politics of aesthetics involves a multiplicity of small ruptures, of small shifts, that refuse the blackmail of radical subversion.

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**KELSEY:** And of course the surface is now also completely integrated into the space of work. When we work, which is to say, when we communicate, we are mostly sliding on these surfaces.

**RANCIÈRE:** There again we must relativize the idea that everything has become immaterial, that work is nothing but screens, and that screens are a surface of slippage, etc. I don't have a lot of sympathy for Santiago Sierra's actions, but when he pays immigrant workers minimum wage to dig their own graves or to get tattoos that signify their condition, he reminds us at least that the “equivalence” of an hour of work and its effect on the body is not the so-called equivalence of everything that slides across a screen. The screen is neither Big Brother nor a network



of collective intelligence representing the power of the “multitudes.” A screen is not so much a surface of reproduction as the site of a construction, not a mere surface of equivalence on which we slip but a place where a process of transformation occurs. The problem lies in knowing what types of surfaces to construct in order to disrupt the normal functioning of surfaces and depths. What happens in video projections that cast a spectacle of solitude on the white walls of museums—as in the work of Eija-Liisa Ahtila, say—or of everyday misery, as in that of Gillian Wearing? If we change the dimensions, if we go from the TV screen to three images simultaneously projected on the walls of a room, will we disrupt the logic of the production of the everyday? That remains to be seen, but in any case the surface, like the image, is not the amorphous destiny of things—it’s a process of art that changes the coordinates of the given.

**KELSEY:** Video installations tend to reproduce the everyday activity of window-shopping. I rarely feel emancipated in a video installation.

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**RANCIÈRE:** There is no reason to be emancipated by a video installation. But we must refuse the logic that says the video projection, the TV screen, and the shop-window are the same thing. No surface produces emancipation in and of itself. The problem is to define a way of looking that doesn’t preempt the gaze of the spectator. It’s true for spectacular installations, but it’s also true for the photographs of blast furnaces or of warehouses and shipping containers that anticipate a new objective gaze as a product of objective framing against blank backgrounds. We cannot escape the slippages of the surface and the gaze. Emancipation is the possibility of a spectator’s gaze other than the one that was programmed. This goes for the critical artist as well as for the window dresser.

**CARNEVALE:** So, another question about the surface: Can one properly receive a reflection on all these themes inscribed in a space that is half-filled with ads for galleries and half-filled with articles that serve to sell what is being shown in galleries?

**RANCIÈRE:** We have to refuse the false choice between “collaboration or exodus” demanded by contemporary thinkers like Paolo Virno. There are, no doubt, artists in search of intellectual legitimacy, curators and

119 gallery directors who think it's good for sales to organize panel discussions at art fairs or to publish theoretical texts in magazines that promote the artists on the market. There are also artists and curators who think it's necessary to subvert the status quo from within the institutions and the market. This creates mixed spaces where people interested in the "latest" art and those interested in the subversion of the existing order can meet. In any case, the art market today passes through these places of speech and thought, which it does not really dominate. The question then becomes, What can we do there? I am doing this interview for *Artforum*, where it will appear among ads for galleries, just as I spoke two years ago at the Frieze Art Fair, where, as at all fairs, there were galleries selling their wares, but also visitors who constructed their own pathways through the labyrinth of merchandise—young artists, freelance curators, directors of alternative institutions, who came looking for ideas or to share experiences. This defines a particular circle in the circle of circles that make up the fair, one of these indeterminate spaces whose own possibilities can be amplified. I try to say what seems true to me and what I think might be useful structuring this space of discussion. At Frieze, I participated in a forum on "Art, Politics, and Popularity." For me, it was an occasion to reflect on the kinship or distance between two notions of popularity: one tied to the idea of serving a popular cause and the other tied to the idea of satisfying a broad public. In certain art institutions, there is a tendency to equate the two, to give political value to the types of exhibitions that, by installing a lot of fun installations in a post-Pop style, are likely to attract the "outer-borough youth" and therefore to produce a positive political effect. At Frieze there were a lot of discussions about all this with artists, critics, and curators. As to the effect that might have, that's the affair of those who listen to me or read me and who decide on the power to accord my words. Emancipation is also knowing that one cannot place one's thinking into other people's heads, that one cannot anticipate its effect. I've said what I've had to say, and people will make of it what they will.

**KELSEY:** Did you give them good ammunition?

**RANCIÈRE:** I don't have any silver bullets. There aren't any, in any case. My role is not to supply weapons but to help invent other criteria for reflecting on the works of art, methods, and types of diagnostics

that constitute art's present. I never say what should be done or how to do it. I try to redraw the map of the thinkable in order to bring out the impossibilities and prohibitions that are often lodged at the very heart of thought that imagines itself to be subversive.

\* See Jacques Ranciere, *The Nights of Labor: The Workers' Dream in Nineteenth-Century France*, trans. John Drury (Philadelphia: Temple University Press, 1989).

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Published in *Artforum*, March 2007.

# Art as Occupation

## Claims for an Autonomy of Life

HITO STEYERL

*I want you to take out your cellphone. Open the video. Record whatever you see for a couple of seconds. No cuts. You are allowed to move around, to pan and zoom. Use effects only if they are built in. Keep doing this for one month, every day. Now stop. Listen.*

**LET'S START WITH A SIMPLE PROPOSITION: WHAT USED TO BE WORK HAS** increasingly been turned into occupation.<sup>1</sup>

This change in terminology may look trivial. In fact, almost everything changes on the way from work to occupation—the economic framework, but also its implications for space and temporality.

If we think of work as labor, it implies a beginning, a producer, and, eventually, a result. Work is primarily seen as a means to an end:

a product, a reward, or a wage. It is an instrumental relation. It also produces a subject by means of alienation. An occupation is the opposite. An occupation keeps people busy instead of giving them paid labor.<sup>2</sup>

An occupation is not hinged on any result; it has no necessary conclusion. As such, it knows no traditional alienation, nor any corresponding idea of subjectivity. An occupation doesn't necessarily assume remuneration either, since the process is thought to contain its own gratification. It has no temporal framework except the passing of time itself. It is not centered on a producer/worker, but includes consumers, reproducers, even destroyers, time-wasters, and bystanders—in essence, anybody seeking distraction or engagement.

## **Occupation**

The shift from work to occupation applies in the most different areas of contemporary daily activity. It marks a transition far greater than the often-described shift from a Fordist to post-Fordist economy. Instead of being seen as a means of earning, it is seen as a way of spending time and resources. It clearly accents the passage from an economy based on production to an economy fueled by waste, from time progressing to time spent or even idled away, from a space defined by clear divisions to an entangled and complex territory.

Perhaps most importantly: occupation is not a means to an end, as traditional labor is. Occupation is in many cases an end in itself.

Occupation is connected to activity, service, distraction, therapy, and engagement. But also to conquest, invasion, and seizure. In the military, occupation refers to extreme power relations, spatial complication, and 3-D sovereignty. It is imposed by the occupier on the occupied, who may or may not resist it. The objective is often expansion, but also neutralization, stranglehold, and the quelling of autonomy.

Occupation often implies endless mediation, eternal process, indeterminate negotiation, and the blurring of spatial divisions. It has no built-in outcome or resolution. It also refers to appropriation, colonization, and extraction. In its processual aspect occupation is both permanent and uneven—and its connotations are completely different for the occupied and the occupier.

Of course occupations—in all the different senses of the word—are not the same. But the mimetic force of the term operates in each of the different meanings and draws them toward each other. There is a

magic affinity within the word itself: if it sounds the same, the force of similarity works from within it.<sup>3</sup> The force of naming reaches across difference to uncomfortably approximate situations that are otherwise segregated and hierarchized by tradition, interest, and privilege.

## Occupation as Art

In the context of art, the transition from work to occupation has additional implications. What happens to the work of art in this process? Does it too transform into an occupation?

In part, it does. What used to materialize exclusively as object or product—as (art)work—now tends to appear as activity or performance. These can be as endless as strained budgets and attention spans will allow. Today the traditional work of art has been largely supplemented by art as a process—as an occupation.<sup>4</sup>

Art is an occupation in that it keeps people busy—spectators and many others. In many rich countries art denotes a quite popular occupational scheme. The idea that it contains its own gratification and needs no remuneration is quite accepted in the cultural workplace. The paradigm of the culture industry provided an example of an economy that functioned by producing an increasing number of occupations (and distractions) for people who were in many cases working for free. Additionally, there are now occupational schemes in the guise of art education. More and more post- and postpost-graduate programs shield prospective artists from the pressure of (public or private) art markets. Art education now takes longer—it creates zones of occupation, which yield fewer “works” but more processes, forms of knowledge, fields of engagement, and planes of relationality. It also produces ever-more educators, mediators, guides, and even guards—all of whose conditions of occupation are again processual (and ill- or unpaid).

The professional and militarized meaning of occupation unexpectedly intersect here—in the role of the guard or attendant—to create a contradictory space. Recently, a professor at the University of Chicago suggested that museum guards should be armed.<sup>5</sup> Of course, he was referring primarily to guards in (formerly) occupied countries like Iraq and other states in the midst of political upheaval, but by citing potential breakdowns of civic order he folded First World locations into his appeal. What’s more, art occupation as a means of killing time intersects with the military sense of spatial control in the figure

of the museum guard—some of whom may already be military veterans. Intensified security mutates the sites of art and inscribes the museum or gallery into a sequence of stages of potential violence.

Another prime example in the complicated topology of occupation is the figure of the intern (in a museum, a gallery, or, most likely, an isolated project).<sup>6</sup> The term “intern” is linked to internment, confinement, and detention, whether involuntary or voluntary. She is supposed to be on the inside of the system, yet is excluded from payment. She is inside labor but outside remuneration: stuck in a space that includes the outside and excludes the inside simultaneously. As a result, she works to sustain her own occupation.

Both examples produce a fractured time-space with varying degrees of occupational intensity. These zones are very much shut off from one another, yet interlocked and interdependent. The schematics of art occupation reveal a check-pointed system, complete with gatekeepers, access levels, and close management of movement and information. Its architecture is astonishingly complex. Some parts are forcefully immobilized, their autonomy denied and quelled in order to keep other parts more mobile. Occupation works on both sides: forcefully seizing and keeping out, inclusion and exclusion, managing access and flow. It may not come as surprise that this pattern often but not always follows fault lines of class and political economy.

In poorer and underdeveloped parts of the world, the immediate grip of art might seem to lessen. But art-as-occupation in these places can more powerfully serve the larger ideological deflections within capitalism and even profit concretely from labor stripped of rights.<sup>7</sup> Here, migrant, liberal, and urban squalor can again be exploited by artists who use misery as raw material. Art “upgrades” poorer neighborhoods by aestheticizing their status as urban ruins and drives out long-term inhabitants after the area becomes fashionable.<sup>8</sup> Thus art assists in the structuring, hierarchizing, seizing, up- or downgrading of space; in organizing, wasting, or simply consuming time through vague distraction or committed pursuit of largely unpaid para-productive activity; and it divvies up roles in the figures of artist, audience, freelance curator, or uploader of cellphone videos to a museum website.

Generally speaking, art is part of an uneven global system, one that under-develops some parts of the world, while overdeveloping others—and the boundaries between both areas interlock and overlap.



## Life and Autonomy

But beyond all this, art doesn't stop at occupying people, space, or time. It also occupies life as such.

Why should that be the case? Let's start with a small detour on artistic autonomy. Artistic autonomy was traditionally predicated not on occupation, but on separation—more precisely, on art's separation from life.<sup>9</sup> As artistic production became more specialized in an industrial world marked by an increasing division of labor, it also grew increasingly divorced from direct functionality.<sup>10</sup> While it apparently evaded instrumentalization, it simultaneously lost social relevance. As a reaction, different avant-gardes set out to break the barriers of art and to recreate its relation to life.

Their hope was for art to dissolve within life, to be infused with a revolutionary jolt. What happened was rather the contrary. To push the point: life has been occupied by art, because art's initial forays back into life and daily practice gradually turned into routine incursions, and then into constant occupation. Nowadays, the invasion of life by art is not the exception, but the rule. Artistic autonomy was meant to separate art from the zone of daily routine—from mundane life, intentionality, utility, production, and instrumental reason—in order to distance it from rules of efficiency and social coercion. But this incompletely segregated area then incorporated all that it broke from in the first place, recasting the old order within its own aesthetic paradigms. The incorporation of art within life was once a political project (both for the Left and Right), but the incorporation of life within art is now an aesthetic project, and it coincides with an overall aestheticization of politics.

On all levels of everyday activity, art not only invades life, but occupies it. This doesn't mean that it's omnipresent. It just means that it has established a complex topology of both overbearing presence and gaping absence—both of which impact daily life.

## Checklist

But, you may respond, apart from occasional exposure, I have nothing to do with art whatsoever! How can my life be occupied by it? Perhaps one of the following questions applies to you:

Does art possess you in the guise of endless self-performance?<sup>11</sup> Do you wake feeling like a multiple? Are you on constant auto-display?

Have you been beautified, improved, upgraded, or attempted to do this to anyone/thing else? Has your rent doubled because a few kids with brushes relocated into that dilapidated building next door? Have your feelings been designed, or do you feel designed by your iPhone?

Or, on the contrary, is access to art (and its production) being withdrawn, slashed, cut off, impoverished, and hidden behind insurmountable barriers? Is labor in this field unpaid? Do you live in a city that redirects a huge portion of its cultural budget to fund a one-off art exhibition? Is conceptual art from your region privatized by predatory banks?

All of these are symptoms of artistic occupation. While, on the one hand, artistic occupation completely invades life, it also cuts off much art from circulation.

### **Division of Labor**

Of course, even if they had wanted to, the avant-gardes could never have achieved the dissolution of the border between art and life on their own. One of the reasons has to do with a rather paradoxical development at the root of artistic autonomy. According to Peter Bürger, art acquired a special status within the bourgeois capitalist system because artists somehow refused to follow the specialization required by other professions. While in its time this contributed to claims for artistic autonomy, more recent advances in neoliberal modes of production in many occupational fields started to reverse the division of labor.<sup>12</sup> The artist-as-dilettante and biopolitical designer was overtaken by the clerk-as-innovator, the technician-as-entrepreneur, the laborer-as-engineer, the manager-as-genius, and (worst of all) the administrator-as-revolutionary.

As a template for many forms of contemporary occupation, multitasking marks the reversal of the division of labor: the fusion of professions, or rather their confusion. The example of the artist as creative polymath now serves as a role model (or excuse) to legitimate the universalization of professional dilettantism and overexertion in order to save money on specialized labor.

If the origin of artistic autonomy lies in the refusal of the division of labor (and the alienation and subjection that accompany it), this refusal has now been reintegrated into neoliberal modes of production to set free dormant potentials for financial expansion. In

this way, the logic of autonomy spread to the point where it tipped into new dominant ideologies of flexibility and self-entrepreneurship, acquiring new political meanings as well. Workers, feminists, and youth movements of the 1970s started claiming autonomy from labor and the regime of the factory.<sup>13</sup> Capital reacted to this flight by designing its own version of autonomy: the autonomy of capital from workers.<sup>14</sup> The rebellious, autonomous force of those various struggles became a catalyst for the capitalist reinvention of labor relations as such. Desire for self-determination was rearticulated as a self-entrepreneurial business model, the hope to overcome alienation was transformed into serial narcissism and overidentification with one's occupation. Only in this context can we understand why contemporary occupations that promise an unalienated lifestyle are somehow believed to contain their own gratification. But the relief from alienation they suggest takes on the form of a more pervasive self-oppression, which arguably could be much worse than traditional alienation.<sup>15</sup>

127 The struggles around autonomy, and above all capital's response to them are thus deeply ingrained into the transition from work to occupation. As we have seen, this transition is based on the role model of the artist as a person who refuses the division of labor and leads an unalienated lifestyle. This is one of the templates for new occupational forms of life that are all-encompassing, passionate, self-oppressive, and narcissistic to the bone.

To paraphrase Allan Kaprow: life in a gallery is like fucking in a cemetery.<sup>16</sup> We could add that things become even worse as the gallery spills back into life: as the gallery/cemetery invades life, one begins to feel unable to fuck anywhere else.<sup>17</sup>

## Occupation, Again

This might be the time to start exploring the next meaning of occupation: the meaning it has taken on in countless squats and takeovers in recent years. As the occupiers of the New School in

2008 emphasized, this type of occupation tries to intervene into the governing forms of occupational time and space, instead of simply blocking and immobilizing a specific area:

Occupation mandates the inversion of the standard dimensions of space. Space in an occupation is not merely the container of our bodies, it is a plane of potentiality that has been frozen by the logic of the commodity. In an

occupation, one must engage with space topologically, as a strategist, asking: What are its holes, entrances, exits? How can one disalienate it, disidentify it, make it inoperative, communize it?<sup>18</sup>

To unfreeze the forces that lie dormant in the petrified space of occupation means to rearticulate their functional uses, to make them non-efficient, non-instrumental, and non-intentional in their capacities as tools for social coercion. It also means to demilitarize it—at least in terms of hierarchy—and to then militarize it differently. Now, to free an art space from art-as-occupation seems a paradoxical task, especially when art spaces extend beyond the traditional gallery. On the other hand, it is also not difficult to imagine how any of these spaces might operate in a non-efficient, non-instrumental, and non-productive way.

But which is the space we should occupy? Of course, at this moment suggestions abound for museums, galleries, and other art spaces to be occupied. There is absolutely nothing wrong with that; all these spaces should be occupied, now, again, and forever. But again, none of these spaces is strictly coexistent with our own multiple spaces of occupation. The realms of art remain mostly adjacent to the incongruent territories that stitch up and articulate the incoherent accumulation of times and spaces by which we are occupied. At the end of the day, people might have to leave the site of occupation in order to go home to do the thing formerly called labor: wipe off the tear gas, go pick up their kids from child care, and otherwise get on with their lives.<sup>19</sup> Because these lives happen in the vast and unpredictable territory of occupation, and this is also where lives are being occupied. I am suggesting that we occupy this space. But where is it? And how can it be claimed?

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### **The Territory of Occupation**

The territory of occupation is not a single physical place, and is certainly not to be found within any existing occupied territory. It is a space of affect, materially supported by ripped reality. It can actualize anywhere, at any time. It exists as a possible experience. It may consist of a composite and montaged sequence of movements through sampled checkpoints, airport security checks, cash tills, aerial viewpoints, body scanners, scattered labor, revolving glass doors, duty-free stores. How do I know? Remember the beginning of this text? I asked you to record a few seconds each day on your cellphone. Well, this is the sequence

that accumulated in my phone; walking the territory of occupation, for months on end.

Walking through cold winter sun and fading insurrections sustained and amplified by mobile phones. Sharing hope with crowds yearning for spring. A spring that feels necessary, vital, unavoidable. But spring didn't come this year. It didn't come in summer, nor in autumn. Winter came around again, yet spring wouldn't draw any closer. Occupations came and froze, were trampled under, drowned in gas, shot at. In that year people courageously, desperately, passionately fought to achieve spring. But it remained elusive. And while spring was violently kept at bay, this sequence accumulated in my cellphone. A sequence powered by tear gas, heartbreak, and permanent transition. Recording the pursuit of spring.

Jump cut to Cobra helicopters hovering over mass graves, zebra wipe to shopping malls, mosaic to spam filters, SIM cards, nomad weavers; spiral effect to border detention, child care, and digital exhaustion.<sup>20</sup> Gas clouds dissolving between high-rise buildings. Exasperation. The territory of occupation is a place of enclosure, extraction, hedging, and constant harassment, of getting pushed, patronized, surveilled, dead-lined, detained, delayed, hurried—it encourages a condition that is always too late, too early, arrested, overwhelmed, lost, falling.

Your phone is driving you through this journey, driving you mad, extracting value, whining like a baby, purring like a lover, bombarding you with deadening, maddening, embarrassing, outrageous claims for time, space, attention, credit card numbers. It copy-pastes your life to countless unintelligible pictures that have no meaning, no audience, no purpose, but do have impact, punch, and speed. It accumulates love letters, insults, invoices, drafts, endless communication. It is being tracked and scanned, turning you into transparent digits, into motion as a blur. A digital eye as your heart in hand. It is witness and informer. If it gives away your position, it means you'll retroactively have had one. If you film the sniper that shoots at you, the phone will have faced his aim. He will have been framed and fixed, a faceless pixel composition.<sup>21</sup> Your phone is your brain in corporate design, your heart as a product, the Apple of your eye.

Your life condenses into an object in the palm of your hand, ready to be slammed into a wall and still grinning at you, shattered, dictating deadlines, recording, interrupting.

The territory of occupation is a green-screened territory, madly assembled and conjectured by zapping, copy-paste operations, incongruously keyed in, ripped, ripping apart, breaking lives and heart. It is a space governed not only by 3-D sovereignty, but 4-D sovereignty because it occupies time, a 5-D sovereignty because it governs from the virtual, and an  $n$ -D sovereignty from above, beyond, across—in Dolby Surround. Time asynchronously crashes into space; accumulating by spasms of capital, despair, and desire running wild.

Here and elsewhere, now and then, delay and echo, past and future, day and night nest within each other like unrendered digital effects. Both temporal and spatial occupation intersect to produce individualized timelines, intensified by fragmented circuits of production and augmented military realities. They can be recorded, objectified, and thus made tangible and real. A matter in motion, made of poor images, lending flow to material reality. It is important to emphasize that these are not just passive remnants of individual or subjective movements. Rather, they are sequences that create individuals by means of occupation. They also subject them to occupation. As material condensations of conflictive forces, they catalyze resistance, opportunism, resignation. They trigger full stops and passionate abandon. They steer, shock, and seduce.

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I might have sent something to you from my phone. See it spreading. See it become invaded by other sequences, many sequences, see it being re-montaged, rearticulated, reedited. Let's merge and rip apart our scenarios of occupation. Break continuity. Juxtapose. Edit in parallel. Jump the axe. Build suspense. Pause. Countershoot. Keep chasing spring.

These are our territories of occupation, forcefully kept apart from each other, each in his and her own corporate enclosure. Let's reedit them. Rebuild. Rearrange. Wreck. Articulate. Alienate. Unfreeze. Accelerate. Inhabit. Occupy.

## Notes

1. I am ripping these ideas from a brilliant observation by the Carrot Workers' Collective. See their "On Free Labour," <http://carrotworkers.wordpress.com/on-free-labour/>.

2. "The European Union language promoting 'occupation' rather than 'employment,' marking a subtle but interesting semantic shift towards keeping the active population 'busy' rather than trying to create jobs." Ibid.

3. Walter Benjamin, "Doctrine of the Similar," in *Selected Writings*, eds. Marcus Bullock and Michael W. Jennings, trans. Howard Eiland (Cambridge, MA: Belknap Press, 1999), 2: 694–711, esp. 696.

4. One could even say: the work of art is tied to the idea of a product (bound up in a complex system of valorization). Art-as-occupation bypasses the end result of production by immediately turning the making-of into commodity.

5. Lawrence Rothfield as quoted in John Hooper, "Arm museum guards to prevent looting, says professor," *Guardian*, July 10, 2011, <http://www.guardian.co.uk/culture/2011/jul/10/arm-museum-guards-looting-war>. "Professor Lawrence Rothfield, faculty director of the University of Chicago's cultural policy center, told the *Guardian* that ministries, foundations and local authorities 'should not assume that the brutal policing job required to prevent looters and professional art thieves from carrying away items is just one for the national police or for other forces not under their direct control.' He was speaking in advance of the annual conference of the Association for Research into Crimes Against Art (ARCA), held over the weekend in the central Italian town of Amelia. Rothfield said he would also like to see museum attendants, site wardens and others given thorough training in crowd control. And not just in the developing world."

6. "The figure of the intern appears in this context paradigmatic as it negotiates the collapse of the boundaries between Education, Work and Life." Carrot Workers' Collective, "On Free Labour."

7. As critiqued recently by Walid Raad in the building of the Abu Dhabi Guggenheim franchise and related labor issues. See Ben Davis, "Interview with Walid Raad About the Guggenheim Abu Dhabi," *ARTINFO*, June 9, 2011, <http://www.artinfo.com/news/story/37846/walid-raad-onwhy-the-guggenheim-abu-dhabimust-be-built-on-a-foundation-ofworkers-rights/>.

8. Central here is Martha Rosler's three-part essay, "Culture Class: Art, Creativity, Urbanism," *e-flux journal*, no. 21 (December 2010); no. 23 (March 2011); and no. 25 (May 2011).

9. These paragraphs are entirely due to the pervasive influence of Sven Lütticken's excellent text "Acting on the Omnipresent Frontiers of Autonomy," in *To The Arts, Citizens!*, eds. Óscar Faria and Joao Fernandes (Porto: Serralves, 2010), 146–67. Lütticken also commissioned the initial version of this text, to be published soon as a "Black Box" version in a special edition of *OPEN* magazine.

10. The emphasis here is on the word *obvious*, since art evidently retained a major function in developing a particular division of senses, class distinction, and bourgeois subjectivity even as it became more divorced from religious or overt representational function. Its autonomy presented itself as disinterested and dispassionate, while at the same time mimetically adapting the form and structure of capitalist commodities.



11. The Invisible Committee lay out the terms for occupational performativity: "Producing oneself is becoming the dominant occupation of a society where production no longer has an object: like a carpenter who's been evicted from his shop and in desperation sets about hammering and sawing himself. All these young people smiling for their job interviews, who have their teeth whitened to give them an edge, who go to nightclubs to boost the company spirit, who learn English to advance their careers, who get divorced or married to move up the ladder, who take courses in leadership or practice 'self-improvement' in order to better 'manage conflicts'—the most intimate "self-improvement," says one guru, 'will lead to increased emotional stability, to smoother and more open relationships, to sharper intellectual focus, and therefore to a better economic performance.'" *The Invisible Committee, The Coming Insurrection* (Los Angeles: Semiotext(e), 2009), 16.
12. Peter Bürger, *Theory of the Avant-Garde* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1984).
13. It is interesting to make a link at this point to classical key texts of autonomist thought as collected in Sylvère Lotringer and Christian Marazzi, eds., *Autonomia: Post-Political Politics* (Los Angeles: Semiotext(e), 2007).
14. Antonio Negri has detailed the restructuring of the northern Italian labor force after the 1970s, while Paolo Virno and Franco "Bifo" Berardi both emphasize that the autonomous tendencies expressed the refusal of labor and the rebellious feminist, youth, and workers' movements in the '70s was recaptured into new, flexibilized, and entrepreneurial forms of coercion. More recently Berardi has emphasized the new conditions of subjective identification with labor and its self-perpetuating narcissistic components. See, among others, Antonio Negri, "Reti produttive e territori: il caso del Nord-Est italiano," in *L'inverno è finito: Scritti sulla trasformazione negata (1989–1995)*, ed. Giovanni Caccia (Rome: Castelvecchi, 1996), 66–80; Paolo Virno, "Do You Remember Counterrevolution?," in *Radical Thought in Italy: A Potential Politics*, eds. Michael Hardt and Paolo Virno (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1996); and Franco "Bifo" Berardi, *The Soul at Work: From Alienation to Autonomy* (Los Angeles: Semiotext(e)), 2010.
15. I have repeatedly argued that one should not seek to escape alienation but on the contrary embrace it as well as the status of objectivity and objecthood that goes along with it.
16. In "What Is a Museum? Dialogue with Robert Smithson," *Museum World* no. 9 (1967), reprinted in Jack Flam, ed., *The Writings of Robert Smithson* (New York: New York University Press, 1979), 43–51.
17. Remember also the now unfortunately defunct meaning of occupation. During the fifteenth and sixteenth centuries "to occupy" was a euphemism for "have sexual intercourse with," which fell from usage almost completely during the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries.
18. Inoperative Committee, *Preoccupied: The Logic of Occupation* (2009), 11.
19. In the sense of squatting, which in contrast to other types of occupation is limited spatially and temporally.
20. I copied the form of my sequence from Imri Kahn's lovely video *Rebecca makes it!*, where it appears with different imagery.
21. This description is directly inspired by Rabih Mroué's terrific lecture, "The Pixelated Revolution," on the use of cellphones in recent Syrian uprisings.

# Eventwork

## The Fourfold Matrix of Contemporary Social Movements

BRIAN HOLMES

**ART INTO LIFE:** Is there any more persistent utopia in the history of vanguard expressions?

Shedding its external forms, its inherited techniques, its specialized materials, art becomes a living gesture, rippling out across the sensible surface of humanity. It creates an ethos, a mythos, an intensely vibrant presence; it migrates from the pencil, the chisel or the brush into ways of doing and modes of being. From the German Romantics to the Beatnik poets, from the Dadaists to the Living Theater, this story has been told again and again, each time with a startling twist on the same underlying phrase. At stake is more than the search for stylistic renewal; it's about transforming your everyday existence.

**THEORY INTO REVOLUTION:** Is there any more ardent desire for the future of leftist thinking?

The fundamental demand of the thinkers and rioters of May '68 was also "change life" (*changer la vie*). But from a revolutionary viewpoint, the consequences of intimate desire should be economic and structural. Situationist theory had no meaning without immediate communization. "Marx, Mao, Marcuse" was a slogan for the streets. The self-overcoming of art was understood as just one part of a program to vanquish class divides, transform labor relations and put alienated individuals back in touch with one another.

The '60s were full of wild fantasies and unrealized potentials; yet significant experiments were undertaken, with consequences extending up to the present. Campus radicalism gave new life to educational alternatives, resulting in large-scale initiatives like the University Without Walls in the United States or the Open University in Britain. The counter-cultural use of hand-held video cameras led to radical media projects like Paper Tiger Television, Deep Dish TV and Indymedia. Politics itself went through a metamorphosis: autonomous Marxism gave rise to self-organized projects all across Europe, while affinity groups based on Quaker conceptions of direct democracy took deep root in the U.S., structuring the anti-nuclear movement, becoming professionalized in the NGOs of the '80s, then surging back at full anarchist force in Seattle. Since the AIDS movements, activism regained urgency and seriousness, grappling with concrete and progressively more complex issues such as globalization and climate change. Yet, society still tends to absorb the transformations, to neutralize the inventions. The question is not how to aestheticize "living as form," in order to display the results for contemplation in a museum. The question is how to change the forms in which we are living.

Social movements are vehicles for this metamorphosis. At times they generate historic events, like the occupation of public squares that unfolded across the world in 2011. Through the stoppage of "business as usual" they alter life paths, shift labor routines and career horizons along with laws and governments, and contribute to long-lasting philosophical and affective transfigurations. Yet despite their historic dimensions, the sources of social movements are intimate, aspirational: they grow out of small groups, they crystallize around what Guattari called "non-discursive, pathic knowledge."<sup>1</sup> Their capacity for sparking change is widely coveted in our era. Micro-movements in the form

of trends, fashions, and crazes are continually ignited, channeled and fueled by public relations strategists, in order to instrumentalize the upwelling of social desire. Still grassroots groups, vanguard projects and intentional communities continue to take their own lives as raw material, inventing alternate futures and hoping to generate models, possibilities, and tools for others.

Absorbing all this historical experience, social movements have expanded to include at least four dimensions. Critical research is fundamental to today's movements, which are always at grips with complex legal, scientific, and economic problems. Participatory art is vital to any group taking its issues to the streets, because it stresses a commitment to both representation and lived experience. Networked communications and strategies of mass-media penetration are another characteristic of contemporary movements, because ideas and directly embodied struggles just disappear without a megaphone. Finally, social movement politics consists in the collaborative coordination or "self-organization" of this whole set of practices, gathering forces, orchestrating efforts and helping to unleash events and to deal with their consequences. These different strands interweave, condense into gestures and events, and disperse again, creating the dynamics of the movement. A fourfold matrix replaces any single, easily definable initiative.

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No doubt the complexity of this fourfold process explains the rarity of effective interventionism. But that's the challenge of political engagement. What has to be grasped, if we want to renew our democratic culture, is the convergence of art, theory, media, and politics into a mobile force that oversteps the limits of any professional sphere or disciplinary field, while still drawing on their knowledge and technical capacities. This essay tries to develop a concept for the fourfold matrix of contemporary social movements. The name I propose for it is *eventwork*.

But wait a minute—if we're talking grassroots activism, why insist on complexity? Why even mention the disciplines and the professions? The reason is that the grassroots has gone urban and suburban and suburban, and it's *us*: the precarious middle-class subjects of contemporary capitalist societies, which are based on knowledge, technology, and communication. Our disciplines create these societies. Our professions seem only able to maintain them as they are. The point is to explore

how we can *act*, and what role art, theory, media, and self-organization can have in effective forms of intervention.

Like the sociologist Ulrich Beck in his book on *The Risk Society*, I think the movement outside the modernist institutions has been made necessary by the failure of those institutions to respond to the dangers created by modernization itself.<sup>2</sup> The dangers of modernization grew clearer at the close of the postwar period, when the Keynesian-Fordist mode of capitalist development revealed its inherent links with inequality, war, ecological destruction, and the repression of minorities. It became apparent that not only “hard” science, but also the social sciences and humanities were helping to produce the problems; yet nothing in their internal criteria of truth or legitimacy or professional success could restrain them. The most conscious and articulate exponents of each of the separated disciplines then felt the need to develop a critique of their own field, and to merge that critique into an attempt at social transformation. Only in this way could they find an immanent response to the sources of their own alienation.<sup>3</sup>

So there is a paradox of eventwork: it starts from within the disciplines whose limits it seeks to overcome. In this text I’ll start with the internal contradictions of avant-garde art in the late ’60s, and with the attempt by one group of Latin American artists to go beyond them. With that narrative as a backdrop, I’ll sketch out the emergence of an expanded realm of activism in the post-Fordist era, from the ’70s up to now. The aim is to discover some basic ideas that could change the way each of us conceives of the relations between our daily life, our politics, and our discipline or profession.

In this movement, certain truisms will run up against their shortfalls. What I want to make clear is that despite their rhetorical attractions, the twin formulas of “art into life” and “theory into revolution” are too simplistic to describe the pathways that lead people beyond their professional and institutional limits. The failure to describe those paths with the right mix of urgency and complexity leads to the bromides of “relational art” (intimacy on display in a sterile white cube) or the radical chic of “critical theory” (revolution for sale in an academic bookstore). Through their weakness and emptiness, these failures of cultural critique provoke reactionary calls for a return to the modernist disciplines (as when we are enjoined to restrict artistic practice to some version of “pure form”). The result is a disjunction from the present

and a lingering state of collective paralysis, which is the most striking characteristic of left politics today, at least in the U.S.

As living conditions deteriorate in the capitalist democracies, one pressing question is how artists, intellectuals, media makers, and political organizers can come together to help change the course of collective existence. The answer lies in a move across institutional boundaries and modernist norms. Each of the separated disciplines needs to define the paradox of eventwork—and thereby open up a place for itself, beyond itself, in the fourfold matrix of contemporary social movements.

## History

Let's go straight to the most impressive example of eventwork in the late '60s, which unfolds not in New York or London or Paris, but in Argentina. This was the moment of the country's industrial take-off, when an expanding middle class enjoyed close links to cultural developments in the metropolitan centers. In capitalist societies, utopian longings often accompany periods of economic growth, because the abundance of material and symbolic production promises real use values. But since mid-1966 Argentina was under the grip of a military dictatorship, which repressed individual freedoms and imposed brutal programs of economic rationalization. Under these conditions, a circle of self-consciously "vanguard" artists in Buenos Aires and Rosario began to sense the futility of the rapid cycles of formal innovation that had marked the decade of pop, op, happenings, minimalism, performance and conceptualism. They became keenly aware that inventions designed to shatter bourgeois norms were being used as signs of prestige and intellectual superiority by the elites, to the point where, as León Ferrari wrote, "the culture created by the artist becomes his enemy."<sup>4</sup> Therefore these artists began an increasingly violent break with the gallery and museum circuits that had formerly sustained their practices, using transgressive works, actions and declarations to curtail their own participation in officially sanctioned shows.

By mid-summer of 1968 they decided to organize an independent congress, the "First National Meeting on Avant-Garde Art." The goal was to define their autonomy from the elite cultural system, to formulate their social ideal—a Guevarist revolution—and to plan the realization of a work that would embody their aims.<sup>5</sup> In this work, the aesthetic material, as Ferrari explained, would no longer be articulated

according to formal innovations, but instead with clearly referential and immediately graspable “meanings” (*significados*) which themselves would be subjected to transgressive profanation, in order to generate a powerful denunciation of existing social conditions. Echoing Ferrari’s approach in the language of semiotics and information theory, another contributor to the meeting, Nicolás Rosa, insisted that “the work is experimental when it proceeds to the *rupture of the cultural model*.” This rupture was to be frank, direct and irreversible, enacted in a visual, verbal and gestural language that would allow anyone to participate. It would also be disseminated in the mass media. Situated outside the elite institutions and linked to the social context of its realization, the work would “produce an effect similar to that of political action,” in the words of the artist Juan Pablo Renzi, who had drafted the framing text for the meeting. And because “ideological statements are easily absorbed,” Renzi continued, the revolutionary work “transforms the ideology into a real event from within its own structure.” Such was the theoretical program that led to *Tucumán Arde*, or “Tucumán is Burning.”

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What was meant by the title? The group sought to denounce the process of restructuring that had been imposed on the sugar industry in the province of Tucumán, resulting in widespread unemployment and hunger for the workers. Beyond Tucumán itself, they wanted to reveal the larger program of economic rationalization being carried by the national bourgeoisie under dictatorial command, in line with U.S. and European interests. To do so would require the production of “counter-information” on the strictly semiotic level, using factual analysis to oppose the government propaganda campaign that surrounded the restructuring. So the artists collaborated with students, professors, filmmakers, photographers, journalists and a left-wing union, engaging in a covert fact-finding mission which they disguised as a traditional cultural project. In the course of two trips they visited fields and factories, circulated questionnaires, interviewed, filmed, and photographed workers and their families, putting their preliminary analysis to the test of experience. This on-site research was the first phase of the project, culminating in a press conference where they ripped the veil from their activities and explained the real purpose of their work, hoping—in vain, as it turned out—to raise a scandal and push their messages out into the mass media.



An effective denunciation would also require the production of what the artists called an “over-informational circuit” (*circuito sobreinformacional*) which would operate on the perceptual level, in order to overcome the persuasive power of the official propaganda both quantitatively and qualitatively.<sup>6</sup> For the second phase they formulated a multilayered exhibition strategy, beginning with teaser campaigns that introduced potential publics to the words “Tucumán” and “Tucumán Arde” through posters, playbills, cinema screens and graffiti interventions. They then created two multimedia exhibitions in union halls in Rosario and Buenos Aires, attempting in both cases to use not a single room but the entire building. They deployed press clippings and images from the government propaganda campaign and contrasted these to economic and public-health statistics as well as diagrams indicating the links between industrial interests, local and national officials, and foreign capital. They displayed documentary photographs, projected films, delivered speeches, and circulated a critical study prepared by the collaborating sociologists. At roughly half-hour intervals the lights were cut, dramatizing the kinds of infrastructural failures that were typically endured by people in the provinces. Bitter coffee was served to give the public a taste of the hunger affecting a cane-growing region where food, and sugar itself, was in chronically short supply.

The exhibition strategy was a success. The opening in Rosario on November 3 attracted over a thousand people on the first night, resulting in a prolongation of the show for two weeks instead of one. It was restaged in Buenos Aires on November 25, this time including the covertly produced “Third Cinema” film, *La Hora de los Hornos* (The Hour of the Furnaces, 1968), by Octavio Getino and Fernando Solanas, whose projection was halted every half hour for immediate discussion. The level of courage implied by this process, under conditions of military rule, is difficult to imagine. The show in Buenos Aires was censored on its second day by threats against the union, exposing the repressive character of the regime and inviting a further radicalization of the country’s cultural producers.

Because of its collective organization, its experimental nature, its investigatory process, its tight articulation of analytic and aesthetic means, its oppositional stance and its untimely closure, *Tucumán Arde* has become something of a myth in Argentina and abroad. The American critic Lucy Lippard, who would later be active in the Art Workers Coalition, repeatedly claimed that she had been radicalized

by her meeting with members of the group on a visit to Argentina in October 1968.<sup>7</sup> The French journal *Robho* devoted a dossier to the work in 1971, emphasizing its break with bourgeois art and its revolutionary potentials. In its more recent reception, which has included a large number of shows and articles from the late 1990s on, the project has been linked to “global conceptualism,” and to an interventionist form of media art based on semiotic analysis.<sup>8</sup> This attention from the museum world testifies to an intense public interest in a process that emphasized common speech, direct action and a break with bourgeois cultural forms. But that same attention opens up the questions of absorption, banalization, and neutralization. In the most thoroughly documented analysis, the Argentine art historian Ana Longoni vindicates the aims of the project by asking the obvious disciplinary question: “Where’s the vanguard art in *Tucumán Arde*?” She responds: “If *Tucumán Arde* can be confused with a political act, it is because it *was* a political act. The artists had realized a work that extended the limits of art to zones that did not correspond, that were external.”<sup>9</sup>

So what was achieved by the move to these zones external to art? At a time when institutional channels were blocked and the modernizing process had become a dictatorial nightmare, the project was able to orchestrate the efforts of a broad division of cultural labor, capable of analyzing complex social phenomena. It then disseminated the results of this labor through the expressive practices of an event, in order to produce awareness and contribute to active resistance. What resulted was a change in the finality, or indeed the use-value, of cultural production. As one statement indicates, the project was conceived “to help make possible the creation of an *alternative culture* that can form part of the revolutionary process.”<sup>10</sup> Or as the *Robho* dossier put it, “The extra imagination found in *Tucumán Arde*, if compared for example to the usual agitation campaign, comes expressly from a practice of, and a preliminary reflection on, the notions of event, participation, and proliferation of the aesthetic experience.”<sup>11</sup> That’s a perfect definition of eventwork.

Its effectiveness comes from a perceptual, analytic, and expressive collaboration, which lends an affective charge to the interpretation of a real-world situation. Such work is capable of touching people, of involving them, not through a retreat to the exalted dreamland of a white cube, but instead within the everyday complexity of life in a technocratic society, where the most elusive possibility is that of shared

resistance to the vast, encroaching programs of government and industry. My question is how to extend that resistance into the present, how to make it last past each singular event. Graciela Carnevale, who preserved the archive at great risk throughout the Videla dictatorship, said this to me in a conversation, “There is always a great difficulty in how to transmit this experience or make it perceptible, beyond the information about it.”<sup>12</sup> Her dilemma is that of everyone who has been involved in a significant social movement: “How to share an experience that produced such great transformations in oneself?”

### **Actuality**

The four vectors of eventwork converge into action beneath the pressure of injustice and the anguishing awareness of risk, in situations where your own discipline, profession, or institution proves incapable of responding, so that some other course of action must be taken. “I don’t know what to do but I’m gonna do it,” as my comrades in the Ne Pas Plier collective used to say. Activism is the making-common of a desire and a resolve to change the forms of living, under uncertain conditions, without any guarantees. When this desire and resolve can be shared, the intensive assemblage of a social movement brings both the agonistic and the utopian dimension into daily experience, into leisure hours, passionate relations, the home, the bed, your dreams. It brings public responsibility into private passion. That’s living as political form.

Of course it’s not supposed to be that way in modern society, where an institution exists, in theory at least, to address every need or problem. Experts manage risks on government time; artists produce the highest sublimations of entertainment; the media respond faithfully to popular demands for information; and social movements are the disciplined actions of organized laborers seeking higher wages, all beneath the watchful eye of professional politicians. That’s the theory, anyway. This functional division of industrial society reached its peak of democratic legitimacy in the decades after WWII, when the Keynesian-Fordist welfare state claimed to achieve stable growth, income equality and social benefits for an expanding “middle class,” which included unionized factory laborers alongside a broad range of university-trained technicians, service providers and managers. What revealed itself in 1968 and afterwards, however, was not just the inability of the industrial state to go on delivering the goods for that

expanding middle class. What revealed itself, with particular intensity inside the educational and cultural circuits made possible by economic growth, was a shared awareness that the theory doesn't work, and that despite its supposedly corrective institutions, capitalist modernization itself produces conditions of gendered and racialized exploitation, neocolonial expropriation, mental and emotional manipulation, and ever-worsening environmental pollution.

The sense of a threat lodged within the utopian promises of Keynesian social democracy and Fordist industrial modernization was a major motivator for the emergence of the so-called "new social movements," which could not be reduced to workplace bargaining demands and which could not be adequately conceived within the frameworks of traditional class analysis. In these movements, to the dismay of an older and more doctrinaire political generation, issues of alienation and therefore of identity began coming ineluctably to the fore.<sup>13</sup> The people involved in the civil rights and antiwar campaigns, and then in a far wider range of struggles, had to bring new causes, arenas, and strategies of action into some kind of alignment with thorny questions of perception knowledge, communication, motivation, identity, trust, and even self-analysis, all of which became only more acute as immediate material necessity receded in the consumer societies. Artistic expression now appeared as a necessarily ambiguous mediator between personal conviction and public representation. The intersections of theory and daily life became more dense and entangled, with the result that each movement, or even each campaign, turned into something original and surprising, the momentary public crystallization of a singular group process. The simultaneous inadequacy and necessity of this way of doing politics has come to define the entire period of post-Fordism: it is *our* actuality, our present tense, at least from a progressive-left perspective. If an intervention like *Tucumán Arde* can still appear familiar, in its modes of organization and operation if not in its ideologies and revolutionary horizons, it's because the basic sets of objective and subjective problems underlying it are still very much with us today.

The similarities and the differences will come into focus if we think back on one of the most influential social movements of the post-Fordist period, which is AIDS activism. I wasn't part of that movement and I can't bear witness to its intensities. But what's impressive from a distance is the collective reaction to a situation of extreme risk,

where the issue is not so much the technical capacity as the *willingness* of a democratic society to respond to dangers that weigh disproportionately on stigmatized minorities. Rather than widespread police and military repression, as under a dictatorship, it is the perception of an intimate threat that lays the basis for militant action. A totalizing ideological framework like Marxism can no longer be counted on to structure this perception. Instead, subjectivity and daily experience become crucial. The questions of who you are, who others think you are, what rights you are accorded and what rights you are ready to demand, are all life or death issues, felt and spontaneously expressed before being formulated and represented. A recent book called *Moving Politics* makes clear how much these affective dimensions mattered, after a threshold of indignation had been crossed and grief could be transformed into anger.<sup>14</sup> At the micro level, the “event” could be a glance or a tear in private, a gesture or a speech in a meeting, no less than a public action or a media intervention. These are all ways to elicit and modulate affects, which mobilize activist groups while exerting a powerful force on others—whether friends or strangers, elected officials or anonymous spectators.

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Yet indignation and rage, along with solidarity and love for fellow human beings, can only be the immediate foundations of a social movement. Critical research, symbolic expression, media and self-organization were the operative vectors for AIDS activism, just as they had been for a vanguard project like *Tucumán Arde*. At first the issues themselves had to be defined, and they were highly complex, involving the social rights to fund or instigate certain lines of research, to legalize or ingest certain kinds of medications, to receive or dispense certain kinds of publicly supported care. Scientific and legal investigations, often performed by AIDS sufferers, were an essential part of this effort.<sup>15</sup> At the same time, it became apparent that the rights to treatment and care were dependent not only on scientific and legal arguments, but also on the ways that risk groups were represented in the media, and on the ways that politicians monitored, solicited or encouraged those representations, in order to advance their own policies and ensure their own reelection.<sup>16</sup> The struggle had to be brought into the fields of education and cultural production, whose influence on the structures of feeling and belief should not be underestimated. But at the same time, it had to reach into the mass media. This breakthrough to the media required the staging of striking events on the ground,

often with resources borrowed from visual art and performance. And all that entailed the coordination of a far-flung division of labor under more or less anarchic conditions, where there could be no director, no hierarchy, no flow chart, etc. To give some insight into this complex interweave of AIDS activism, I'd like to quote the art critic and activist Douglas Crimp, from an interview conducted by Tina Takemoto:

**CRIMP:** Within ACT UP, there was a sophistication about the uses of representation for activist politics. This awareness came not only from people who knew art theory but also from people who worked in public relations, design, and advertising ... . So ACT UP was a weird hybrid of traditional leftist politics, innovative postmodern theory, and access to professional resources ... . One of the most emblematic images associated with ACT UP was the SILENCE=DEATH logo, composed of a simple pink triangle on a black background with white sans serif type. This image was created by a group of gay designers who organized the Silence=Death Project before ACT UP even started. Although they didn't design the logo for ACT UP, they lent it to the movement, and it was used on T-shirts as an official emblem.<sup>17</sup>

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Again, what lends resonance to the event is the difference of the people involved, and therefore of the techniques and knowledges they are able to bring to bear, whenever they find the inspiration, the need, or the courage to overstep their disciplinary boundaries and start to work at odds with the dominant functions. That all of this should only become possible under the menace of illness and the direct threat of death is, I think, of the essence: it's not something one should avoid or shirk away from. Social movements arise and spread in the face of existential threats. The issue then, in our blinkered and controlled and self-satisfied societies, is the perception of a threat and the modulation of affect in the face of it—or in other words, the way you rupture a cultural pattern, the way you motivate yourself and others to undertake a course of action. This paradoxical figure of a social solidarity founded on an experience of rupture brings us back to the larger, trans-generational question of eventwork, exactly as Graciela Carnevale expressed it: "How to share an experience that produced such great transformations in oneself?"

Speaking from my own experience, I've also participated in a large movement, or really a constellation of social movements: the global justice movements opposing financially driven globalization. Starting

around 1994, they arose across the earth, in Mexico, India, France, Britain, the U.S., etc. From the beginning these movements interacted very extensively, first through labor, NGO and anarchist networks, then in counter-summits mounted in the face of the transnational institutions such as the WTO and the IMF, then through the veritable popular universities constituted by the World Social Forums. The people I worked with, mainly in Europe but also in the Americas, were able to twist or subvert some of the utopian energies of the Internet boom, combining them with labor struggles, ecological movements and indigenous demands to create a political response to corporate globalization. In the course of these movements, the relations between critical and philosophical investigation, artistic processes, direct action, and tactical media opened up a vast new field of practice, more vital than anything I had previously known. The Argentine insurrection of December 2001 was a culminating moment of this global cycle of struggles; and for those involved with art, not only the history but also the actuality of social movements in Argentina seemed to confirm the idea that aesthetic activity could be placed into a new framework, one that was no longer freighted with the strict separations of the modernist institutions.<sup>18</sup> All this convinced me that contemporary art in its most challenging and experimental forms has indeed been suffering from the “cultural confinement” that Robert Smithson diagnosed long ago, and that its real possibilities unfold on more engaging terrains, whose access has mostly been foreclosed by the institutional frameworks of museums, galleries, magazines, university departments, etc.<sup>19</sup> The concept of eventwork is based directly on these experiences with contemporary social movements, which have generated important co-operative and communicational capacities and helped to revitalize left political culture.

It's obvious, however, that the global justice movements were not able to overturn the ruling consensus on capitalist development and economic growth. In fact, the recent financial crisis has both vindicated the arguments we began making as much as fifteen years ago, and also shown those arguments to be politically powerless, incapable of contributing to any concrete change. A similar verdict was delivered to environmental activists by the debacle of the Copenhagen climate summit.

All of that fits into a larger pattern. If I had to offer a one-sentence version of what I've learned about society since 1994, it might go like



this: “The entire edifice of speculative, computer-managed, gentrifying, militarized, over-polluted, just-in-time, debt-driven neoliberal globalization has taken form, since the early ’80s, as a way to block the institutional changes that were first set into motion by the new social movements of the ’60s-’70s.” In other words, cultural confinement does not just affect experimental art, as Smithson seems to have believed. Instead it applies to all egalitarian, emancipatory, and ecological aspirations in the post-Fordist period, which now reveals itself to be a period of pure crisis management, one that has not produced any fundamental solutions to the problems of industrial modernization, but has only exported them across the earth. Yet those problems are serious; they have accumulated on every level. What’s the use of aesthetics if you don’t have eyes to see? It would not be a metaphor to say that the U.S., in particular, has been living on credit since the outset of the post-Fordist period. Now, slowly but inexorably, the bill is coming due.

## Perspectives

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The question I’ve tried to raise is this: how do cultural practices become political acts? Or to put it more sharply: how does the operative force of a cultural activity, or indeed of a discipline, somehow break through the normative and legal limits imposed by a profession? How to create an institutional context that offers a chance of mutual recognition and validation for people attempting to give their particular skills and practices a broader meaning and a greater effectiveness?

These questions can be framed, in an inverting mirror, by an image from the wave of protest that swept over the state of Wisconsin in the face of Governor Scott Walker’s ultimately successful bid to impose an austerity plan that includes an end to the right of collective bargaining. The image is a protest snap from someone’s digital camera, reproduced widely on the web.<sup>20</sup> It shows a middle-class white woman standing in front of an American flag, next to a Beaux-Arts statue. She holds a sign in her hands that says in bold capital letters: **“I AM NOT REPLACEABLE, I AM PROFESSIONAL.”**

Who is this woman? An artist? A curator? An art historian? A cultural critic? Why does she proclaim her security in this way? Does she still have a job? Does she still have rights? And how about ourselves? Where do our rights come from? How are they maintained? How are they produced?

It seems to me that in the United States right now, as in other countries, there is a rising feeling of existential threat. Endless warfare, invasive surveillance, economic precariousness, intensified exploitation of the environment, increasing corruption: all of these mark the entry into an era of global tension—a tension that has not been seen since the 1930s. As economic collapse continues and climate change becomes more acute, these dangers will become far more concrete. We urgently need to prepare for the moments when adherence to a social movement becomes inevitable. Yet it appears that laws, ethical codes and the requirements of professionalism in all-absorbing, highly competitive careers, still make it impossible for most Americans to find the time, the place, the medium, the format, the desire, and above all the collective will that would help them to resist the threats. This reminds us of what Thoreau taught in his time, namely that being a citizen of a democratic country means always being on the edge of starting a revolution. Something about our forms of living and working has to change, not just aesthetically and not just in theory, but pragmatically, in terms of the kinds of activity and their modes of organization.<sup>21</sup> Or as Doug Ashford once put it, “Civil disobedience is an art history, too.”<sup>22</sup>

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This essay was written in the summer of 2011, while major social movements continued to unfold across Europe and the Middle East, and a dead calm weighed on the U.S. As we go to press, the game has changed. Hundreds of thousands of people across the country have taken to the streets, set up encampments in public squares, and begun activating all the social, intellectual, and cultural resources at their disposal in order to carry out a deep and searching critique of inequality. Alongside organizers, researchers and media activists, artists have played a role, which continues to expand as more people overstep the boundaries of their disciplinary identities. Social movements come in great waves, generating unpredictable consequences: no one knows what this one will leave behind. But the inspiration of Wisconsin has been fulfilled and its paradoxes have been overcome. Floating above crowds across the country, a very different sign could be seen, pointing to what now appears to be a precarious destiny: **“LOST MY JOB, FOUND AN OCCUPATION.”**

## Notes

\* Concepts of eventwork have previously been developed by Suely Rolnik, "Politics of Flexible Subjectivity: The Event Work of Lygia Clark," in Terry Smith, ed. *Antinomies of Art and Culture* (Duke U.P., 2009); and also by Sylvia Maglione and Graeme Thomson in their exhibition "Blown Up! Eventwork" (2009), documented at <http://facsoflife.wordpress.com/blown-up>. The notion developed here is somewhat different, but I am grateful to both these inspirations.

1. Félix Guattari, *Chaosmosis: an Ethico-Aesthetic Paradigm* (Indiana University Press, 1995), p. 25.

2. Ulrich Beck, *Risk Society: Towards a New Modernity* (London: Sage, 1992, 1st German edition 1986).

3. The most striking example of this self-critique in the social sciences is the reaction of anthropologists to their discipline's participation in the Vietnam War; see for example Dell Hymes, ed., *Reinventing Anthropology* (New York: Random House, 1972).

4. León Ferrari, "The Art of Meanings" (1968) in Inés Katzenstein, ed., *Listen Here Now! Argentine Art of the 1960s: Writings of the Avante-Garde* (New York: MoMA, 2004), p. 312.

5. Four typescripts of texts delivered at this meeting are preserved in the archive of Graciela Carnevale; they are the sources for this paragraph. Three of them (including the one by León Ferrari quoted above) are translated in *Listen Here Now!* *ibid.*, pp. 306-18; the fourth, by Nicolás Rosa, is reproduced in Spanish in Ana Longoni and Mariano Mestman, *Del Di Tella a "Tucumán Arde": Vanguardia artística y política en el 68 argentino* (Buenos Aires: Eudeba, 2008), pp. 174-78.

6. See María Teresa Gramuglio and Nicolás Rosa, "Tucumán Arde" (1968), declaration circulated at the Rosario exhibition, reproduced in *Del Di Tella a Tucumán Arde*, *ibid.*, pp. 233-35. The text is translated under the title "Tucuman Burns" in Alexander Alberro and Blake Stimson, eds., *Conceptual Art: A Critical Anthology* (Cambridge: MIT Press, 1999), pp. 76-79; but *circuito sobreinformacional* is rendered as "informational circuit," losing a crucial emphasis.

7. Concerning Lippard's visit to Argentina and her declarations, see Julia Bryan-Wilson, *Art Workers: Radical Practice in the Vietnam War Era* (Berkeley: UC Press, 2009), pp. 132-38.

8. See Mari Carmen Ramírez, "Tactics for Thriving on Adversity: Conceptualism in Latin America, 1960-1980," in Luis Camnitzer, Jane Farver and Rachel Weiss, eds., *Global Conceptualism: Points of Origin: 1950s-1980s*, (New York: Queens Museum of Modern Art, 1999) and Alex Alberro, "A Media Art: Conceptual Art in Latin America," in Michael Newman and Jon Bird, eds., *Rewriting Conceptual Art* (London: Reaktion Books, 1999). Another important book is Andrea Giunta, *Avant-Garde, Internationalism, and Politics: Argentine Art in the Sixties* (Durham: Duke University Press, 2007). Among major exhibitions featuring the archive of *Tucumán Arde* are *Global Conceptualism* (Queens, 1999) *Ex Argentina* (Berlin 2003); *Documenta 12* (Kassel, 2007); and *Forms of Resistance* (Van Abbemuseum, Eindhoven, 2007-2008). A copy of the archive of *Tucumán Arde* has been acquired by the MacBa in Barcelona.

9. Ana Longoni and Mariano Mestman, *Del Di Tella a Tucumán Arde*, p. 216.
10. "Frente a los acontecimientos políticos....," unsigned document in the archive of Graciela Carnevale (2 pages), apparently a sketch for a broadside to be distributed at the Rosario exhibition.
11. "Dossier Argentine: Les fils de Marx et de Mondrian," *Robbo* no. 5-6, Paris, 1971, p. 16.
12. Conversation with Graciela Carnevale, Rosario, Argentina, April 11, 2011.
13. For the concept of "new social movements" and a review of the most prominent theories about them, see Donatella della Porta and Mario Diani, *Social Movements: An Introduction*, 2d ed. (London: Blackwell, 2006), chap. 1.
14. Deborah B. Gould, *Moving Politics: Emotion and Act Up's Fight against AIDS* (Chicago: U of C Press, 2009).
15. See Steven Epstein, *Impure Science: AIDS, Activism, and the Politics of Knowledge* (Berkeley: UC Press, 1996).
16. See Douglas Crimp, ed., *AIDS: Cultural Analysis/Cultural Activism* (Boston: MIT Press, 1988).
17. Tina Takemoto, "The Melancholia of AIDS: Interview with Douglas Crimp," *Art Journal*, Vol. 62, No. 4 (Winter, 2003), p. 83.
18. For the role of artists in Argentine social movements, see Brian Holmes, "Remember the Present: Representations of Crisis in Argentina, in *Escape the Overcode: Artistic Activism in the Control Society* (WHW: Van Abbemuseum, Zagreb and Eindhoven, 2009); also available at <http://brianholmes.wordpress.com/2007/04/28/remember-the-present>. For a book that literally attempts to rewrite the history of contemporary art on the basis of *Tucumán Arde*, see Luis Camnitzer, *Conceptualism in Latin American Art: Didactics of Liberation* (Texas: U of Texas Press, 2007).
19. Robert Smithson, "Cultural Confinement" (1972), in Nancy Holt, ed. *The Writings of Robert Smithson* (New York: NYU Press, 1979).
20. See among many other blogs and websites, <http://thepragmaticprogressive.org/wp/2011/02/19/a-letter-from-a-union-maid-in-wisconsin> (accessed 07/11/11).
21. This is exactly the conclusion of Dan S. Wang and Nicolas Lampert, "Wisconsin's Lost Strike Moment," at [http://www.justseeds.org/blog/2011/04/wisconsins\\_lost\\_strike\\_moment\\_1.html](http://www.justseeds.org/blog/2011/04/wisconsins_lost_strike_moment_1.html).
22. Doug Ashford and 36 others, *Who Cares* (New York: Creative Time Books, 2006), p. 29.

# Poetics, Commitment

**Ayreen Anastas's M\*Bethlehem  
and Pasolini Pa Palestine**

JALEH MANSOOR

A provisional space for a group of words that have been forced to abandon their meanings. While disruptive, this event of separation may also be enabling; displaced from their “proper” definitional locations, the identities of these word refugees are also rendered indeterminate. This does not mean that they can mean any and everything—wondering in exile, they still bear the traces of the violent interpretive conflicts that have historically attempted to fix them into place and put them to use. Gathered precariously in this new edition of the OED, the word-refugees seem to lose their sense of usefulness. But paradoxically, this loss precipitates the birth of another utility all together; the word-refugee begins to map, usefully, a world in which sense, knowledge and action are lacking absolute guarantees. They map, in other words, the uncertain terrain of the political.<sup>1</sup>

The text accompanies a film, *M\*Bethlehem*, in which a female voice babbles, the voice-over to images shot with documentary starkness of Bethlehem under curfew, a documentary voice-over gone awry. “Babble” flows into sonorous rhythm, an aural texture at odds with the direct visual long shots. This musicality, in turn, solidifies into a system (the alphabet), as it becomes clear that the voice, at once lulling and stuttering, is working through the letters of a dictionary. Text and sound, written by Ayreen Anastas, reminds us that “autonomy” could never be confused with apoliticism. Loss of grounding precipitates a poetics of protest reconcretizing language, and, more broadly, the meaning of activism. Indeterminacy and provisional autonomy articulate those political, social, and economic precarity, becoming more concrete than the meta-political slogans on the one hand, and participatory potlucks, usually mobilized to address such sites.

151 Anastas is a founding member of the artist and activist collective “16 Beaver,” which broadly attempts to set specific and intentional objectives in the interest of transnational anti-capital, anti-corporate movements. 16 Beaver has hosted, among many other events ranging in scope and format, talks by and screenings of filmmaker Harun Farocki, screening of Alexander Kluge’s work, seminars with Brian Holmes on the interconnection of aesthetics and politics, open discussions on Rancière’s work in addition to less delimited tendencies in contemporaneity, such as the recent recrudescences of abstraction; it has hosted autonomist theorist Franco Bifo Berardi as well as activists involved with Tahrir Square demonstrations this past January and February (2011). The collective holds events at institutions in numerous cities, nationally and abroad, hosting teach-ins at MIT, Cambridge among others. A program entitled “strategies of resistance” occurred at the Kunsthalle Exnerghasse, Vienna and the Contemporary Arts Center, Vilnius.

In its “mission statement,” Anastas and fellow founder Rene Gabri state: “16 Beaver is the address of a space initiated/run by artists to create and maintain an ongoing platform for the presentation, production, and discussion of a variety of artistic/cultural/economic/political projects. It is the point of many departures/arrivals.” The description is vague at best, anomic at worst. “Departures and arrivals” become a metaphor for peripatetic transience, evoking the generic space of the airport, the trope of capitalist globalization and the vapid, exhausted monad that postdates the subject created by such spaced. This vagueness, however, is necessitated by the present inadequacy of available

descriptive language to circumscribe 16 Beaver's committed—I take them at their work, and surely the long *duree* of their efforts testifies to their dedication if not the rigor of their rhetoric—attention to many geopolitical contexts in the interest of anti imperialist, transnational class equity.

The risk of symptomizing the globalization it attempts to (those clichéd twin words) “critique” and “resist” are a strength and simultaneous weakness of 16 Beaver. The organizers at 16 Beaver describe their “teach ins” as places to learn “strategies of resistance,” and as “a web-project which is developing in relation to a series of conversations regarding Artists/Collectives/Politics.” Activism here is understood to be a form of organization mobilized toward specific ends, although these ends are understandably held in abeyance, suspended until the right time. That said, the statement continues along weak if not problematic lines: “The idea is to engage these issues while creating new relationships and networks between groups and individuals who would otherwise remain isolated.”<sup>2</sup> The participant who may show up seeking more militant forms of instruction—such as how to perform getting arrested non-violently, how to deal with cops, or what kind of legal aid may be available, how to ward off rape and sexual harassment—is disappointed yet appeased with another potluck and, if lucky, some good conversation.

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The activist horizon of 16 Beaver's “project”—in the sense of an integrated, consistent focus on relevant contemporary problem sets—may or may not be clear. What interests me here is the word “art” in the mission statement, which appears after the term “activism.” The meaning of this word suffers an even greater lapsus. 16 Beaver persists in attempting to define the relationship between activism and art, one of the most continuous, agonistic searches of 20th century Marxism, through committed process over many years, as I have mentioned. That it cannot yet “define” art testifies to the group's endurance: it does not adopt facile slogans. It is, however, evident that “art” is neither a site of autonomy—an exceptional site of “free play”—in the tradition of Baumgarten, Kant, and most significantly, Schiller. And yet, 16 Beaver does not espouse the “Art Into Life” mission of the historical avant-garde; shock, negation, access to oscillating infantile drives, and transgressive “excess” work to counter instrumentality do not constitute its horizon. Finally, it cannot be misrecognized as part of the most compromised misprision of the historical avant-garde: the “relational,” and



open “participatory” ethos of the 90s and early 2000s. The latter takes place, one term among several, in a framework of “the aesthetic turn,” founded on recent interest in the work of Jacques Rancière, to which I will return.<sup>3</sup>

The present essay focuses solely on Ayreen Anastas’s work which diverges from the stated intentions of the collective she co-founded, in turn suggesting a relationship between art and activism other to “art into life.” Anastas embeds most of her artistic practice artist as part of a collaborative effort with Gabri. In 2009, they presented a formal lecture together against American foreign policy in the Middle East at the NY Public Library. By contrast, her solo work—which I differentiate because of the antagonism between activism and art, a friction that makes the co equal labor of political activism on the one hand and poetic, artistic practice all the more imperative—revivifies a negative modernist cultural practice, a set of processes so frequently vilified by critiques of “the autonomy of art” begun by the historical avant-garde and continued into the present.<sup>4</sup>

153 Anastas’s filmic work insists on the provisional autonomy associated with modernist idioms, more specifically poetic language folded in on its own materiality, the condition for the possibility of communication over communication itself. This insistence does not, however, act as a “return,” a “turn,” a trend of any kind, but rather, a historically grounded negative dialectical response to post-fordist conditions which the autonomists (Virno) have characterized as bereft of boundaries between any and all human endeavors. How, then, to impose borders, and in what sense may the recrudescence of an impossible autonomy also impose a politics lost in the collapse of differentiation?

*M\*Bethlehem* (2004) and *Pasolini Pa Palestine* (2005) both use non-referential language, multiple frames set mis-en-abyme in an homage to self-referentiality, and other putatively “formalist” techniques to telegraph the inadequacy of political and meta-political language in thinking “The West Bank.” Tension is maintained not as a formal end in itself nor as an open-ended means, but as a necessary condition for concretizing the abstract, or more radically, thinking the impossible in order to arrive at an understanding that would not merely reproduce the given hegemonic mode of liberal democratic politics, which are entwined in colonialism. Determinative, denotative language remains inadequate to the political indeterminacy of Palestine. The archive of language

articulates the problem of reference and autonomy well. The Oxford English Dictionary, understood as both a “reference” point for “living” language and as a repository of history, a place of dynamic yet specific temporalities and spatialities. *M \* Bethlehem* presents “straight” documentary views, shots extended temporally, of Bethlehem under curfew. The “voiceover” of the documentary is displaced, replaced by Anastas reading, by turns, “theory” (Foucault and Agamben, among others) and The Oxford English Dictionary, and her interruption of both authoritative “sources.” The OED demonstrates the excess and lack of language on the one hand in relation to a preconstituted signifier generative of the power of language as law on the other in aporetic conjuncture. The latter, an abstraction performed concretely at the price of “mere” life,” is performed as such.<sup>5</sup> During the process of making *M \* Bethlehem*, Anastas worked with the OED to generate The New Shorter Oxford English Dictionary, which she discusses as

A provisional space for a group of words that have been forced to abandon their meanings. While disruptive, this event of separation may also be enabling; displaced from their “proper” definitional locations, the identities of these word refugees are also rendered indeterminate. This does not mean that they can mean any and everything—wondering in exile, they still bear the traces of the violent interpretive conflicts that have historically attempted to fix them into place and put them to use. Gathered precariously in this new edition of the OED, the word-refugees seem to lose their sense of usefulness. But paradoxically, this loss precipitates the birth of another utility all together; the word-refugee begins to map, usefully, a world in which sense, knowledge and action are lacking absolute guarantees. They map, in other words, the uncertain terrain of the political.<sup>6</sup>

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What seems at first glance to be a rehearsal of modernist poetics oscillates and finally flickers forth as poetic language operating necessarily—not arbitrarily, not by chance, not open ended—in a constellation of political militancy. The excess and lack of language, far from a rehearsal although it does revivify the premises of Mallermean poetics, is a political condition. This condition, in turn, is one that must be met, but resisting hegemony involves a reshuffling of abstraction and concretion. Commitment is a function of estrangement. One example of a *New OED* entry is “enemy” under E:

**ENEMY** 1. The fact, condition or position of being near or close by; nearness, neighborhood. a in space. b in abstract relations, as kinship; affinity of nature, nearness in time, etc. ...

And “fundamentalism” under F:

**FUNDAMENTALISM** 1. a word, sense, or phrase peculiar to or originating from the United States of America. 2. *fig* to make dark or obscure in meaning or intelligibility, to destroy the clearness of. 3. the great errors and dangers, that may result out of the misconception of the names of things 4. *fig*. A mark of disgrace or infamy; a sign of severe censure or condemnation, regarded as impressed on a person or thing; ‘brand.’ 5. *spec*. The making of distinctions prejudicial to people of a different race or colour from oneself; racial discrimination.

Here, the constitutive potential of language is not reducible to context.<sup>7</sup> It is precisely their provisional decontextualization—an interval apart from the performative that characterizes every aspect of post-industrial life as Virno and the autonomists would have it—that clarifies the concrete specificity of contexts. First, Anastas rehearses Said’s Foucauldian argument in *Orientalism*, namely, the qualifications of the objects originate in the subject and are not inherent attributes of the object. The term “fundamentalism” entered common American English at a particular historical moment (in recent “memory,” the hostage crisis, the beginning the Reagan administration, although the term goes back much further).<sup>8</sup> Extracted from habituated use, permitted to take weight as a temporarily “autonomous” yet contingent object, the word comes into focus as one with particular effects, one whose origins are vague and/or clearly bound up with state ideological apparati. Continuing with Anastas’s entry, the word—a part of code tasked with communication, with some element of transparency in order to be shared among three or more speakers of the code—obscures, darkens, betrays the burden of words. The third part of the entry revisits the way in which power organizes intelligibility, a regime of knowledge, the archive as Foucault discusses it in *The Order of Things* at a place and time. As such language is a system of effects rather than a referential tool. Those effects are material, concrete, impressed on life in its precariousness. None of these potential ends, or provisional closures in meaning, are either explicit or conclusive. Anastas allows the dictionary to be a topology of potentiality, in which reference coagulates, disrupts, and continues to move.

Disruption on the one hand, and imposition of militant meaning, while not antithetical, are allowed the friction necessary to allow each a charge not possible with aestheticist synthesis of art and politics (against which Benjamin warned). Poetic language—unassimilated to slogans—retains revolt in potentio.<sup>9</sup>

Of course that potential has been the object of debate for the last century. It is a truism, indeed a reified assumption, that poetics and political activism are incompatible. Unlike the discursive category “art,” evoked as a generality inclusive of politicized practices such as tactical media, and “politics,” the terms “poetics” and “activism” pose a more specific and localized binary, one that appears, by definition, to obviate the possibility of complex terms: “activist poet,” “poet activist.” “Poetics” forecloses definitive meaning and remains indeterminate while “activism” demands the fulfillment of a bare minimum of predetermined goals. Vulgarly, one is posited as means, the other as ends. Arguments for each have, recursively through the history of 20th C political and cultural speech, suspected advocacy of the other of unaccountability or even violence. The constellation of debates throughout the 20s and 30s among Adorno, Lukacs, Benjamin, and Brecht are one such oft-cited example.<sup>10</sup> Ironically, another instance is the emergent debate after WWII between Sartre’s concept of “Committed Literature,” and Adorno’s aporetic indictment and simultaneous expectations of lyric poetry.<sup>11</sup> His oft cited statement that lyric poetry after Auschwitz is barbaric, frequently cited as an instance of modernism’s autonomy as authoritarian disavowal misses the caveat: “it is all the more necessary.”<sup>12</sup> It also fails to recognize Adorno’s passionate devotion to the necessary impossibility of articulating violence and loss at the historical scale of the Shoah. Commemoration and resistance must be hard won, or they risk being reified, so many fetishes of a post war capitalist democracy in which even suffering and memory become affective trinkets (in a phrase, Oprah culture). Appearances as such do not amount to activism, nor, sadly, to the rigors of poetic language.

Rare are the contingent historical moments wherein both the axes of radical activism and those of sensory experimentation and an investigation into the materiality of language approach a relation of proximity. Claude Cahun’s work with Contre Attaque, the anti-Vichy regime collective, comes to mind, as does her book of experimental verse and prose, *Les Paris Sont Ouverts*.<sup>13</sup> Recently, the relationship between poetic “abstraction” and concrete political action continues to

be rehearsed, often with the same historical figures now crudely instrumentalized as personifications of generalized historical political positions. In an on-line conversation on contemporary politics and art (poetry seems to have been added as a sub category of “art”) in the blog *Evening Will Come*, poet and activist Juliana Spahr, in conversation with Joshua Clover and Chris Nealon remarked: “There is a stand off that could be cartoonized as that between Adorno and Brecht and that part of the problem with how we study literature in the academy is that Adorno has won.”<sup>14</sup> While Spahr acknowledges situating “Brecht” and “Adorno” caricatures—problematic in that both are overtly and equally radically political, and provide different ways of practicing politics—her claim that Adorno “has won” amounts to a hegemonic blindness to poetic language’s ability to “move people to action.” “Adorno has won,” sadly, becomes shorthand for describing the smug self-satisfied stasis of academia. Poetic language, in other words, is not understood to take part in activism. Spahr laments the absence of “movement poetry.” She points out that, far from a means without ends, even the most intimate and/or “open ended” language is active because it “moves” the other, producing affect and possibly action. Of course the nuances in the debates of the Frankfurt school are lost. When Spahr points out that even love poetry moves one to action by effecting affect, she could be citing Adorno as much as Brecht! Discussant Joshua Clover cautions, in response to Spahr, that despite the movement-to-affect inherent to poetic language, writers are not necessarily also organizers, nor does activism move from language to the street. His next claims rehearse Adorno’s famous dictum about the barbarity yet necessity of poetry against a historical horizon set by Auschwitz, without the dictatorial language of course:

At the same time, though, I wanted to suggest that even poets whose work doesn’t initially seem to be thinking about historical crisis, about capitalism, about politics, often are thinking about it. So I wanted to assign myself a task: given that poets aren’t the same as activists, but that poetry is a really sensitive barometer of the present, could I try to describe or act out a reading practice that took poetry seriously as a way of thinking about politics? To answer yes, it turned out, meant to accept that the poetry that interests me runs along a whole gamut of “thinking about politics” that makes more sense if you re-phrase it slightly, as “thinking about the present.” That way, I felt like I could begin to insist that divides in poetry between stances like “quietude” and “activism”

made less sense than did a whole landscape of time-telling strategies that included, yes, straight-up calling for revolution but also a sit-and-wait attitude.<sup>15</sup>

In this internal debate-as-rehearsal of 20th C debate, at stake is the immediacy, the mediation, of call to action. Anastas preserves the tension of “impossibility” and “necessity” passionately set by a position that would later be misunderstood as simply autonomous.<sup>16</sup> At the same time, her abstract language becomes clearly a matter of “Palestine,” and not vaguely, “the present,” which can never be present to itself.<sup>17</sup> The tension, and specificity, of Anastas’s work surfaces a nuance in “modernist aesthetics” too often collapsed into the now, in 2011, vapid term autonomy. For Adorno, preserving tension permitted a true politics rather than works of art [that] merely assimilate themselves to the brute existence against which they protest, in forms so ephemeral (the very charge made against autonomous art by committed writers) that from the first days they belong in the seminars in which they end. The menacing thrust of the antithesis is a reminder of how precarious the condition of art is today. Each of the two alternatives [commitment and autonomy] negates itself with the other. Committed art cancels the distance between the two. ‘Art for art’s sake’ denies by its absolute claims the ineradicable connections with reality which is the polemical a priori of the attempt to make art autonomous from the real, i.e. provisionally detached.<sup>18</sup>

The tension between Anastas’s poeticism—disconnected and reconnected to the documentary quality of the visual field—and activist politics both resists that of the geo-political site she addresses and reflects it. For the political horizon is itself “suspended” in an indeterminate aporetic condition in many contexts. One such example of aporia is “Palestine” itself. Suspended in a non-state, locked in one of the greatest instantiations of nationalism, Israel, a “neither/nor,” or, more accurately and worse, a “both/and,” those who barely survive within the parameters of this non-existent proper name “Palestine” constitute neither an independent state nor a position of clear interiority as an ethnic minority in relation to Israel. Palestinians are not given the rights of citizens but are subject to the law, to numerous and barely mediated forms of discipline, violence, and control.<sup>19</sup> This topology, I would call it an aporetic topology, is well recognized to be the condition of everyday life, indeed precarious survival, in Palestine. The zone of indistinction that subtends modernity acts in a heightened way in that context.

"In *Pasolini Pa Palestine*, Anastas retraces Pier Paolo Pasolini's trip to the West Bank in 1963 to search for an authentic Palestine for his film "The Gospel According to St. Matthew."<sup>20</sup> Anastas works from within Pasolini's search for subaltern authenticity to materialize the post-1948 gradual colonization of the West Bank and Golan Heights. A problem for Anastas with Pasolini, for which she much introduce the fragmentation inherent in language.

Anastas's implicit critique of Pasolini's search for authenticity grounded in the land and those who live on it acknowledges that the concept of an authentic community risks becoming a reaction formation that avoids overcome politics through recourse to the dream of an organic community, a melancholically aestheticized iteration of Romantic imaginaries of the land and "the people."<sup>21</sup> *Pasolini Pa \* Palestine* pays homage to formations substitute a mythic or pseudo-scientific notion of common sense. Examples of this "common sense" include eugenics, the romanticized primitivism of agrarian and Third World Communism, or the statistical fiction of consensus.

159 Ayreen Anastas and Rene Gabri's collaborative work evokes Palestine indirectly. Their best known project, shown at Art in General in 2006, entitled "Means Without Ends: Camp Campaign," took its name from Agamben's *Means without Ends* as well as his concept of the "camp as the nomos of the modern."<sup>22</sup> "Curious" about how a camp such as the one in Guantánamo Bay, Cuba could exist in the 21st century, Anastas and Gabri went on a road trip across the US, starting in New York City and ending on the West Coast. Throughout their journey, Anastas and Gabri filmed specific sites of enclosure—Native American Reservations, gated communities, national parks—and held interviews and public discussions in parking lots, at memorial sites, community centers and exhibition spaces, any remotely public site in order to explore the punitive function of enclosures in modern statist sovereignty.

T.J. Demos, in his ground-breaking essay on Anastas and Gabri's collaborative work, argues that their project carves a space neither aesthetic nor purely political, or neither pure means nor means to an end. "Entitled Means Without Ends: Camp Campaign," Demos argues that the pair "direct the entwinement of aesthetics and politics against the force of separation that has arisen recently in reference to the camp."<sup>23</sup> While the author lauds the Camp Campaign for its politicization of aesthetics, it is never made clear how this operates, if indeed it does, or if the project may not, sadly, aestheticize politics. Part of the indistinct

quality of the work may result from the failure to adequately think the conjuncture of aesthetics and politics more specifically, or how that conjuncture operates in a way specific to Anastas and Gabri's practice rather than the ideas that pre-exist the work. The author tells us many times that the word is both art and politics; however, the conjuncture is neither demonstrated by the essay on the work nor the work itself. Beyond telling us that "the artists break from a descriptive and analytical trajectory by introducing a certain opacity in the map's format, represented by the inclusion of passages of poetic language, stuttering repetitions and nonsensical sequences of words." We are not shown how this absence of sense, stuttering and "poetic language" deliver us to the commitment of Anastas and Gabri's work. Moreover, the aspects of *Camp Campaign* to which Demos refers to as "poetic" differ significantly from that of Anastas's films. While the former generates a collapse of politics and aesthetics to bordering on anomie, the other results in a tension between terms that communicates political aporia with a lucidity that direct denotative language could not achieve.

Demos, after Agamben and dozens of others, applies the concept of biopolitics coined by Foucault in the conclusion to the third volume of *A History of Sexuality*, and elaborated in a lecture entitled "17 March, 1976," delivered at the Collège de France, Foucault defined on biopolitics as "the acquisition of power over man insofar as man is a living being...which led to state control over the biological."<sup>24</sup> Agamben's theorization of the camp as "nomos of the modern" which the *Camp Campaign* explicitly mobilizes, owes its premise to Foucault's framework. Crucially, however, Demos erroneously states that "It is precisely the force of separation—between life and law, between human being and citizen—that for Agamben brings the camp into existence," reversing Agamben's point that it is the *proximity* between life and law that endangers mere life. The latter is susceptible because of its indeterminate proximity, not its distance. It is abandoned by, yet held within, the axes of law.<sup>25</sup> Agamben summarizes his project with the statement: "He who has been banned is *not*, in fact, simply set outside the law and made indifferent to it but rather *abandoned* by it, that is, exposed to a threshold in which life and law, outside and inside, become indistinguishable."<sup>26</sup> He calls this a topological zone of indistinction.<sup>27</sup>

Those who have spent decades on the problem from the vantage within Israel, such as Ariella Azoulay and Adi Ophir argue, the



distinction Benjamin made between law making violence and law preserving violence enacted toward a legally sanctioned end does not apply in Palestine, or any occupied, stateless territory.<sup>28</sup> Suspended violence in the absence of laws or rights are neither constitutive nor preservative. There is no language in keeping with law that could articulate a demographic outside the bounds of language, be it punitive or protective. Ariella Azoulay, describing the intersection of photojournalism and activism in *The Civil Contract of Photography*, discusses the Palestinian as an a-subject position occupying an oblique angle to hegemony. Palestinians are scotomized in civil rights discourses which originate in and revolve around the discourse of the nation state. "Because Palestinians are considered stateless, they are absented from the discourse on citizenship."<sup>29</sup>

Neither Azoulay nor Ophir address cultural production outside of documentary photography as a denotative form by which to communicate with the outside world on behalf of voiceless, within hegemonic order, persons, a culturally oriented activism does exist in Palestine. Khaled Jarrar, a young artist who also lives and works in Ramallah insists on his role as an activist, not unlike Anastas. Trading a concrete gesture for language, Jarrar designed and produced a passport stamp. An occupied territory, there are no institutionalized processes or entry or exit into Palestine. One must pass through myriad Israeli checkpoints but once in Palestinian "territory," can traverse unsurveilled, off of any systematic political metric. In a sense, this allegorizes the degree to which Palestine does not "exist" according to international codes. Visitors are absorbed into the streets of West Bank cities like Ramallah as though off of any map. Jarrar, a la tactical media, mimics forms of discipline and control to challenge it in a way that turns meaning onto the other. Some passport holders yield to a fear of Israeli authority, declining the stamp, while others embrace it as a sign of their own political stance. Jarrar claims "I believe in art that makes a difference, that talks about change. My art is making a political statement."<sup>30</sup> But Jarrar does not make "statements;" he acts, performing within the parameters of every day "life." He actively approaches anyone and everyone in the streets of Ramallah, proposing to act on their passport, a radical militant action in a post 9/11 global order. He is aware of the risks of his actions. Those actions, however, depend on a reliance on the administrative functions that shore up a nation state. He is imagining, in a way not unlike tactical media artists the Yes Men, an alternative

reality, one in which Palestine would be a sovereign state. In this sense, Jarrar relies on the given order of the state and statehood. He mimics Israeli—an extreme form of the modern nation state—nationalist logic. The artist's tactic adheres to neither a Marxist modernist universality nor the transnationalism of the historical avant-gardes, Constructivist, Surrealist or Dada. Yearning for a specificity in a geopolitical site effectively voided, Jarrar locates it in identity: a stamp of national identity. Of course the passport stamps cannot be called nationalist—there is no nation whereof to speak—it does border on identitarian. Identity is a function of the very constitutive violence of which Benjamin speaks in "Critique of Violence," and Hannah Arendt after him in *The Origin of Totalitarianism*. Hannah Arendt, in her well known "The Decline of the Nation State and the End of the Rights of Man" begins with a simple question: how is it that he or she who could embody the rights of man as such, the stateless one, or the refugee, signals a legitimating crisis at the heart of the concept of rights?

The conception of human rights based upon the assumed existence of a human as such, broke down at the very moment that those who professed to believe in it were for the first time confronted with people who had indeed lost all other qualities and specific relationships—except that they were still human.<sup>31</sup>

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The tension between criticality and autonomy associated with modernism has long been dismissed as a lingering Kantianism, owing much, paradoxically, to those in favor of the putative "aesthetic turn."<sup>32</sup> The latter tendency, to which I return, attempts to dissolve the generative friction between art and politics in what risks becoming a neutralizing synthesis, one that betrays both politics/activism and aesthetics/poetics.

Étienne Balibar and Jacques Rancière, among others, have tried to think the necessary connection between aesthetics and resistant social formations, and the collective articulations of dissent through the lens of "human rights" following Arendt, over the past few decades. Despite the fact that neither uses the word "activism" as such—a curious omission in terminology—both try to redefine politics as that which occurs among shifting understandings of "the people" rather than at an electoral level, or what Rancière calls "metapolitics." Protest and forms of critical expression are the object of their common inquiry despite

their many differences. Another shared problem set for both is that of “aesthetics,” which they attempt to wrest from a history of thought inextricably bound with a Kantian legacy. For both, aesthetics do not fall outside the parameters of politics, it does not occupy a position of either alterity or autonomy. Visibility—indeed representation—make both terms dependent on the other. Provisional groupings formed through disagreement who elect to manifest dispute, among whom we might include activists, do so through forms of visibility and representation. Both acknowledge that dissensus entails a sensory elements irreducible to ideology.

In *Politics and the Other Scene*, Balibar builds on Benjamin’s twin concepts of constitutive and maintenance violence. In “Internationalism or Barbarism,” the state, though a source of violence, is a form of necessary violence, one that checks the atavistic tendencies of groups and clans. “The fact remains that nationalism(s), racism(s), and fascism(s) represent a spectrum of ideological formations which, in a sense, presuppose each other.”<sup>33</sup> While this leads to the “phantom” of unified nationality, or impossible nationality, nationalism binds and limits the latter tendencies that are part of its very foundation, its “other scene.”<sup>34</sup> Jarrar’s passport stamp suggests a similar claim: recognition of Palestinian identity as such is foremost, organization to ebb the tide of non-recognition as violence is also emphasized. The passport stamp project reintroduces tactically, and tactfully, a “politics of civility” guarded by the state and perpetually renegotiated through mutual recognition, a balance of identification and disidentification. Aesthetics plays no insignificant role in the maintenance of equilibrium, by turns challenging and upholding status quo, containing and letting irrupt forces of irrationality. It’s part is greater than that of activism, what the author calls “civility from below” which can result in “disincorporation.”<sup>35</sup> Art provides a totality that supercedes the minoritarian quality of issue or identity specific activism.

Dis-incorporation is a double-edged sword. The political hypothesis of “civility from below” cannot, then, choose between the strategy, or language, of the becoming majoritarian or the becoming minoritarian of resistance, since it defines itself both as alternative to the violence inherent in the state, and as a remedy for the state’s impotence in respect to the two faces of cruelty. If this is not a theoretical choice, then it is a conjunctural question, a question of the

art of politics—and perhaps simply art, since the only means civility has at its disposal are statements, signs, and roles.<sup>36</sup>

Balibar permutes Benjamin's well-known formula that the politicization of aesthetics is socialism's logic while fascism entails the aestheticization of politics, arriving at a collapse where politics is an art, a form of the social. What part might activism, with its specific aspirations, play? Why emphasize "art," its statements and signs ultimately indeterminate?

Another articulation of an inadequate attempt to rethink the link between politics and aesthetics resulting in more of a meaningless collapse than a productive aporia, would be the term "partition in the sensible," posited by Jacques Rancière who privileges anti-autonomous, or art-into-life, aesthetics (rejecting differentiations between interwar and post World War II iterations of the avant-garde, such as the account put forward by Peter Burger in *Theory of The Avant-garde*) more explicitly. He defines politics as the drive toward appearances of those, the marginalized, who "do not count" or do not appear in the space of representation (politically or culturally) and those who do. To participate in the enactment of equality becomes a matter of visibility, presentation, indeed theatricality.<sup>37</sup> "It is an order of the visible and of the sayable that sees that a particular activity is visible and another is not, that this speech is understood as discourse and another as noise."<sup>38</sup> The political occurs when hegemonic orders are interrupted by the sudden appearance of the heretofore unperceivable. Because it produces transitions in perceptual experience, politics are aesthetic by definition. The very word "representation" locates the seam of an always already existent imbrication of politics and aesthetics. This leaves little room for activism outside of visibility.

Politics, as opposed to the spectacle of meta-politics or media driven dramatization of hegemony, entails the manner of appearance, the way in which the non-hegemonic elements demonstrate their demands, enacting, in effect, an art of monstration. "Politics does not happen just because the poor oppose the rich. It is the other way around: politics (that is, the interruption of the simple effects of domination by the rich) causes the poor to exist as an entity."<sup>39</sup> This attempt to rethink the conjuncture of art and politics does not explicitly address activism in the discourse of "art" although it would appear to be the means of

monstration, of new frames, or, as Rancière would have it, “partitions in the visible.” The reframing of the relation among fiction and fact is one of the most radical breaks enacted by the concept of “partitions in the visible;” visibility is not synonymous with hegemony, wherein models of critical resistance would require exposing the fictions or lies in the sociopolitical real. Now, the problem does not lie in Rancière’s definition of “disagreement” as an incommensurability of elements rather than a system of dissembling and repression (spectacle). Rancière’s argument was seductive during the era of triumphant liberalism and “enforced consensus” of the 90s and early 2000s. The collapse of politics and aesthetics under the term visibility not only threatens to neutralize both, but proves to be hopelessly relativistic. In the avoidance to posit a horizon against which totality, universality might be rethought in concrete, material terms. Any iteration of disagreement is “political,” or worse, “poetic.”

One open question among others might the criteria by which to differentiate radical resistance from repetition, re-entrenchment, or indeed, a reactionary politics, if both frame perception of the social field anew. There are, now, smokers rights activists, the Tea Party participants call themselves activists, etc. To what extent does “a partition in the sensible” neutralize both politics and aesthetics? “Politics ... causes the poor to exist as an entity” is a dangerous proposition precisely for its reliance on visibility as the central means to the end of political change. This theory serves the reactionary right as much as the radical left. Those who hold visibility, however momentarily, direct politics.

Recent tendencies—among them relational and participatory practices and a Rancierean ethos that subtends them—run the risk of, to borrow the language of argumentation in favor of politicized autonomy, “merely assimilat[ing] themselves to the brute existence against which they protest, in forms so ephemeral (the very charge made against autonomous art by committed writers) that from the first days they belong in the seminars in which they end.”<sup>40</sup> The menacing thrust of the antithesis is a reminder of how precarious the condition of art is today. Each of the two alternatives [commitment and autonomy] negates itself with the other. Committed art cancels the distance between the two. ‘Art for art’s sake’ denies by its absolute claims the ineradicable connections with reality which is the polemical a priori of the attempt to make art autonomous from the real.” By contrast, Anastas’s insistence on the materiality of language, historically deemed a-political and

indifferent to politicized meaning, becomes the site of politics at an elemental level because of that very materiality, especially in the context of “dematerialization” mercilessly enforced as much by advancing regimes of refined and integrated capital as by Nationalist ideology, or worse, the entwinement of both. Concrete language is not a metaphor, but a necessary resource. One might wish to address recent events where language itself is being privatized via copyright law.

I would like to close the present lines of thinking with a timely statement made in the contemporary art journal *e-flux*. Franco Berardi Bifo, rethinking the meaning of autonomy in contemporaneity, summarizes nicely the degree to which the collapse of culture into every day life has assisted hegemony, that is, the forward march of capitalist expropriation.

We should be able to consider what possibilities remain available for creating an autonomy for knowledge from capitalism in the future. We should be able to imagine a pathway for knowledge workers to self-organize, and we should be able to create the institutions, or models for future institutions, of knowledge production and transmission. The complex mutation of knowledge production and transmission, and the related transformation—or devastation—of modern institutions of education, has been a crucial outcome of financial dictatorship in the sphere of semiocapital.<sup>241</sup>

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The emphasis on art into life, life has art, has effectively eclipsed a space from which to think and from which to act.

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Published in *Journal of Aesthetics and Protest* #8 (Winter 2011/12), pp. 55-79.

## Notes

1. The iteration of the project cited here was published in the exemplary volume edited by Tanya Leighton. In *The Poem About Love You Don't Write The Word Love*. New York and Berlin: Sternberg Press, 2006. P. 196.

2. This statement, consciously or otherwise, it is not clear, risks advocating the model of conviviality as antidote to “alienation” and capitalist modernity first formalized in Nicholas

Bourriaud's *Relational Aesthetics*. 1998. That which must be resisted, for which the group assists in formulating strategies, appears to be loneliness more than any particular operations of transnational capital. Although Claire Bishop's seminal essay "Antagonism and Relational Aesthetics." *October*. No 110 was paradigmatic and seems to have raised awareness about the inefficacy of relational "art," activist "art" doesn't appear to have found a way out just yet. For a set of examples of more militant and rigorous forms of art as activism, see Emily Apter, "Thinking Read: Ethical Militance and The Group Subject." *Communities of Sense: Rethinking Aesthetics and Practice*. Durham: Duke University Press, 2009.

3. Against the standard melancholic lament of the failure of the historical avant-garde, some scholars are arguing for its "success." See Gavin Grindon. "Surrealism, Dada, and the Refusal of Work: Autonomy, Activism and Social Participation in the Radical Avant-garde." *Oxford Art Journal* No. 34 (2011): 79-96. See also Blake Stimpson and Gregory Sholette. *Collectivism after Modernism: The Art of Social Imagination after 1945*. Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2007. Helen Molesworth's work has been pioneering in this regard. See *Part Object, Part Sculpture*. Columbus: Wexner Center for the Arts, 2005.

4. Anastas has emphasized the work of Gertrude Stein in the formation of her own practice.

5. The term "mere life" derives from Walter Benjamin's "Critique of Violence." *Reflections*. Ed. Peter Demetz. New York: Schocken, 1978. P. 277.

6. The iteration of the project cited here was published in the exemplary volume edited by Tanya Leighton. *In The Poem About Love You Don't Write The Word Love*. New York and Berlin: Sternberg Press, 2006. P. 196. I am grateful to Yates McKee, who not only assisted the artist with the preparation of her text for publication, but drew my attention to Anastas's work.

7. The performative "nature" of language is of course inextricably linked with modernist poetics, from Mallarmé on. As ever, see Jacques Derrida's "Double Session" in *Dissemination*. Trans. Barbara Johnson. Chicago: Chicago University Press, 1981. pp. 173-286 and "Signature, Event, Context" in *The Margins of Philosophy*. Trans. Alan Bass. Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1995. Pp. 307-330.

8. See Mahmood Mamdani. *Good Muslim, Bad Muslim: America, The Cold War and the Roots of Terror*. New York: Doubleday Press, 2004. And Tariq Ali. *The Clash of Fundamentalisms*. London: Verso, 2002.

9. Julia Kristeva. *Revolution in the Poetic Language*. New York: Columbia University Press, 1984.

10. See Bertolt Brecht's "Against Georg Lukacs," "Walter Benjamin's "Conversations With Brecht," Theodor Adorno's "Letters to Walter Benjamin" and Benjamin's "Reply," succinctly edited in *Aesthetics and Politics: The Key Texts of the Debate within German Marxism*. London: Verso, 1977.

11. See Theodor Adorno's well-known "Commitment," reprinted in *Aesthetics and Politics: The Key Texts of the Debate within German Marxism*. Ibid.

12. Theodor Adorno. "Commitment." Ibid.

13. Claude Cahun. *Les Paris Sont Ouvertes*. Paris, 1934.

14. "Poetry and Politics Round Table with Joshua Clover, Chris Nealon and Juliana Spahr." *Evening will Come: A Monthly Journal of Poetics*. Issue 6. (June 2011).

15. Ibid. Adorno's term for Clover's "doesn't initially seem to be thinking about historical crisis, about capitalism, about politics, often are thinking about it" "an apoliticism that is in fact deeply political." *Commitment*. P. 177.

16. I admire the spirit of Spahr's point, that the academy narrowly delimits its field, and tautologically reproduces itself. Intuitively true as this may be, using "Adorno" as a proper name to summarize the problem serves neither an expansion of the field nor an understanding of Adorno's interest in a non-facile commitment. Later in the conversation, Joshua Clover asserts that.

17. Giorgio Agamben. "What is the Contemporary?" in *What is an Apparatus?* Stanford: Stanford University Press, 2009. See also the *October* "Questionnaire on the Contemporary." No. 133.

18. Theodor Adorno. "Commitment." Reprinted in *Aesthetics and Politics: The Key Texts of the Debate within German Marxism*. London: Verso, 1977. P. 177-178.

19. See Gil Anidjar. *Semites. Race, Religion and Literature*. Stanford: Stanford UP, 2008. And Anidjar's *Our Place in Andalus: Kabbalah, Philosophy, Literature in Arab Jewish Letters*. Stanford: Stanford UP, 2002. See also Ilan Pappé. *The Ethnic Cleaning of Palestine*. London: Oxford UP, 2006. And *Wrestling with Zion: Progressive Jewish American Responses to the Israeli-Palestinian Conflict*. Tony Kushner, ed. New York: Grove Press, 2003. Finally, two useful overviews remain *Palestine: The Arab-Israeli Conflict*. Russell Stetler, ed. San Francisco: Ramparts, 1972; *Intifada: The Palestinian Uprising Against Israeli Occupation*. Zachary Lockman and Joel Beinin, eds. Boston: South End Press, 1989; Edward Said. *The Question of Palestine*. New York: Vintage Press, 1980; *The Israel-Arab Reader*. Laquer and Rubin, eds. New York: Penguin, 1970; and Noam Chomsky's Introduction to *The New Intifada*. London: Verso, 2001.

20. Pasolini's project may be productively discussed in these terms. In a variety of media (poetry, essays and films), from from *Le ceneri di Gramsci* (1957) to *Notes Towards an African Orestes* made in 1975, the year of his death, and his last posthumously published work, *Petrolia*, Pasolini searched for a cultural context unspoiled by capitalist modernity. The two terms are inextricably linked. Pasolini's agonistic yearning for a pre-lapsarian space cannot be misprised and dismissed as another form of a colonialist ethos on the one hand or a reactionary anti-Modernism on the other; it elaborates itself from a Marxist and anti-colonialist vantage. While Pasolini's work could be understood as an early harbinger of "left Heideggerianism," it also teases out the Romantic strands of Marxism in Italy in the 60s. See Angelo Restivo. *The Cinema of Economic Miracles: Visuality and Modernization in the Italian Art Film*. London: Duke UP, 2002.

21. Anastas's negative dialectical approach to Pasolini recalls Adorno's methodology, and more specifically, *The Jargon of Authenticity* (1964, translation 1973). Chicago: Northwestern University Press, 1973. Anastas demonstrates the degree to which Pasolini is at once critical of the colonialist politics productive of contemporary Palestine and unable to acknowledge the shattered aura of Palestine, the shattered aura writ large in the face of modernity.

22. Giorgio Agamben. "The Camp as the Nomos of the Modern." *Homo Sacer: Sovereign Power and Bare Life*. Trans. Daniel Heller-Roazen. Stanford: Stanford University Press, 1998. P. 166.

23. TJ Demos. "Means Without Ends: Camp Campaign." *October*. No. 126 (Fall 2008). P. 79.



24. Michel Foucault. "17 March, 1976" *Society Must be Defended*. Trans. David Macey. New York: Picador, 2003. Pp. 239-263.
25. *The Power of Inclusive Exclusion*. Adi Ophir, Michael Givoni, and Sari Hanafi, eds. New York: Zone Press, 2009.
26. Giorgio Agamben. "The Logic of Sovereignty." *Homo Sacer: Sovereign Power and Bare Life*. Trans. Daniel Heller-Roazen. Stanford: Stanford University Press, 1998. P. 28.
27. *Ibid.*
28. Ariella Azoulay and Adi Ophir. "The Monster's Tail." *Against the Wall: The Art of Resistance in Palestine*. New York: Lawrence Hill Books, 2011. See also, Adi Ophir, Michael Givoni and Sari Hanafi. *The Power of Inclusive Exclusion: Anatomy of Israeli Rule in the Occupied Palestinian Territories*. New York: Zone Books, 2009. Their discussion is predicated on the same framework I use here: Walter Benjamin's "Critique of Violence." *Reflections*. Peter Demetz, ed. New York: Schocken Books, 1978. P. 299.
29. Ariella Azoulay. *The Civil Contract Of Photography*. New York: Zone Books, 2008. P. 15.
30. Interview with Khaled Jarrar. Hareetz.
31. Hannah Arendt. "The Decline of the Nation State and the End of the Rights of Man" *Origins of Totalitarianism*. New York: Harcourt Brace Jovanovich, 1979.
32. See a special issue of the *New Left Review* that focuses on aesthetics and Rancièrian thought for one example among many: *The Aesthetic Revolution and its Outcomes*. NLR 14 (March-April, 2002). I implicate myself in this "turn" (or "trend"); see also Hinderliter, Kaizen, Maimon, Mansoor, and McCormick. "Introduction." *Communities of Sense: Rethinking Aesthetics and Politics*. Durham: Duke University Press, 2009.
33. Étienné Balibar. *Politics and the Other Scene*. London: Verso, 2002. P.49. For an elaboration of Balibar's approach to problem of transnational identity see *We, The People of Europe? Reflections on Transnational Citizenship*. Princeton: Princeton UP, 2004.
34. *Ibid.*
35. *Ibid.* P. 35.
36. *Ibid.*
37. Rancièr's concept of the political and the sensible has been rehearsed many times in numerous publications. Again, see Hinderliter, et at. *Communities of Sense: Rethinking Aesthetics and Politics*. Durham: Duke University Press, 2009. See also a special issue of the *New Left Review* that focuses on aesthetics and Rancièrian thought. *The Aesthetic Revolution and its Outcomes*. NLR 14 (March-April, 2002).
38. Jacques Rancièr, *Disagreement*, tans, Julie Rose (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1999), p. 29.
39. *Ibid.* P. 11.
40. Theodor Adorno. "Commitment," reprinted in *Aesthetics and Politics: The Key Texts of the Debate within German Marxism*. London: Verso, 1977.
41. Franco Berardi Bifo. "I Want to Think Post-U." *E-Flux* No. 24 (April, 2011).

# Mimesis of the Hardened and Alienated

## Social Practice as Business Model

MARINA VISHMIDT

*“We have invented ourselves, so to speak, the social contradictions that made our freedom necessary.’ Where invented doesn’t mean made up but found and translated the facts that reveal their dormant political dimension.”* — CLAIRE FONTAINE, “HUMAN STRIKE WITHIN THE FIELD OF LIBIDINAL ECONOMY”

**IN THIS ESSAY, I WOULD LIKE TO THINK ABOUT HOW THE FIGURE OF THE** entrepreneur manifests in the domain of cultural production or, more narrowly, art, particularly under normative crisis conditions. The second half of the piece will focus on some case studies, chiefly Theaster Gates, SUPERFLEX, and e-flux, and try to situate these phenomena in that conjuncture. In the meantime, we can set up the questions that will guide this analysis.

The title of the essay, "Mimesis of the Hardened and Alienated," comes from a phrase used in an essay in Theodor W. Adorno's *Aesthetic Theory*, "Situation," where he writes, "Only by immersing its autonomy in society's *imagerie* can art surmount the heteronomous market. Art is modern art through mimesis of the hardened and alienated; only thereby, and not by the refusal of a mute reality, does art become eloquent; this is why art no longer tolerates the innocuous."<sup>1</sup> We can make some extrapolations here, which may not necessarily be Adorno's own. One is that part of modern art's very being was emulating that which was alien to it; that is, its autonomy was based upon a relation of troubled proximity, whether of rejection or mimesis, with the banal social, economic, and material facts from which it operated at a remove. This was a degree of 'near distance' necessary for providing it with new resources of 'alienated reality,' which it would process into increasingly less formal and independent articulations as the transition to the 'contemporary' made its impact felt. This kind of mimesis, which can be observed in the history of art since the decline of its 'modern' moment—a decline that was well underway by the time Adorno wrote the above in the 1960s—gradually takes over not only art's formal imperatives but ends up incorporating the social character of the artist and the productive relations which sustain her. This shift, arguably, signals the transition from modern to contemporary art: to a situation in which art is no longer a separate domain strategically distancing itself from or connecting to an 'alienated reality' at will, but a specialized niche within that reality—art that is contemporary with its time; a time which is strictly harnessed to the temporal rhythms of the market, or, more broadly, to capital accumulation.<sup>2</sup>

Another extrapolation would be that the intolerance of the innocuous that Adorno imputes to art can otherwise be coded as a constant modernizing and constant revolutionizing of the techniques, social relations, and formal ambitions of art, which perhaps can be said to follow the 'dialectic of Enlightenment.' Art constantly strives to overcome its inherited limits, but the metaphysics of art stay in place and prevent it from fully doing so. Following through on this modernizing logic might also imply art doing away with itself in a moment of enlightenment-cum-immolation.

As with all narratives of modernization, art cannot help but also evoke the narrative of economic growth, the liberation theology of capital. Capital too is always striving to overcome its boundaries

and turn the new terrain it has won into the basis for a new round of accumulation.<sup>3</sup>

More specifically, we can allude to the process of ‘disruptive innovation’—or to take its classical Schumpeterian variant, ‘creative destruction’—as a rubric that encompasses and binds processes of critical valorization internal to art and the processes of capital valorization in which it is enmeshed, however differently these ‘disruptions’ are articulated in these two domains.<sup>4</sup> As emphasized by Rosa Luxemburg, capital expands by absorbing into itself non- or pre-capitalist forms of life in an ongoing vector of ‘primitive accumulation.’ Art, as described by Adorno above but as is readily observable from any survey of contemporary production, similarly expands its reach and its relevance by absorbing and re-presenting in its own domain that which was not previously deemed an instance of art. Just as in the vortices of capital, this occurs as a ‘disruptive innovation,’ putting into question or rendering obsolete the previous modes of signification and value, forcing new languages of critique, and ushering historical narratives into view which can ‘account’ for this new paradigm. We could turn to Peter Bürger’s account in *Theory of the Avant-Garde*, where he draws a distinction between ‘self-criticism’ and ‘immanent criticism’ based on a reading of passages in Marx’s *Grundrisse*.<sup>5</sup> Self-criticism would be posed as a challenge *to* an institution, whereas immanent criticism would be posed from within an institution to one or another of its aspects. The suggestion could be made here that a historical process can also convert the former into the latter, particularly in the case of art, which, as Bürger shows with the example of the 20th century avant-gardes, expanded as an institution to absorb its self-criticism. He demonstrates this shift from the ‘historical avant-garde,’ which challenged the system of art itself, to the ‘neo-avant gardes’ of the 60s and 70s which elaborated a critique internal to that system. While the reasons Bürger gives for this can be set aside here, we can see how art adopting the strategies of business has been a self-criticism and a disruptive innovation mainly within the institution of art, helping to extend its power and influence. E-flux could be taken as a case in point, where the mimetic conflation of collaborative art practice and small media corporation results in an institutional entity which corners the market in virtually every thinkable activity in the sphere of circulation of art; that is, in publicity—what Alexander Alberro defines as the main playing field of Conceptual Art.<sup>6</sup> Here, the ‘disruptive

innovation' is to the institution of art: an art practice can gain immense leverage from single-mindedly pursuing business strategies, all the while defying categorization. Characteristically, no business strategies were harmed in this experiment, it is only art that had its boundaries distended one further time in what, to Bürger, would surely count as final heap of earth on the coffin of the historical avant-gardes. A situation in which no institution is hurt, only reconfigured by individual actors seeking to advance their interests through it would be considered an instance of immanent criticism by Bürger. We could likewise say that up until the present moment, all crises of capitalism have been immanent inasmuch as they have propelled capitalism beyond barriers suddenly revealed as obsolete, whether these be technological, political or social.

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It is also true that art can behave as a form of 'disruptive innovation' *within* the economy, with culture-led regeneration tasked with redeveloping whole areas, displacing and replacing the populations which inhabit them with boutique subjectivities and the high-value forms of consumption that come with them. Art is a force for speculation within an era of speculative capital. It provides a fearless, omncreative, and iconoclastic archetype for managers and finance professionals to self-identify with, as well as a class-based 'soft power' to mobilize the potential of low-value and at-risk populations, as in the 'social' or 'socially engaged' art initiatives that form part of any regeneration agenda these days.

However, if these ideological affinities can be mapped and developed further, the analogy between 'disruptive innovation' in art and in business is of only limited interest so long as it stays on the level of analogy rather than allowing us to discern a common logic structurally grounded in the economic mechanisms that drive capitalist society. We can start to delineate some of the features of such a logic with the proposition that "the mimesis of the hardened and alienated" as it comes to us today does not simply, as I have already indicated, give art new resources for its own formal, or even social, innovation. It allows it to stop *being art*, or to stop being *only art*, and allows it to start playing a much more direct role as a channel of empowerment, governance and even accumulation—if only of 'social capital'<sup>7</sup>—for specific communities and in specific contexts. No longer is art a component in larger market-led and top-down social engineering plans which adds value and creative cachet to speculative property development,

however threadbare and transparent this *modus operandi* is by now. Now it is art, and the art institution in particular, which provides the 'added value' to activities which function only partially and strategically as art. It is now the practice of the hardened and alienated in the social field, with the mimesis of art. This resource-based approach, distinguished by a pragmatism that appears subversive at first glance, ends up buttressing the boundaries it treats so casually, because it lives and dies with the capital those boundaries are still capable of yielding. That is, the institution of art must remain in place, but so must the institution of business and the community—the community of capital.<sup>8</sup> This is something that I have elaborated at greater length elsewhere in my published work, so this will serve as an extended sketch departing both from that work and signalling more to come.<sup>9</sup>

Here I would like to confine myself to charting the 'entrepreneur' as a policy and a life form which does not only index this pragmatism in the field of art production—a pragmatism which we can also recognize from the world of activism, particularly online activism and many progressive NGOs. Besides embodying a logic between art and activism in some exemplary art practices of the present moment, it can also appear as a logical culmination of the 'disruptive innovation' that economic logics must represent in the field of art, if the art wants to both remain relevant to the exigencies of the contemporary and not be defined by them.

What comes to mind when we try to reflect upon entrepreneurialism in the field of culture? For instance, we can think of a sort of entrepreneurialism-from-below that some still fondly reminisce of as one of the better aspects of Thatcher's legacy in the UK, producing a great deal of idiosyncratic and insurgent self-organized culture such as post-punk record labels, once the field of cultural production was redrawn both by the DIY imperative and the ideology of small ownership as the best way to secure material and ideological independence from the state and the social compacts state cultural funding was meant to secure. One could also recall the 'culturepreneurs' of the 1990s and early 2000s.<sup>10</sup> When it comes to charting the fortunes of this figure in periods of crisis such as we are experiencing in the present, one is likewise reminded of World Bank policy documents extolling the bootstrapping virtues of street sellers and 'micro-entrepreneurs' who only need a small boost from the bigger entrepreneurs of micro-credit to flourish in the vibrant informal economies of 'emerging markets.'

As we can learn from the work of Silvia Federici on the destructive impact of micro-credit in Indian, African, and South American subsistence economies, or even the campaigning around ‘payday loans’ in the UK recently, unregulated micro-economies (serving ‘populations’ which are not deemed worthy of regulation, since they have proven themselves unresponsive to market incentives those regulations are there to promote) breed large parasites.<sup>11</sup> The greater the degree of need, the more likelihood that entities capitalizing on that need—also like the layers and layers of subcontractors in informal economies or deregulated large economies—will spring up, further eroding the solidarity required to organize in order to combat exploitation and poverty effectively. Only right-wing zealotry would strive to deny that capital invariably tends to monopoly, which contributes to limiting access to resources for those who do not start from an established resource base, and drives the much-eulogized small producers, innovators, etc., out of business, returning them to the pools of dependent waged labour whence they came. Here we can also think of Albert-László Barabási and his theory of the emergence of power nodes in scale-free networks.<sup>12</sup> The law basically stipulates that those who have resources will attract more, while those who don’t will have to transfer whatever they have to those with the resources, in a network-theory confirmation of the Biblical adage.<sup>13</sup>

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However, maybe a bit laterally, I would also like to think about the dispositions, subjectivities, and sensibilities that are produced at the encounter of art with the ‘disruptive influence’ of business; in other words, the aesthetics of this encounter. The cell-form of art is the entrepreneurial artist who reproduces the art institution simply by reproducing herself as an artist. She is thus mimetic of the ‘automatic subject’ of value, which is self-reproducing as a social form once the presuppositions (for capital, private property, and wage labour; for art, the institution of art) are in place. Claire Fontaine has discussed this in terms of the ‘ready-made artist,’ the natural consequence of a century’s assimilation of the ready-made ‘artwork’ into the institution of art and the predictable slow diffusion of art as a quantum which can take place in, and add value within, any social situation guaranteed by the art institution in the person of the artist.<sup>14</sup> This instills an ethical and affective homogeneity that obtains between the subject and object of art, and, in times of the intensified rule of abstract value over production in general and art’s markets in particular, between art and

capital. This tends to even out the ideological edges between economic and political positions, as a general agreement is reached that capital is simply what we all are and should strive to maximize. Parenthetically, this can be compared to the non-politics of inclusion, where systemic variables cannot be questioned or changed, but more and more people can be upgraded to 'participate' in the system, and political activism is nothing but evening out the playing field to improve the prospects of success for those temporarily 'excluded'.<sup>15</sup> It may be objected that more radical perspectives have made an impact in the mainstream of policy and public opinion since the crisis struck, especially with the emergence of Occupy, 15M, and the uprisings in the Arabic Mediterranean. However, as commentators have noted, pragmatism rather than ideological contestation is the lifeblood at least of the Western movements, and the bedrock of pragmatism is inclusion, albeit with one important exclusion that follows from this principle: there can be no demands.<sup>16</sup>

But how does all this relate to the figure of the entrepreneur as a contemporary art strategy? Perhaps it does have something to do with the diffuse activism sketched out above, which is centred on doing good in the here and now, in a horizon where there can only be addition, only be accumulation, never disruption. This kind of pragmatic standpoint thus, paradoxically, plays a disruptive role in art, if not in society, since art is constituted by the fiction of uselessness, formal rigour, and indexicality rather than direct involvement. Counter-tendencies would of course include all 'social practices' which have been variously adumbrated as relational, interventionist, or engaged in the past several decades. However, isn't it the case that among the practices viewed as most subversive at the time, in counterpoint to artists such as the institutionally feted Tiravanija or Deller (to take two otherwise extremely divergent practices), were the overtly entrepreneurial ones? Because they occupied both the community-facing and business-minded ends of the relational spectrum, such practices were deemed to be seriously engaging with the legacy of the art and economics nexus that had been so variously explored since the Artist Placement Group, to take one of the best-known but also the most opaque examples.<sup>17</sup>

Here, I principally have in mind the 'shovel-ready' social aesthetics of the collective SUPERFLEX for an illustration of how entrepreneurialism and autonomy conjoin in a resolutely post-critical and results-oriented agenda which is often indistinguishable from a mainstream development NGO, whether it directs its efforts at Amazonian



farmers or residents of inner-city Copenhagen.<sup>18</sup> SUPERFLEX have consistently maintained an emphasis on the 'entrepreneurial' as the conceptual basis of their practice, which I have written about at greater length elsewhere.<sup>19</sup> This can be viewed as a 'capacity-building' manoeuvre, in the language of the NGO: what they are enabled to do through the agency of art would not be accessible to a regular business, while the structures and rhetoric of business gives them a certain currency in fields outside of, but to no small extent within, art.

Other examples of the 'entrepreneurial' as an identification and a logic of production in current and recent art could be cited, albeit not within the length confines of this essay. Andy Warhol might be the germ plasm here; although artists have behaved entrepreneurially more or less for the whole recorded history of art, he was perhaps the first to thematize it as production logic on a massive scale. These examples are characterized by an opting for the optimizing, expansive possibilities afforded by embracing business as a principle of production of art, rather than a hostile 'Other' to art. In SUPERFLEX's case, this is then joined with charitable or community-minded infrastructure projects which easily slot into a 'social design' typology, driven by the same logic of optimization as the business side of things. But even if such non-conflictual activist outlooks in the realm of contemporary art are not new or unprecedented, and are indeed presupposed of the overtly 'social practices' sketched out earlier, SUPERFLEX's focus on the 'entrepreneur' is somewhat special.

Yet the celebration of the entrepreneur can also be done rather more dramatically. Here I would like to focus the phenomenon through the lens of the 'insurgent business' practice of Theaster Gates,<sup>20</sup> a Chicago-based artist who's been getting a lot of attention recently precisely for his projects that seek to 'add value' to communities through entrepreneurial artist-led redevelopment and to add 'social credit' to the art world by giving it a chance to contribute to these projects.

Gates has forged both a lucrative and critically significant career by mobilizing interest and investment in derelict, historically African-American areas of Chicago through a complex and performative practice involving object-making, advocacy and the physical rehabilitation of built spaces. This amounts to a sort of benign artist-run (rather than artist-led) gentrification, empowering the artist himself in these agendas as well as the community he has defined as both the substance of and the audience for his work. A recent exhibition at the White Cube in

London entitled *My Labor is My Protest* presented this work for a UK public. Here there is an articulation of labour as a positive and transformative practice, one which entails organizing groups of friends, supporters, and local people to fix up old, decaying houses and turn them, not into residential units, like Edgar Arceneaux or other US-based artists who address themselves to independent housing projects in neglected areas, but into cultural or community centres, archives and libraries, bolting 'cultural capital' onto run-down areas of Chicago which would not normally attract middle-class audiences of whatever racial designation. It should be noted that Gates' work very much departs from the history of racial segregation and zoned disinvestment in the city, but is far less interested in questions of class. In a mode typical for US discourses of social justice, it elides questions of class with those of race and especially of racialized—and fetishized—culture.

Some of the material that is produced in the renovation process will later find its way to the art market or the exhibition circuit, as Gates uses it to craft discrete autonomous art objects. Recently in dOCUMENTA (13) in Kassel, an ageing townhouse due to be demolished and converted into a hotel was taken over by Gates and his team for the duration of the exhibition. It was inhabited by documenta interns, who mediated a programme of regular activities in the house, and the renovation process that the house was undergoing; or, rather, the documentation of this process became the artwork on display. Large rooms hosted film and video installations of glossily produced soul and gospel musical performances by Gates' associates.

Gates' entrepreneurial outlook—promoting the virtues of labour in social change, preferably the labour of others, while he interfaces with real estate developers, art institutions, and NGOs—is resolutely and unapologetically 'post-political.'<sup>21</sup> This evokes the precepts of 'human capital,' with the reversal entailed by the notion of the capitalist as a worker and the worker as the owner of 'human capital,' which both appropriates and cancels the political subjectivity of work as alienation. This then leads to a monadic notion of experience based on this corporate and consumer personhood, meaning change can only be construed on personal and self-maximizing grounds, bearing out the truth of 'human capital' ideology (which, like all ideologies, creates the grounds for its own legitimization). Michel Foucault charts the emergence of the concept of 'human capital' in the genealogy of neoliberalism he provides in *The Birth of Biopolitics* lecture course. With Foucault, however,

we would also need to decipher the link between notions of creativity in reconstituting for workers the kind of compulsively self-enhancing assets 'human capital' denotes.<sup>22</sup> This dynamic of self-enhancement is then transvalued from an economic process to an affective one, and this transition is called 'creativity.' While this can only be touched on here, creativity as a complex of overt and implicit presuppositions about the relation between labour and value does not just generalize the 'creativity' of capital to labour but marks the point where management intervenes in labour, where management is internalized. The mobilization of the entrepreneur is guided by creativity both as a productive norm at work and a way to transcend the constraints of labour while, of course, not escaping the demands of value. Creativity thus marks the joint between self-management and self-exploitation, autonomy, and heteronomy. The capacity of creativity to be easily internalized as a workplace norm renders it the form of governmentality that obtains specifically in the workplace, even as the entrepreneur can principally operate anywhere, most visibly in cultural fields and as a labour template for the no-longer-autonomous artist. Creativity thus functions as a springboard for capitalist populism, assuring every exploited worker and discontented artist that their interests are not any different from capital's. These interests signally coincide in the performance of labour that is inventive, fulfilling and that would be a joyful experience whether or not there was money involved.

Given this set of co-ordinates, which to me seem to be implicitly and manifestly at play in Gates' project, he appears not to be interested in some of the structural conditions that both make the project materially possible and call forth its particular appearance of politics. One of these would be the role of the very interests, such as the property developers whom he involves to support these projects, in the decay and depression the projects are intended to address. Eliding this enables him to uphold a donor-friendly message of inspirational community action and social capital-building through culture. What is powerfully suggestive about his activities as an artist and as an amateur developer is that they so perfectly integrate the logic of culture-led regeneration while translating it into the terms of autonomous art, on the one side, and on the other neutralize the critical perspectives that have developed on these processes through those terms. It exemplifies the current dogma of 'crisis-as-opportunity' for positive community action, as the state withdraws from social reproduction only to better perform

its duties of service to an increasingly narrow fraction of capital. At the same time, it disavows this set of ideological co-ordinates by developing a convincing and affective grammar of historically-freighted cultural symbolism and empowerment for its protagonists.

The notion of 'empowerment' has long played an ambivalent role—a progressive rhetoric with often conservative and co-opting results—in minority communities in the West in the neoliberal era; that is to say, in the aftermath of the era of social movements and wide social contestation. 'Empowerment,' analogous to the 'inclusion' I examined earlier, is the accepted terminology for a process of social mobility which is usually individualized and has a pragmatist orientation in taking the extant power relations as its ultimate horizon, as the parameters which circumscribe a social actor who hopes to improve her position. However crudely this might resound, we can only understand the function of empowerment as a political technology if we juxtapose it with 'revolution' as a way to name the horizon of social change. When applied to collectives, it denotes a non-antagonistic mode of advancing through power structures which are flexible enough to accommodate the claims of the thus-far marginalized, thus in a position to grant 'power' to those claims or the people making them—rather than a system which is structurally hostile to equality or an 'equal' distribution of power. Empowerment thus redounds to the credit of injustice, showing that there is actually enough justice in the system to recognize the claims of the dispossessed (how did they get that way? It doesn't matter), so the system must be ultimately good, and open to change. In the case of Theaster Gates, it means that emblems of structural violence such as housing privatisation, unemployment, and white supremacy turn into resources for a cultural project which exposes them to the light, only to push them into the background as irrelevant in the face of the real, positive change partially bankrolled by the market and non-profit entities systemically responsible for those very same ills. This project, however, guards itself from charges of instrumentality or exploitation through its recourse to artistic speculation; that is, a parallel as well as an implicated practice of autonomous art which then renders the social a *contingent* aspect of its mythopoesis.

This is a notable tendency, not only for Gates, but for a large swathe of currently produced art that takes the social as its material and circulates at the most visible levels of the global exhibition circuit. Another example that could be cited here would be Tino Seghal. Particularly

in his work, this tendency can be described as a kind of optical illusion which presents two dimensions at once, both of which cannot be perceived simultaneously. Either you, as a viewer, agree to the social contract of the work—which involves focusing on the immediate, direct experience of orchestrated sociality in Seghal's case or a processual and temporal theatre of community in Gates—or you try to understand the conditions of possibility of these performances, including working conditions, the performers' agency, power relations in this ensemble of social mimesis, and so forth. It seems that each cancels out the other, rendering any critical approach off limits, or even redundant, because the distance demanded by critique breaks the social contract of frictionless exchange on which this work is predicated (as in the service industries that it emulates), thus declining to 'engage' with the work's basic process. The work places itself beyond critique, by its participants or its viewers, because it does not base its criteria on anything but the language and parameters of 'autonomous art' while at the same time using only social relations—such as the economy and layers of institutional mediation in Gates' case—as its 'material' and territory of action. In Gates' case, there is a valorization of the 'entrepreneur' as a broker of capital generated within and outside the community for the purposes of improving the situation of that community and also turning it into a sort of authored artwork that can circulate in the channels of legitimacy and resources afforded by the art world. Both sites—the community and the art institution—merge in a pragmatic and charismatic tableau of empowerment.

In a similar manner to the original theorist of 'human capital' theory, the Chicago economist Gary Becker, Gates affirms that social change is driven by business, by entrepreneurial initiative, and that a successful enterprise is the best form of resistance to any crisis.<sup>23</sup> As a recent review put it, "Against dismissing the sublation of civil rights into consumer rights, *My Labor Is My Protest* proposes business as a mode of collaborative critique. A political space where people make things, invest narrative in those things, and sell those things." So this brings us back to the idea of business as an activity fostering autonomy, and disrupting established relationships of passivity and dependence. We can note how easily collaborative critique and the exploitation inseparable from making and selling things are fused here. Given the current social and economic decline observable in many parts of the world, with escalating, concrete misery and stagnation a reality even in

the 'rich countries,' it is not surprising that activism and business pair up in a utopian vision of social desire which has at its base a vision of money brokering intimate and meaningful exchanges which can have actual empowering effects. This is a seductive vision with great social resonance at the moment, echoing with the gospel of financial abstraction 'out-cooperated' by small-scale enterprise, alternative economic models, and networks of trust: a pastel landscape of sharing that has been readily embraced by corporates.

The e-flux platform has been a salient vector in this milieu.<sup>24</sup> Given its different but co-present modalities of business, artwork, social aggregator, journal, video distribution service and exhibition space, all of which take as their object the 'social capital' of the artworld, it is the *Time/Bank* project<sup>25</sup> which would seem to be most interested in branding and valorizing the already irregular and quixotic forms of exchange that drive the artworld (in distinction, say, from the ads business which seems to subsidize some of the less lucrative aspects of e-flux activity). This is not a reflection on the insufficient radicalism of time banking; for no local-exchange or time-money system has any capacity whatever to shift the capital-labour relation or its basis in the form of abstract value. The most it can do is prop up de-monetized or hyper-exploited sections of the population or regions, which can sometimes be a significant precursor to any social or political action that then might have systemic implications. This may be said to apply when the state intervenes to ban alternative or parallel currencies which prove 'too successful,' as in the episode of the 'Wörgl experiment' with freigeld in 1933.<sup>26</sup> E-flux can also be said to be a radiant example of 'disruptive innovation,' as they have developed an operating model that affords great latitude creatively and materially to its participants while ideologically distancing themselves from both state and market as support systems for art, thus upholding the fairly classical entrepreneurial attitude of independence.

To its credit, e-flux has eschewed socially utopian rhetoric to adumbrate its activities, keeping to a studied neutrality which at times is grounded in its announced status as a collaborative artwork and other times in that of a business. The speculative gesture which stakes a claim to the post-conceptual legacy is the one of disavowing the barriers between art and commerce ontologically—in the sphere of production, rather than incidentally, art in the market after it's made (circulation). *Time/Bank*, on the other hand, is an economic experiment within an

economic experiment, a microcosm of the space for alternative economies afforded by booming macro-economies—incipiently legitimizing both e-flux's business model, and the impenetrable quasi-markets of the artworld.<sup>27</sup> Furthermore, e-flux is a small business that asseverates itself to be an artwork, whereas SUPERFLEX uses entrepreneurialism as an analogy with the making of art which seeks a direct social function. Gates takes this mediated corporate mentality one step further into 'actual' philanthropy. Given the cynicism that cannot help but accompany the socially entrepreneurial approach, it may seem like a successful mimesis of the hardened and alienated would look very much like e-flux, where art and commercial services are not to be critically or practically distinguished and gain all the more leverage from this blurring—something like an artworld Serco, "the biggest company you've never heard of."<sup>28</sup> Dramatizing art's overlap with money as modalities of speculation has been a solid tradition in the 20th century, from Marcel Duchamp and Daniel Spoerri's cheques to Robert Morris' and Maria Eichhorn's 'investment art' and Christine Hill's career-long mimesis of petty proprietorship as relational aesthetics. Still, e-flux shows that this structural symmetry between art and the economic cannot remain allegorical forever. With the advent of permanent economic crisis, the autonomy of art will sublate itself in the gospel of profit, if only to support the autonomy of the money in a society where making money is its only source of support. There is a certain logic, even a beauty, to such a solvent pragmatism. Perhaps we can say, with J.H. Prynne, "The name of that is of course money, and/the absurd trust in value is the pattern of/bond and contract and interest—just where/the names are exactly equivalent to the trust/given to them./Here then is the purity of/pragmatic function."<sup>29</sup>

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Published in *E-flux Journal* #43, (March 2013).

## Notes

1. Theodor W. Adorno, *Aesthetic Theory*, trans. Robert Hullot-Kentor (London & New York: Continuum, 1997), 21.

2. The art historian and critic Kerstin Stakemeier makes some acute observations on this

shift in my dialogue with her, in "The Value of Autonomy: A conversation between Kerstin Stakemeier and Marina Vishmidt about the reproduction of art," *Texte zur Kunst*, no. 88, *Die wertfrage/A Question of Value* (2012): 102-117.

3. Karl Marx, *Grundrisse: Foundations of the Critique of Political Economy* (Rough Draft), trans. Martin Nicolaus (London: Penguin, 1993), 270, 334, 408-410. The footnote on p. 334 establishes the Hegelian provenance of this idea.

4. Of course Schumpeter didn't believe capitalism relied on exploitation; he was at pains to disprove 'Marxian doctrine' with his more scientific deductions that capital accumulation in fact relies on the 'supernormal' intelligence and acuity of entrepreneurs. See "Introduction," in Joseph A. Schumpeter, *Capitalism, Socialism and Democracy* (London and New York: Routledge, 2003), 16. The notion of 'creative destruction' is mainly developed in this text.

5. Peter Bürger, *Theory of the Avant-Garde* (Manchester: Manchester University Press, 1984), 20-27.

6. Alexander Alberro, *Conceptual art and the politics of publicity* (Cambridge, Mass.: MIT Press, 2004).

7. For a review of a recent book-length critique of this dubious term by Ben Fine which glosses the arguments of the book as well as its limitations and the types of political agency it does not investigate, see Emma Dowling, "Tales of 'Much of a muchness': Adventures in the land of social capital," *ephemera: theory and politics in organization*, vol. 12, No. 4 (December 2012): 480-485.

8. Jacques Camatte, *Capital and community: the results of the immediate process of production and the economic work of Marx*, trans. David Brown (London: Unpopular Books, 1988).

9. One of the contexts where I have pursued these questions at length is my recently completed doctoral thesis titled *Speculation as a Mode of Production in Art and Capital* (Queen Mary, University of London, 2013).

10. Anthony Davies and Simon Ford, "Culture Clubs," *Mute*, vol.1, no. 18 (September 2000); available at <http://www.metamute.org/editorial/articles/culture-clubs>; also "Art Futures," *Art Monthly*, no. 223 (February 1999).

11. Silvia Federici, lecture at launch of her book *Revolution at Point Zero: Housework, Reproduction, and Feminist Struggle* (Oakland: PM Press, 2012), 12 November 2012, Goldsmiths, University of London. The Guardian newspaper's ongoing coverage of the spread of payday loans and attendant controversies includes Hilary Osborne, "University of London bans payday loans on campus" (28 February 2013), Osborne, "Problem payday loan debts rise by almost 300%," and Nicholas Watt and Patrick Wintour, "Payday loan firms face cap after government U-turn" (28 November 2012).

12. Albert-László Barabási, *Linked: The New Science of Networks* (Cambridge, MA: Perseus, 2002); Eric Bonabeau, "Scale-Free Networks," *Scientific American*, 288 (5) (May 2003): 60-9.

13. "The Parable of the Sower," in Matthew 13:12 in the New International Version: "Whoever has will be given more, and he will have an abundance. Whoever does not have, even what he has will be taken from him." Thus we can see a secret archaeological resonance



between the pseudo-naturalistic tropes of Social Darwinism and the wrath of the Old Testament deity.

14. Claire Fontaine, "Ready-Made Artist and Human Strike: A few Clarifications." Available at [www.clairefontaine.ws/pdf/readymade\\_eng.pdf](http://www.clairefontaine.ws/pdf/readymade_eng.pdf).

15. Alain Badiou, *Ethics: An Essay on the Understanding of Evil* (London & New York: Verso, 2002).

16. The 'movement of the squares' in Europe and North America (15M/Indignados/Real Democracia Ya! in Spain, Syntagma in Greece, Occupy in the US) had a strong, and in some circumstances definitive antipathy to political polarization of any kind, and declared themselves, at the highest level of generality, simply in opposition to the present (which is not a bad starting point). Of course there were many conflicts emerging inside the movement, including splits over property destruction in the Oakland Commune and the presence of gender/sexual violence and racism inside the camps. Particularly for the latter point, see the Communiqué from *morewomentrans* at <https://sites.google.com/site/bmorewomentrans/communique>. Here, the question of the 'human strike' can still emerge as antagonism within a show of unity, whether it is arrived at by consensus or party politics.

17. Although APG pioneered the adoption of business-focused strategies in contemporary art, their itinerary was too broad and idiosyncratic to paint them as straightforward precursors of the tendencies discussed here.

18. See [www.superlex.net/](http://www.superlex.net/).

19. Marina Vishmidt, "Sales Targets: Superlex Face the Economy," *Kaleidoscope*, no. 10 (2011).

20. See [www.theastergates.com/](http://www.theastergates.com/).

21. In this sense, it is very much in keeping with the most recent documenta, which offered a *soi-disant* ecological thematic whose only theoretical commitment seemed to be to the power of the bourgeois art institution to map and index every natural and cultural phenomenon taking place anywhere in the globe any time in human history—a good diagram of the artistic 'primitive accumulation' I discuss in this essay, and here clearly traceable to the 'real' primitive accumulation that delivers these far-lung events into the curatorial lap like so much festive neocolonial confetti (although with ontological equality between humans and nonhumans assumed, the questions of power that are framed through the category of colonialism can no longer be articulated, and certainly not within the institution itself—the last documenta ran on the labour of 100 unpaid interns, who facilitated the majority of artists' projects, including that of Gates.).

22. Jason Read, "A Genealogy of Homo-Economicus: Neoliberalism and the Production of Subjectivity," *Foucault Studies*, no. 6 (February 2009): 25–36; Michel Foucault, *The Birth of Biopolitics: Lectures at the Collège de France 1978–1979*, trans. Graham Burchell (Basingstoke and New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2008); Marina Vishmidt, *Speculation as a Mode of Production in Art and Capital* (Queen Mary, University of London, 2013); Chris Bilton, "Manageable Creativity," in *International Journal of Cultural Policy*, vol. 16, no. 3 (2010); or Ulrich Bröckling, "On Creativity: A Brainstorming Session," in *Educational Philosophy & Theory*, vol. 38, no. 4 (2006).

23. Gary S. Becker, *Human Capital: A Theoretical and Empirical Analysis with Special Reference to Education*, 3rd Edition (Chicago and London: The University of Chicago Press, 1993); Hesse McGraw, "Theaster Gates: Radical Reform with Everyday Tools," *Afterall*, no. 30 (Summer 2012).
24. See [www.e-flux.com/](http://www.e-flux.com/).
25. See [www.e-flux.com/timebank/](http://www.e-flux.com/timebank/).
26. See [en.wikipedia.org/wiki/W%C3%B6rgl#The\\_W.C3.B6rgl\\_Experiment](http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/W%C3%B6rgl#The_W.C3.B6rgl_Experiment).
27. See also Valueform's "Delusions of Revolt: Notes on the Limits of Aesthetic Praxis," (14 May 2012). Available at <http://www.metamute.org/community/yourposts/delusions-revolt-notes-limits-aesthetic-praxis>.
28. Serco Group PLC is a ubiquitous infrastructure, services, logistics, and facilities corporation which operates a number of formerly public services worldwide, while sporting a comically sinister name (SERvice Corporation) straight out of 1960s counter-cultural satire. Serco is involved in everything from traffic systems to prisons to school meals. See <http://www.serco.com/> and a critical report at <http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=szNLMtgI7hU> ("The Biggest Company You Never Heard Of").
29. J. H. Prynne, *Kitchen Poems* (Grossman Publishers/ Cape Goliard Press, 1968).

Stills from:

# *The Society of the Spectacle*

HEATH SCHULTZ

75MIN VIDEO | 2013

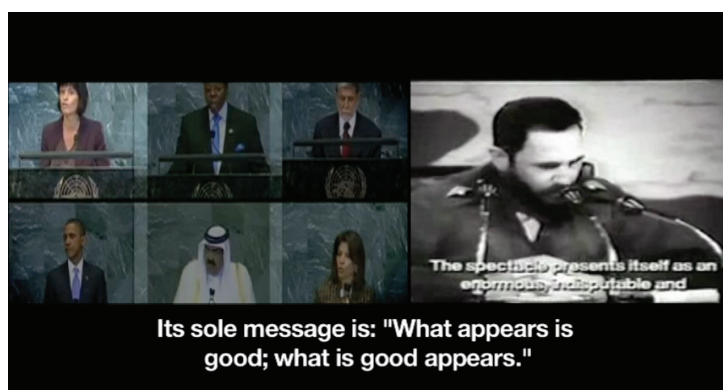
**SYNOPSIS:** The Society of the Spectacle (2013) takes infamous Situationist Guy Debord's film of the same name as a starting point and skeleton for a new video project. Through intensive research and dtournement the film is part recreation, part criticism, and part inquiry.

Détournement need not only be a mode of subversion, but can also be a self-critical and open-ended way of thinking and making—one that might also be used by others. *Spectacle* can be thought of as a piece of research by way of re-making or re-stating; a research project which makes use of Debord's work not as a quotation but as an appropriation of a collective inheritance in the cultural commons. This is how Debord worked, both with his own work as well as his use of the work from others. For Debord this is the "first step toward a literary communism."

I have only the modest hope that my film might contribute to a deepening of a theoretical analysis and contribute to a culture of anti-capitalist cultural production.

Reproduced here are stills and texts from the film of particular relevance to the themes of this reader. All text is reproduced from Guy Debord, *The Society of the Spectacle*, 1967.

The film may viewed in full at [HEATHSCHULTZ.COM](http://HEATHSCHULTZ.COM)

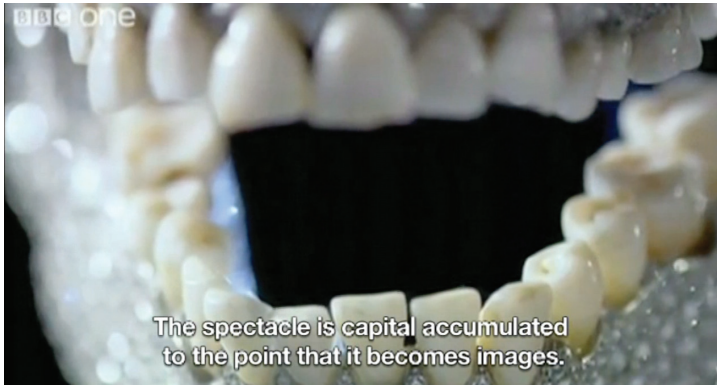


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Considered in its own terms, the spectacle is an *affirmation* of appearances and an identification of all human social life with appearances. But a critique that grasps the spectacle's essential character reveals it to be a visible negation of life—a negation that has taken on a *visible form*. [10]

The spectacle presents itself as a vast inaccessible reality that can never be questioned. Its sole message is: "What appears is good; what is good appears." The passive acceptance it demands is already effectively imposed by its monopoly of appearances, its manner of appearing without allowing any reply. [12]

The spectacle is able to subject human beings to itself because the economy has already totally subjugated them. It is nothing other than the economy developing for itself. It is at once a faithful reflection of the production of things and a distorting objectification of the producers. [16]



Though separated from what they produce, people nevertheless produce every detail of their world with everincreasing power. They thus also find themselves increasingly separated from that world. The closer their life comes to being their own creation, the more they are excluded from that life. [33]

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The spectacle is *capital* accumulated to the point that it becomes images. [34]



The point is to actually participate in the community of dialogue and the game with time that up till now have merely been *represented* by poetic and artistic works. [187]

When art becomes independent and paints its world in dazzling colors, a moment of life has grown old. Such a moment cannot be rejuvenated by dazzling colors, it can only be evoked in memory. The greatness of art only emerges at the dusk of life. [188]



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In the spectacle's basic practice of incorporating into itself all the *fluid* aspects of human activity so as to possess them in a congealed form, and of *inverting* living values into purely abstract values, we recognize our old enemy *the commodity*, which seems at first glance so trivial and obvious, yet which is actually so complex and full of metaphysical subtleties. [35]

The fetishism of the commodity—the domination of society by “intangible as well as tangible things”—attains its ultimate fulfillment in the spectacle, where the real world is replaced by a selection of images which are projected above it, yet which at the same time succeed in making themselves regarded as the epitome of reality. [36]

The world at once present and absent that the spectacle *holds up to view* is the world of the commodity dominating all living experience. The world of the commodity is thus shown for *what it is*, because its development is identical to people's *estrangement* from each other and from everything they produce. [37]



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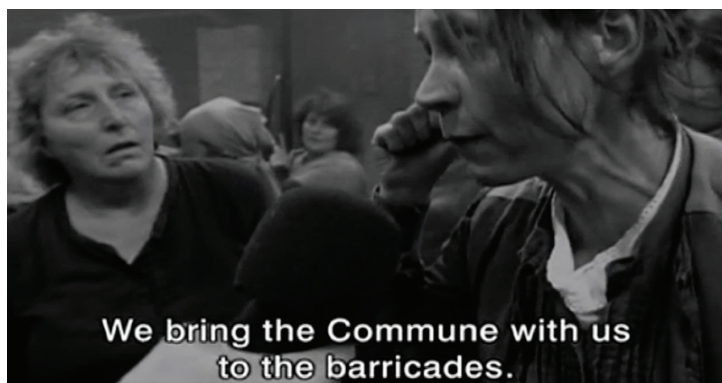
The bourgeoisie has thus made irreversible historical time known and has imposed it on society, but it has prevented society from *using* it. “Once there was history, but not any more,” because the class of owners of the economy, which is inextricably tied to *economic history*, must repress every other irreversible use of time because it is directly threatened by them all. The ruling class, made up of *specialists in the possession of things* who are themselves therefore possessed by things, is forced to link its fate with the preservation of this reified history, that is, with the preservation of a new immobility *within history*. Meanwhile the worker at the base of society is for the first time not materially *estranged from history*, because the irreversible movement is now generated from that base. By demanding to live the historical time that it produces, the proletariat discovers the simple, unforgettable core of its revolutionary project; and each previously defeated attempt to carry out this project represents a possible point of departure for a new historical life. [143]

With the development of capitalism, irreversible time has become *globally unified*. Universal history becomes a reality because the entire world is brought under the sway of this time’s development. But this history that is everywhere simultaneously the same is as yet nothing but an intra-historical rejection of history. What appears the world over as *the same day* is merely the time of economic production, time cut up into equal abstract fragments. This unified irreversible time belongs to *the global market*, and thus also to the global spectacle. [145]



New signs of negation are proliferating in the most economically advanced countries. Although these signs are misunderstood and falsified by the spectacle, they are sufficient proof that a new period has begun. We have already seen the failure of the first proletarian assault against capitalism; now we are witnessing the *failure of capitalist abundance*. On one hand, anti-union struggles of Western workers are being repressed first of all by the unions; on the other, rebellious youth are raising new protests, protests which are still vague and confused but which clearly imply a rejection of art, of everyday life, and of the old specialized politics. These are two sides of a new spontaneous struggle that is at first taking on a *criminal* appearance. They foreshadow a second proletarian assault against class society. [115]

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Still originally from Peter Watkin's *La Commune (Paris 1871)*, 2001, included in *The Society of the Spectacle*, 2013.



# Oh, What a Mess I've Made

## On Aesthetics and Political Praxis

OLIVE MCKEON

*A few people may have been standing together—five, ten or twelve, not more; nothing has been announced, nothing is expected. Suddenly everywhere is black with people and more come streaming from all sides as though streets had only one direction. Most of them do not know what has happened and, if questioned, have no answer; but they hurry to be there where most other people are. — ELIAS CANETTI (16)*

**THOUSANDS OF US OUT HERE. IN THE MIDDLE OF THE STREET, IN THE MIDDLE** of the city. Yelling, tumbling, running. Breaking off, galloping down the alley like a pack of wild ponies. Pausing, licking our fingers and testing the air. Then out onto the street again. The pack becomes a mass becomes a throng becomes a maelstrom. Grabbing a wrist and

thrusting forward. The cops! the cops! Plans B and C. Spinning on heels, back tracking. Turning and then turning again and they are off our tail. We are out wolfing.

Political struggles coordinate the movements of bodies in spaces as in marches, protests, strikes, sit-ins, occupations, blockades, and lock downs. These forms of struggle often share compositional devices: bodies filling up or emptying out a space, bodies surrounding a terrain or clogging a channel, bodies displacing objects, breaking brittle surfaces, burning combustible elements. These sensuous moments of unrest traverse a broad cross section of political struggle. While one can describe these moments as a calculus of social and material forces, I wonder what one can learn from an inquiry into the aesthetic character of political struggles. An examination of struggles in their aesthetic dimension—their shards and ashes, their clamor and mess, their inescapable sensuality—can illuminate the gravity and exhilaration of political praxis.

This essay proposes a shift in formulating arts activism from a question of bringing art to social movements and towards thinking aesthetically about the barest of political practices. From this vantage point, political struggles already involve a rich set of aesthetic operations that precede the contribution made by artists. I use the concept of aesthetics to denote sensuousness and play, invoking specifically Kant's formulation of the beautiful as involving free play and a purposiveness without purpose. I propose an approach to political practices that may arouse an experience of the beautiful, as suggested through my reading of a text by the French journal *Tiqqun*. While often sensuous, fulfilling, and rapturous, crowds and collective assemblages also potentially bear the dangers of alienation. Yet this aesthetic orientation toward political practices uniquely suggests a move away from the professionalization of arts activism that tames what otherwise might unfold as free play, communism, and the beautiful.

Thinking about the aesthetics of political struggles—especially in the moments when they become enacted with bodies in space—reframes an orientation towards art and politics. A few common frameworks for arts activism often situate art as a supplement to political movements. Community-based projects bring art in order to empower oppressed groups or build solidarity between people. Or artists aim to contribute and support social movements through projects such as silk-screening protest posters or preparing street theater for demonstrations. These

practices, often immensely useful to community groups and social movements, fit into a framework of supplementing politics with art.

Moving in different direction, I propose an alternative question to ask: *How can we think aesthetically about our political practices.* This entails a shift from supplementing social movements to engaging with the preexisting complexity and richness of forms of struggle such as marches, blockades, occupations, sabotage, and so on. Approaching a political demonstration from this point of view would conceive of the street as always already a performance. This shift involves thinking formally and sensuously about spatial-temporal political practices and about politics as a rich aesthetic field in itself. One can focus on the artisanal crafting of political struggle, the 'social movements' happening in the street in distinction to making dances alone in the studio.

This suggests a further aesthetic turn for politics and activism, a transference of the functions played by art to political practice. One could apply the notion of prefigurative politics to the aesthetic so that social movements might aesthetically prefigure the world to come. Everything one asks for from an aesthetic experience could be asked of how groups enact political struggles in space and time. The intensities of the aesthetic can be heightened, even made psychedelic, through forms of struggle. Situations of mass political insurrection involve a sensuous density, the exhilarating overturning of once undisturbed spaces and the devastating materiality of violence and repression. Other political practices, such as an under-attended, boring rally of trite and banal speeches, pall in comparison as aesthetic experiences. These practices might benefit from an increase in intensity and unpredictability. This call to seek aesthetic experiences amongst billy clubs and rubber bullets might appear dystopian or even an apology for police violence because of its potentiality for excitement. While certainly a danger, one must not overlook the importance of the aesthetic aspects of how struggles feel as we engage in them. Instead, this is a call to experience the conflict and antagonism that is a part of any historic political struggle from the civil rights era to Tahrir Square and beyond.

In thinking about the aesthetics of struggle, what does this term 'aesthetics' do for us? From its long history, I use the term to point to sensuousness and play. Sensuousness refers to the perceptible properties of something, its sensual characteristics. Recalling Frederic Jameson's imperative to *always historicize*, I might rework this as *always aestheticize*, meaning to consider how one comes to perceive or

experience whatever situation is at hand. How do you know a struggle is happening, how do you know to understand it as a political struggle, and what account do you privilege as a means of explain how it occurs? These questions pertain to the sensible and the forces that organize and categorize the sensorium.

As a second idea indicated by the term 'aesthetics,' play traverses many aesthetic theorists, particularly Kant who characterizes the aesthetic experience as one of play (Kant). Play broadly refers to non-instrumental activity, tasks without an end, and I am specifically focused in Kant's notion of 'free play.' Play appears in Kant's aesthetics as the free play of cognitive faculties. One feels an alignment of the faculties and a harmony between intuition and understanding. The aesthetic judgement senses that the object in view displays a purposiveness without purpose, an experience of understanding in general without a particular content. One remains disinterested, unmotivated, and unclouded by desire for the object.

To steal these concepts from Kant then, I propose political struggle as a form of free play, a moment in which one can experience the beautiful. Consider a moment of urban unrest. A person engaged in a riot relates to the landscape in a manner paralleling a patron experiencing the beautiful before a work of art. The rioter does not interact with the newspaper box, trash can, or shop window for their functional properties nor for their pleasing qualities. She does not intend to put something in the trash can, obtain a newspaper from its box, or admire the objects displayed in the window. Rather, she interacts with the elements of the street scene with a purposiveness without purpose. She acts as though she has a purpose, taking a brick to the glass or tilting the newspaper box on its side, yet ultimately these actions serve no particular function. The riot becomes a scene of the free play of the cognitive faculties, an experience of the urban environment disinterested from its relation to either desire or goodness. The street becomes not a conduit of commerce but a play of forms. Certainly, Kant's notion of the beautiful shares some features with the riot but not others such as his *sensus communis*, the universalization of taste. This appropriation of the beautiful stems not from fidelity but an attempt to read with Kant against Kant.

While the connection between urban unrest and a Kantian free play appears out of joint as the beautiful involves a restfulness of the mind and an experience of harmony, play and non-instrumental actions

can help make sense what happens in political struggle. If utopia or communism can be thought not as a concrete set of socio-institutional relations but as a process, political struggles do not pursue a specific end or aim. One must not ask if a particular struggle finishes in victory or defeat but how to swing the unfolding circumstances in an emancipatory direction. The beautiful's purposiveness without purpose resonates both with the non-instrumentality of aesthetic form and political practice.

Play traverses not only aesthetic theory but also the left communist thought of the French journal *Tiqqun*, which embraces this continuous free play of political forces. In its *Introduction to Civil War*, Thesis 10 states, "Civil war is the *free play* of forms-of-life" (*Tiqqun*, 32, my emphasis) and Thesis 30 defines communism as "the real *movement* that elaborates, everywhere and at every moment, civil war" (*Tiqqun*, 63, my emphasis). This use of 'free play' gestures towards a reading of communism in light of Kant's aesthetics. *Tiqqun* presents a runaway communism that dispenses with any need for concepts of value production or exploitation in favor of a notion of communism as a ceaseless civil war without aim or end, a war fought with purposiveness without purpose. The choice of the word *movement* frames communism as a form of dance, an ongoing process of bodies leaning towards and away from each other. *Tiqqun* finds beauty precisely in this elaboration of civil war and communism, as it states, "the only beautiful moments of the last century were disparagingly called 'civil wars'" (*Tiqqun*, 191). Arising out of struggle, political struggle enacts a purposive dis-ordering of the natural universe, a disorder experienced as the harmony and beauty of communism's unfolding. *Tiqqun* provides one approach to communism as an experience of the beautiful.

Let us turn towards social movements and their formal ways of collecting and moving bodies in crowds, packs, swarms, gangs, huddles, clusters, herds, and bursting socialites. Various writers give us a sense of the viscosity and texture of crowds and their movements. One can think of Elias Canetti's poetic description of crowds and the complex typology he invents to understand them: Invisible Crowds, Baiting Crowds, Flight Crowds, Prohibition Crowds, Reversal Crowds, Feast Crowds, Double Crowds, Crowd Crystals, and so on. Or one can recall the way that Deleuze and Guattari picked up and ran with Canetti's work with their figure of the wolf pack: "The wolf, wolves, are intensities, speeds, temperatures, non-decomposable variable distances.

A swarming, a wolfing” (Deleuze and Guattari, 35). These examples indicate the poetics of bodies and their collective movements. An aesthetic approach to struggle examines political practice at level of the crowd assemblages generated and the ensuing corporeality of action, or, in other words, how movements inspire themselves to actually, physically move.

Inside the form of a political struggle rests a dance party, an embodied play of social antagonisms. One can note the parallel between a struggle and a party, in its sense as revelry and festivity. At a dance party, everyone swarms towards the center of the dance floor, wanting to be surrounded and immersed in the amoebic form of the party. Both parties and struggles bring bodies together for a concentrated collective experience, leaving it their wake messes, a disorganized array of bygone objects.

While noting the poetics and play of crowds, I must raise two important admonitions: the danger of alienation and the collapsing distance between play and work. While the packs that form on the streets and collectively discover what they can do together conjures the excitement of social movements, their beauty can produce alienation as much as emergent solidarity. A friend and comrade wrote to me describing her experience during the Millbank riot of November 10, 2010 when fifty thousand British students descended upon the headquarters of the Conservative Party that had voted to triple the cost of university tuition. In the midst of students breaking the floor to ceiling windows of the lobby, tossing whatever computer equipment they found into the street, and setting fires in the courtyard of the building, she describes her uneasiness:

Then the assault on Millbank in the student protests last November, I was there with A and we got into the building after it had been taken. We ran from the cops, went up on the roof, dropped a banner, etc. So this kind of scenario of being able to act with people I know and trust at demos or riots but feeling totally alienated and vulnerable if on my own or in an unknown group, not recognizing a group energy or not being able or desiring to tap into it. So my anxiety is not being able to connect my political desires for collectivity or rupture to the uneasiness with groups, crowds, and their behaviors. Being an only child, I guess I never got over the trauma of the first day at school. I was a sovereign individual thrown into a bunch of stupid kids.

The crowd or pack as a social form can swing in many directions, sometimes as frightening as exhilarating. What haunts us about social relations in other contexts—the first day of school, the bar, the subway—will haunt us within social movements.

One must attend to the specificity of the bodies involved and how the stratification of bodies by race, gender, and class will continue to operate in the midst of action. Decision making and the norms about what to do in the context of political action will not escape the power dynamics at play within racialized and gendered social relations. White bodies acting together in a protest in a commercial center may understand each other as equipped with an anti-capitalist analysis while they may assume brown bodies in a poorer area doing the same actions as stripped of a sophisticated political critique. A group of men may fail to support actions done by women, indicative to them of female hysteria and frenzy rather than strategic political practice. Certain subject positions may understand their struggles as properly political and those done by others as non-political, mob hysteria, pointing towards a differentiation between who and what can occupy the space of the political. The dynamics of white supremacy and patriarchy will emerge in the midst of political movements as in other domains of social life.

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In addition to the uneasiness of and power dynamics within group formations, approaching social movements as aesthetic phenomena raises a complex set of issues regarding cultural production, work, and revolt. If the bodies in the street resemble dancers, does taking part in political organizing consist of a form of cultural labor? Is the dancer/body-running-through-the-streets a cultural worker? From one vantage point, street actions reflect a revolt against work and a momentary refusal to be a quiet, docile body in transit, to heed the demands of capital. From the opposite angle, one could cast the street action as a form of unpaid creative labor that helps to generate a buzz about a city that brands and advertisers will source to promote their commodities. While many examples attest to the channeling of revolutionary movements by advertisers, one commodity appears particularly relevant, a video game titled *Brink* released in North America on May 10, 2011. In the game, two factions, resistance and security, battle in a fictional insurrectionary civil war. The characters utilize *parkour*-style movement, and the billboard advertisements for the game do not fail to circle the *R* in 'Revolution.' Framing political practice as a form of play stands in an uncertain relation to the status of work, often characterized

as expanding into domains of leisure within a post-Fordist context. Political practice can play an antagonistic force to capital and value production, or it can contribute to the cultural reservoirs available for appropriation.

Another aspect of the relations between play, work, and political practice pertains to arts activists who make a profession out of their activist work. By collecting their projects into a portfolio or CV that may get them a teaching gig or other form of employment, they turn what would be the play of political antagonism into the imperatives of work. Perhaps this is the moment when social movements can no longer have their purposiveness without purpose, their beauty. To uphold their status as play may entail a move away from professionalization, from an impressive portfolio of brilliant art work that knits communities together, critiques institutions, and opposes imperialism. The rowdiest in the street and during the darkest hours of the night will never receive compensation for their work, which I prefer to call communist play. Their activity will be anonymous and will not accrue symbolic capital. Few are ever paid to participate in political uprisings. Usually only mercenaries, those hired by a regime to suppress an uprising, receive wages. A distinction may need to separate the free play of political struggles from the logic and regulation of cultural labor.

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If one identifies political practice not as work but as play, one faces the inevitable question of how exactly to fund and reproduce one's political efforts. While we still live in a capitalist mode of production, one is forced to sell labor-power to reproduce oneself or consent to a voluntarist marginalization. The problem of how to fund political practices on the left parallels the discussions around arts funding. As domains of play and non-instrumental activity, both political and artistic practices strive to articulate themselves as detached from or antagonistic to value production. Yet they require material resources to continue to exist. This constitutive contradiction of being exterior or in opposition to capital circulation yet dependent on it haunts those engaged in both political struggles and artistic practices. While furthering and elaborating political struggles involves a set of strategic decisions about how to sustain various efforts, I suggest not identifying too closely with professionalization. Capital will not pay labor for waging class war, and men will not pay women and trans-identified people to resist patriarchy. Parsing out and understanding the distinction and contradiction between the work we do to reproduce our political



practices and the play of struggle itself may help clarify the relation between play and work.

In this consideration of the aesthetics of struggle, political practices emerge as corporeal movements that one cannot abstract from the concrete moments of their elaboration, their performance in space and time. An aesthetic operation occurs during a moment of struggle prior to the arrival of any activist marching bands, the street theater troupes, or art as such. The doing of politics rests upon the participation and play of bodies in the elaboration of a struggle. Addressing politics on the level of its aesthetic operations forges a connection between play, means without ends, and the beauty sought after in both politics and aesthetics. We will not be paid for our most beautiful dances which will be on the ashes of capitalist social relations. We will not add a bullet point on our CV for abolishing capitalism and ourselves as workers, which will be perhaps the most aesthetically satisfying moment of our lives.

201 At stake here is not so much a creative proposition for a new sort of project, but a way of thinking differently about the practices that traverse social movements. This implies a call for artists, in addition to making art for social movements, to make the movement their aesthetic project. In the context of political movements that do not yet have the sublimity of a mass uprising, those involved can thump up the volume, strangeness, choreography, and poetics of what they do politically. If participating in social movements feels boring or unfulfilling, add complexity and play to the dances that unfold on the streets. Use your legs for jumping, kicking, getting low. Use your arms for throwing, climbing, lifting. Your feet for running and stomping. Your hands for secret baseball catcher signs.

Pack lots of bodies into small spaces. Get tighter. Also, be more expansive, decentralize the activity, infinite splinter groups. Use levels—send some people up and others below. Dress the part, which is to say, dress as someone you have never met. Appropriate tactics from the animal kingdom—a wedge of swans, a pack of wolves, a wake of buzzards, a siege of cranes. Whether it is two or ten thousand of you, make it your finest and ceaseless dance.

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*Many thanks to Dara Greenwald, Lindsay Caplan, Marina Vishmidt, and Oxana Timofeeva who have been in dialogue with me about this essay.*

# Ready-Made Artist and Human Strike

## A few Clarifications

CLAIRE FONTAINE

*Thus instead of adding a film to the thousands of films already out there I prefer to expose here the reason why I chose not to do so. This comes down to replacing the futile adventures recounted by the cinema with an important subject: myself.* — GUY DEBORD, IN *GIRUM IMUS NOCTE ET CONSUMIMUR IGNI*, 1956

*My immolation of myself was a somber dampened rocket. It certainly wasn't modern—yet I had recognized it in others, I had recognized it since the war in a dozen or so honorable active men.* — FRANCIS SCOTT FITZGERALD, *THE CRACK-UP*, 1931

*I live solely from here to there inside a little word in whose inflexion I lose my useless head.* — FRANZ KAFKA, *DIARY*, 1911

**WE'RE NOT GOING TO PULL THE DEATH OF THE AUTHOR ON YOU AGAIN.**

No, not that again! No, we're not going to say anything about it, nor speak in favor of therapeutic endeavor, nor on the possibility of cardiac massage or euthanasia. We're going to approach the question from an entirely different perspective, which is that of processes of subjectivization and their relationship to power. The problem at the moment is not so much that of knowing whether the paradigm of the disc jockey may be extended to the situations of all contemporary creators, or whether any spectator/reader, sovereign by means of his or her zapping, short-lived attention, is comparable to any celebrated artist. The crisis, which must be spoken of, is vaster and no doubt older; it reached its height in the twentieth century but its convulsions are shaking us even today. We are speaking of the crisis of singularities.

Foucault explained it clearly: power produces more than it represses, and its most important products are subjectivities. Our bodies are crossed by relations of power and our becomings are orientated by the means through which we either oppose this power or wed ourselves to its flux.

The construction site of the self has always been a collective matter, a matter of interference and resistance, of the distribution of competencies and the division of tasks. Marks of inferiority, sexuality, race, and class are inscribed on the self by a series of focused interventions on the part of the principle relays of power, which act in depth and leave often indelible traces. Black, French, heterosexual, attractive, Bachelors degree, above the poverty line... All of these parameters and others, which we easily introject, result from a social negotiation to which we were not even invited. The dispossession that we thus feel with regard to our presumed identity is the same as that, which we feel when facing history, now that we no longer know how to somehow take part in it. No doubt this feeling of indigence is intensified due to the fact that we know, as Agamben writes in *The Coming Community*, that the hypocritical fiction of an irreplaceable singularity of being in our culture serves solely to guarantee its universal representability.

Whether one speaks of *whatever singularities* or of men without qualities, it is by now almost unnecessary to enumerate those who have diagnosed an impoverishment of Western subjectivity in literature,

sociology, philosophy, psychiatry, and so on. From Joyce to Pessoa, Basaglia to Lang, Musil to Michaux, Valéry to Duchamp, and Walser to Agamben via Benjamin, it is evident that the suture that democracy ought to have practiced on those lives mutilated by recent history has actually produced a hitherto-unknown infection. Those injured by modernity, rather than seeing their wounds scar over and regaining the ability to work, actually discovered all sorts of identity disorders, and found their nerves as well as their bodies marked by the crack-up. The more the “I” spawned and multiplied in all the cultural products, the less one might encounter the consistency of the self in real life. In the last fifty years, democratic power, operating under cover of a promise of general equality, has produced equivalence between those previously separated by everything (class, race, culture, age, etc.) This process was not founded on shared ethics, which would have ultimately produced either full equality or conflict, but on the basis of a mall-like universalism. Of course, from the very beginning this universalism was conceived as a short-lived lie, designed to distract us from the fact that the development of Capital was going to debase civil society so profoundly and create such gulfs of inequality that no political tendency could subsequently emerge from this disaster with dignity, let alone propose a possible remedy.

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The revolts of the 1970s and in particular the ones that took place in Italy in 1977 aired all sorts of dirty laundry that no political or biological family knew how to clean anymore: colonialism, whose racist heritage was doing rather well, after all, sexism, which only looked healthier after 1968, the “free” spaces of extra-parliamentary cells which had become microfascist breeding grounds, the “emancipation” through work that was a postmodern version of Daddy and Grandpa’s slavery, and so on.

What triumphed was the sentiment of having been fooled and having received, in a rural and underdeveloped Europe, an outdated kit for the American way of life of the 1950s, while in the U.S. people were spitting on consumerism and the family and fighting to bring the Vietnam War home. These movements were unique, insofar as they did not fit into the sociological categories usually employed to mystify uprisings. In Italy a “diffused irrationalism” was spoken of, because young people refused to work and rejected the emerging global *petit-bourgeoisie*, believing in neither what society said of them nor the future they were offered.

The fact that these years of unheard-of collective creative fertility, both in terms of life forms and intellectual production, passed into the history books as “the years of lead” [a literal translation of the Italian expression “gli anni di piombo,” referencing the material of the bullets; translator’s note] tells us a lot about what we are supposed to forget. The feminist movement triggered this transformation, which dissolved all the old groups that had channeled energies since ’68. “No more mothers, wives and daughters: let’s destroy the families!” was the cry heard in the street. People were no longer demanding rights from the state but making an affirmation of foreignness in regard to the state of the world, an affirmation which made itself heard: nobody wanted to be included to be discriminated on a new basis. These movements were manifestations of the human strike.

PIERRE CABANNE: Your best work has been your use of your time.

MARCEL DUCHAMP: That’s right.

— Marcel Duchamp, *Conversations avec Pierre Cabanne*, 1966

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“How are you doing?”

“Fine! It’s been a while! Since Frieze...”

“Oh my God! Are you going to Basel?”

“Yeah, see you in Basel!”

*Conversation overheard between two unidentified people in the toilets during the opening of the Scottish pavilion at the 2005 Venice Biennale.*

In art the symptoms manifested themselves violently early on. Dadaism, Duchamp’s urinal and other ready-mades, Pop Art, the détournement, certain presentations of conceptual art, to only cite the most obvious: all of these are luminous oscillations of the classical sovereign position of the artist.

But we are not going to trace a genealogy of transformation in the domain of the production of art objects; what interests us here is what happened in the domain of the production of artists. No doubt, the manner in which the most brilliant amongst them latched onto the flux of a still-Fordist Capital via the principle of “multiples”—in which they started to dematerialize production and exhibition—says something about a new relationship that even today binds us to objects, including art objects. But these initial waves of transformation in the relationship between artists and their practice seemed either harmless

(for museums, galleries, and collectors, it was merely a matter of finding new criteria for commodification) or gently dissenting (this time for the critics it was simply a question of proving that there was value beyond the provocation). In fact these stirrings prepared the ground for vast changes. We won't refer here to the mechanical reproducibility of the artwork but to the reproducibility of artists during the epoch of *whatever singularities*. In an era that has been qualified as post-Fordist, one in which on-demand has replaced stock, the only goods still produced on an assembly line—that of the education system—without knowing for whom, nor why, are workers, including artists.

The extension of the art market, on which there is already a sizeable literature, has in particular generated a mass of people, producer/consumers, who move from gallery opening to gallery opening in the capital cities, from residence to residence, from art fair to biennale. This mass buys more or less the same clothes, knows the same musical, visual, and cinematographic references, and conceives of its productions within the frameworks determined by the market with which it had been initially familiarized through art-schools and magazines. It is not a question here of moralizing about the tastes, attitudes, and aspirations of those who are called “artists.” It is rather a question of understanding the consequences of such an art market on the subjectivities of those who keep it alive.

Yet it is clear that the increasing circulation of works, images of works, and their authors has ended up generating a database of visual and theoretical information, as well as more or less uniform address books, while preserving the same discriminations and inequalities characterizing the rest of society, in line with the protocol of all democratization processes. The self-reproducing fabric called the “art world” has thus reached a stage where interrogating the term “creativity” no longer really makes sense. Nothing “new,” in the most naïve sense of the word, can see the light in this space. The *whatever singularities* who know the public's judgment and taste and are submitted to analogous processes of in the stimulation of their creativity—in a context with, according to strict norms, will produce similar generic works. And if the novelty of the work is no longer even necessary for the market nor for the consumers, this massive generation of uniformity will nevertheless generate genuine dysfunction in the social space that surrounds contemporary art.

The reason we insist on this point is not linked to the superstition that artistic work, unlike other types of work, is supposed to emerge from a profound and direct connection with the singularity of the author. It is evident that if one were to pursue Foucault's dream and, for a year or more, identify productions by their titles alone, eliding the names of the authors, nobody would be able to recognize the paternity of a given work. This is a debate that Fluxus and many others should have already closed because, given the relative transparency of the productive protocols adopted by the artists and the accessibility of the technical means employed, a considerable number of people find themselves, without knowing it, doing "the same thing" in workshops thousands of kilometers apart. Anything to the contrary would be astonishing.

When, wining and dining one evening, you discover that you have actually been speaking to an internationally celebrated artist whom you had taken quite sincerely for a truck-driver, you cannot stop yourself from comparing this impression with that made two weeks ago by a brilliant young man, extremely well read—prior, however, to visiting his website and seeing what he calls his artistic work.

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The two distinct problems—that of the eternal discord between the qualities of human beings and the qualities of their works, and that of the crisis in the singular quality of artistic productions—have a common base: the social space that shelters them, the ethic of those who people it, the use-value of the life lead within it. Or, in other words, the possibility of living in social relations that are compatible with artistic production. The problem raised here, which might appear scandalously elitist, in fact says something about the policies applied to artistic creation and their relation to politics in general.

The only way of assisting creation is to protect those who create nothing and are not even interested in art. If every social relation extracted from capitalist misery is not necessarily a work of art in itself, it is definitely the only possible condition for the occurrence of the artwork. Contemporary artists have the same demands as everybody else: to live an exciting life in which encounters, the everyday, and subsistence are linked in a way that makes sense. They don't need to be sponsored by the very same multinationals that ruin their life, they don't need to take up residencies all over the world where nobody loves them and they have nothing to do with their days but tourism. All they need is a world liberated from the social relations and objects generated by Capital.



"Niquez en haut débit" ("fuck on broadband")

Hijacking of the Bouyges Telecom advertising slogan "*Communiquez en haut débit*" ("Communicate on broadband")

— Metro Chatelet, November 2005

"...what cannot be commercialized is destined to disappear."

— Nicolas Bourriaud, *Esthétique relationnelle*, 2001

"Rirkrit Tiravanija organizes a dinner at a collector's house and leaves him the necessary material for the preparation of a Thai soup. Philippe Parreno invites people to practice their favorite hobbies on the first of May, but on a factory assembly line. Vanessa Beecroft dresses twenty women in a similar manner and gives them a red wig; women that one can only see through the doorjamb. Maurizio Cattelan..." Everyone will have recognized in this interrupted list the beginning of Nicolas Bourriaud's work *Esthétique relationnelle*. The author's intention is to present the "revolutionary" practices of a certain number of artists who should help us oppose behavioral standardization through the creation of "utopias of proximity." We won't judge here the pertinence of the examples chosen to develop his thesis, which starts out indeed from a shared acknowledgment of the homogenization of our life conditions.

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The book has not aged well; both history and critics have shown to what degree this dream was naïve. Above all, experience has demonstrated to visitors/actors that these little utopias accumulate such a quantity of handicaps that they end up becoming grotesque. In addition to carrying the failures already encountered by participative theatre—which at least evolved in the 1970s, in a climate of excess and social generosity unimaginable today—these practices advance with the arrogance of the immaterial and ephemeral work of art, laying claim to the obsolete and suspect principle of the "creation of situations." If the infantile dream of the Avantgardes was to transform the entirety of life into a work of art, they just transformed separate moments of our lives into the playgrounds of several artists.

To use another metaphor, if for example we take seriously the traditional reading of modernism, which claimed that abstraction in painting was a return to the primacy of the support, in the case of these artists it is as though we were being asked to fabricate frames and canvases ourselves with an IKEA-style instruction manual.

Relational aesthetics exposes the most basic conditions of production of creativity: sociality, conviviality around a meal or a drink. But given that the authors' singularities are impoverished, these conditions are no longer presented in the auratic distance of the autobiographies of the great. These are mere objects, furniture, totally prosaic, which must be used. If you still don't believe this, recall, among other things, of one of Tiravanija's works in which he exhibited the car that drove him from the airport to the place of the exhibition. A car touched, "miracled" by contact with the artist, but alas any old car, a ready-made justified by the simple history of its use-value, which is the exact opposite of the concept of the ready-made! (As if the bottle-rack or the Brillo boxes were works of art because they had been used by artists!)

The works of relational aesthetics, which have in common the fact of making an inappropriate usage of the gallery or museum space, oddly end up producing an astonishing impression of familiarity. (This is not the place to evaluate, according to a Platonist criterion, the quality of these works as simulacra of life or of the controlled liberation of life, in a semi-closed milieu. Art has always been more experimental than representative and thus has always needed a laboratory, a separate milieu in which this experimentation could be pursued, with the goal of contaminating—or not—the outside world.) The familiarity, which seizes us, is exactly the same as that which we experience with regard to Capital and its everyday operations. Between the zones consecrated to the relational experience of art, and the museum bookshop, or the dinner after the opening, there is no substantial difference; the affects and percepts which emerge are, in sum, similar to those of shops and commercial locales.

Of course, one could ask whether the public who saw Duchamp's urinal reacted in the same manner. After all, what object was more familiar or more trivial? But the operation of the Duchampian ready-made was not designed to be unsettling in what it allowed to be seen; it was this way due to the position in which it placed the spectator, which was the exact opposite of any encouragement towards interactivity. Showing objects from which the use-value had been once and for all subtracted, such that an exhibition value could be assigned to them, tells us that usevalue is a concept which concerns life and not art (the joke of the Mona Lisa and the ironing board is only another proof of this).

Today it is the place of the artist that is struck with impropriety, no longer the object that he decontextualizes, nor the installations that he fabricates with ordinary elements. It is the gesture of wanting to produce an “original” work, which transforms authors into multiples of *whatever singularities*. But it is not only the poor “relational” artists whom we are targeting here. Under the conditions of production of artistic subjectivity that we have just described, we are all ready-made artists and our only hope is to understand this as quickly as possible. We are all just as absurd and displaced as a vulgar object, deprived of its use and decreed an art object: *whatever singularities*, supposed to be artistic. Under the present conditions, we are, like any other proletariat, expropriated from the use of life, because for the most part, the only historically significant use that we can make of it comes down to our artistic work.

But work is only one part of life, and it is far from being the most important.

- 211 “Ten years of work to pay for a new car and they get two months of prison for burning it.”  
— Pierre, 48, painter in the building trade, *Libération*, 7 November, 2005

Jacques Rancière’s concept of an aesthetic regime of the arts clarifies for us the philosophical legitimacy of exhibiting everything today and the impossibility of employing ethical arguments against this. Under the aesthetic regime “everything is equal, and equally representable” the hierarchies and prohibitions that originated in the old world of representations are ruined forever. Our daily experience and its artistic transcription are of the order of “the parataxical linking up of little perceptions”; the promiscuity of everything and anything appears clearly in the syntax of the literature in which “the absolute liberty of art identifies itself with the absolute passivity of sensual matter.” In a text entitled “If there Is any Unrepresentability” Rancière places Antelme and Flaubert side by side:

“I went to piss.—this can be read in *L’espèce humaine*—It was still dark. Others beside me also pissed, we didn’t speak. Behind the urinal there was the trench for the loos with a little wall on which other guys were sitting, trousers around their ankles. A little roof covered the urinal, the loos. Behind us noises of boots, coughs; it was others arriving. The loos were never deserted. At that

hour a vapor floated above the urinals... The night in Buchenwald was calm. The camp was an immense machine asleep. From time to time the projectors shone from the watchtowers. The eye of the SS opened and closed. In the woods, which surrounded the camp patrols did their rounds. Their dogs didn't bark. The guards were tranquil."

"She sat down and took up her work again which was a stocking of white cotton in which she made—we read in *Madame Bovary*—she worked with her head down; she did not speak. Charles neither. The air passing above the door pushed some dust over the threshold; he watched it dally, and all he heard was the internal pulse of his head, with the distant chicken's squawk who laid eggs in the courtyard."

If the juxtaposition of these two extracts is orchestrated so as to interpellate the reader, and if the critical and semiotic analysis of this grouping would take up an entire book, we will take it as one effect of parataxic syntax amongst others, even if it is particularly significant. Our intention is to support a hypothesis that Rancière openly rejects in his argument. According to him one must interpret the gesture of Antelme, whom, in the midst of disaster, uses the Flaubertian syntax as an act of resistance and re-humanization of his limit-experience. The silence of the people described in these two extracts and the relation between their resigned lack of words and the hostile surrounding objects raises another question: that of a continuity between the affects of the concentration camps and those of daily life in times of "peace," and even with those of the "peace" that preceded the existence of the camps. Located in the forced intimacy between human beings and all sorts of vulgar and odious objects, which constitute the daily life of the majority under advanced capitalism, this continuity has produced effects on our subjectivities far more pernicious than those Marx was able to describe. Reification, real subsumption, and alienation say nothing to us of the lack of words afflicting us when faced with our evident familiarity with commodities and their language, as well as our simultaneous incapacity to name the most simple facts of life, such as political events, for a start.

No doubt it is to this talent at making everything coexist in one day, this capacity to call anything and everything "work," that the extermination machine owed its astonishing efficacy during the Second World War. It was definitely a parataxical banality of evil, which transformed an ordinary employee into Eichmann: all he did, after all, was draw up lists; he was only doing his work.

But beyond the appearance of fragmentation, which characterizes the assemblage of abstract and disparate activities that constitute works in the contemporary world, the task of permanently weaving some continuity to hold life together is offered by each of us, a task that collaborates with the entrenched system, made of tiny gestures and small adjustments. Since the 1930s total mobilization has not stopped; we are still and permanently mobilized within the flux of “active life” (*la “vie active”*). Being *whatever singularities* we are like blank pages on which any history could be written (that of Eichmann, that of a great artist, that of an employee with no vocation); we live surrounded by objects that could become ready-mades, could remain everyday objects, or traverse these two states. However in front of these possibilities, in a light sleep, beneath the surface of the real, a spread of advertising slogans and a host of stupid tasks saturate time and space. Until an interruption, we will remain foreigners to ourselves and friends with things.

213      An image is that in which Another time meets the Now in an illumination to form a constellation. In other words, the image is the dialectic frozen. For whilst the relation between the present and the past is purely temporal and continuous, the relation between Another time and the Now is dialectical: it is not something which unfolds but an image. — Walter Benjamin, *The Arcades Project*, 1940

Parataxis is thus the very form of our existence under a regime said to be democratic. Class difference remains calm, racism stays hidden, discrimination is practiced amidst a multitude of other facts, all flattened on the same horizontal plane of an amnesiac senile present. The images, impressions, and information we receive are a succession of “stuff” that nothing differentiates or organizes. Collage and channel-surfing are no longer separate activities, they are the metaphor for our perception of life. This is why we believe that it is no longer necessary to go one way or another on the death of the author: for if the author as “convention” seems more necessary than ever in the meaningless struggles to protect copyright and in the interviews with creators that infest the periodicals, we no longer even have to ask whether it was ever anything but a convention to serve the interests of power. We have always thought via assemblages, editing, and juxtapositions, but, as Deleuze argues, the most faithful mirror of thought is the moving

image. If one takes this assertion to be a figure of the real rather than a simple metaphor, one is obliged to inquire into the ontological function of the still image amidst total mobilization. In a 1987 article called "The Interruption," Raymond Bellour remarks that the story of the still image has never been written. In a way we can identify the traces of that absence in Benjamin's work: the definition he gives of the dialectical image responds in part to our inquiry: "the immobilization of thoughts just as much as their movement is part of the process of thinking. When thought stops in a constellation saturated with tension, the dialectical image appears." Product of both a cessation and a saturation, the dialectical image is primarily a place where the past encounters the present. But this encounter happens as in a dream, as if the present were purified of any contingency and had given itself over to the pure movement of time and history. The past encounters the present as pure possibility.

The reasons why Benjamin spent so much time analyzing the processes of suspension and cessation in Brechtian theater are inextricably linked to his vision of history and the function that art can assume within it. A large part of his thought appears to be a site for the construction of a knowledge both verbal and visual, which would function as a bridge between the image and life, the fixed image and the moving image. At the center of his research appears always a change in rhythm, whether due to shock, or to other types of interruption.

When, in epic theater, Brecht insists on the processes that produce a strange gaze on both the part of the public and the actors, suspension appears as the technical device employed to release that affect. In 1931 Benjamin described the procedure thus:

a family scene. Suddenly a stranger enters. The woman was just about to roll up a pillow and smother her daughter; the father in the middle of opening the window to call the police. At that very moment a stranger appears in the doorway. A 'tableau' was what one called such a scene in 1900. This means that the stranger finds himself confronted with the situation: bed sheets all rumpled, the window open, furniture turned upside down. Now a type of regard exists before which the most habitual scenes of bourgeois life do not appear to be so different. Strictly speaking, the more the ravages of our social order increase (the more we are affected ourselves, as well as our ability to even notice this), the more the distance of the stranger will be marked.

The prism of the stranger in Benjamin's thought allows us to grasp logical and political links that tend to remain hidden. One becomes strange by means of a halting, for, when the movement picks up again, it is as if the parataxic evidence of the sequence of things appears unbound, as if in that interruption an interstitial space gaped open, sapping both the instituted order and our belonging to it.

In a commentary on Brecht's poems in 1939, Benjamin writes "whoever fights for the exploited class becomes an immigrant in his own country." Becoming stranger, a process that operates via a successive halting of thought images as well as an abandonment of the self, is manifested by an interruption and its following counter-movement.

This process of salvatory defamiliarization, which allows us to gain lucidity, seems to have a close relation to art or, more precisely, to art as source and device of these newfound affects, rather than as a site of their realization. This may be explained by the status of art as a space for the de-functionalization of subjectivities: singularities emerge there emancipated from any utility. As a purely aesthetic space, the world of art harbors a potential critique of the general organization of society, and of the organization of work in particular.

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The process of becoming stranger as a revolutionary act appears in Benjamin's work much earlier, in a 1920 text, which has nothing to do with art, entitled "Critique of Violence." Here one can read that "today organized labor is, apart from the state, probably the only subject entitled to exercise violence." But can one term strikes "violence"? Can a simple suspension of activity, "a nonaction, which a strike really is," be categorized as a violent gesture? In all, no, Benjamin responds, since it is equivalent to a simple "severing of relations." He adds, "in the view of the State conception, or the law, the right to strike conceded to labor is certainly a right not to exercise violence but, rather, to escape from a violence indirectly exercised by the employer, strikes conforming to this may undoubtedly occur from time to time and involve only a 'withdrawal' or 'estrangement' from the employer."

What happens in this singular moment of turning away that allows us to lose our familiarity with the misery of ordinary exploitation, suddenly rendering us capable of decreeing that for one day the boss is not the boss? It is an interruption of the normal routine, a mobilization following upon a de-mobilization. This occurs thanks to a halt that transforms us into astonished spectators, nevertheless ready to intervene. Foucault wrote that the implicit demand of any revolution is "we must change ourselves."

The revolutionary process thus becomes both the means of this change and the goal, because this transformation must generate for itself a context of possible persistence. It is in this sense that Benjamin says a genuinely radical strike would be a means without end, a space in which the entirety of hierarchical organization tied to political bureaucracy would fall apart when faced with the power of events. Parataxis would be ruined by the irruption of discontinuity.

But does a means exist today for the practice of such a strike, neither union-based or corporatist, but larger and more ambitious? The question is complex, but perhaps because of our impoverished singularity we are the first citizens of history for whom the metaphysical affirmation of the human being as a being without professional or social destiny has a very concrete sense. Agamben writes; “there is definitely something humans should be, but this something is not an essence, nor is it even a thing: it is the simple fact of their own existence as possibility or power.”

Some Italian feminists in the 1970s already envisioned a strike that would be an interruption of all the relations that identify us and subjugate us more than could any professional activity. They knew how to engage in a politics that wasn’t considered as politics. During struggles over the penalization of rape, the legalization of abortion, and the application of a quota policy, they simply asked the law to remain silent about their bodies. In 1976 the Bolognian collective for a domestic salary wrote, “If we strike, we won’t leave unfinished products or untransformed raw materials; by interrupting our work we won’t paralyze production, but rather the reproduction of the working class. And this would be a real strike even for those who normally go on strike without us.”

This type of strike that interrupts the total mobilization to which we are all submitted and that allows us to transform ourselves, might be called a human strike, for it is the most general of general strikes and its goal is the transformation of the informal social relations on which domination is founded. The radical character of this type of revolt lies in its ignorance of any kind of reformist result with which it might have to satisfy itself. By its light, the rationality of the behaviors we adopt in our everyday life would appear to be entirely dictated by the acceptance of the economic relationships that regulate them. Each gesture and each constructive activity in which we invest ourselves has a counterpart within the monetary economy or the libidinal economy.



The human strike decrees the bankruptcy of these two principles and installs other affective and material fluxes.

Human strike proposes no brilliant solution to the problems produced by those who govern us if it is not *Bartleby's* maxim: I would prefer not to.

Paris, November 2005

Translated by Olivier Feltham and Continuous Project

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Text taken from **WWW.CLAIREFONTAINE.WS**

# Human strike within the field of libidinal economy

CLAIRE FONTAINE

*The possibility of keeping together autonomy and an affective life is a tale that hasn't been written yet.* — LEA MELANDRI, *UNA VISCERALITÀ INDICIBILE*, 2007

**IN 1974 FRANÇOIS LYOTARD PUBLISHED THE SURPRISING BOOK ENTITLED** *Libidinal Economy* where he attacked Marxist and Freudian simplifications and he opened a new perspective on the connection between desires and struggle. What starts to crumble down at that time under the offensive of the two essential weapon-books by Deleuze and Guattari *Anti-Oedipus* and *A thousand plateaus* is the fetishization of consciousness as the organ that will lead the revolution. As the myth of the avant-garde begins to decline, a psychosomatic reorganization

arises and its consequences on the relationship between people are brutal and inevitable. Like in an inverted Menenius Agrippa's speech the head, with all its metaphorical connotations, lost its privilege and the low body could find a new voice full of desire and fear. A new materialism was coming to life inside people's bodies. At this point the failure of the responsible and pyramidal militant structures becomes blatant: thirst for power, need for leaders and the insufficiency of language to resolve conflicts inside the groups reveal the impossibility of living and fighting in such formations. In '73 the Gramsci Group wrote in the *Proposition* for a different way to make politics: "it's no longer possible to talk to each other from avant-garde to avant-garde with a sectary language of "experts" politicians... and then not being able to concretely talk about our experiences. The consciousness and the explanation of things must become clear through the experience of one's own condition, one's own problems and needs and not only through theories that describe mechanisms" (p.508, *L'orda d'oro*). The language that served the purposes of traditional politics seemed to have lost all its use value in the mouths of these young people; the members of the militant groups felt like they were "spoken," traversed by a speech that didn't transform them and couldn't translate their new uncertain situation. A protagonist of the events describes as it follows his position of leader: "the leader is somebody who is convinced that he has always been revolutionary and communist, and he doesn't ask himself what the concrete transformation of himself and the others is... The leader is the one that when the assemblies don't go the way they should either because a silence takes place either because some political positions are expressed which are different from the ones of his own group, he feels that he must intervene in order to fill the verbal space or to affirm his political line against the others." In this simple and clinical diagnosis we see the groups as spaces where subjective transformation attempts to be funneled into revolutionary efficiency; as a result of this process the positions of the singularities that composed the groups became progressively more and more rigid and the revolutionary space, in order to remain such, imposed the most conservative patterns of behavior within itself.

The term "human strike" was forged to name a revolt against what is reactionary even—and above all—inside the revolt. It defines a type of strike that involves the whole life and not only its professional

side, that acknowledges exploitation in all the domains and not only at work. Even the notion of work comes out modified if seen from the ethical prism of human strike: activities that seem to be innocent services and loving obligations to keep the family or the couple together reveal themselves as vulgar exploitation. The human strike is a movement that could potentially contaminate anyone and that attacks the foundations of life in common; its subject isn't the proletarian or the factory worker but the whatever singularity that everyone is. This movement isn't there to reveal the exceptionality or the superiority of a group on another but to unmask the whateverness of everybody as the open secret that social classes hide.

One definition of human strike can be found in *Tiqqun 2*: it's a strike "with no claims, that deterritorializes the agora and reveals the nonpolitical as the place of the implicit redistribution of responsibilities and unremunerated work."

Italian feminisms offer a paradigm of this kind of action because they have claimed the abolition of the borders that made politics the territory of men. If the sexual borders of politics weren't clearly marked in the seventies in Europe, they still persisted in an obscure region of the life in common, like premonitory nightmares that never stop coming true. In 1938 Virginia Woolf wrote in *Three Guineas*, "Inevitably we look upon societies as conspiracies that sink the private brother, whom many of us have reason to respect, and inflate in his stead a monstrous male, loud of voice, hard of fist, childishly intent upon scoring the floor of the earth with chalk marks, within whose mystic boundaries human beings are penned, rigidly, separately, artificially; where, daubed red and gold, decorated like a savage with feathers he goes through mystic rites and enjoys the dubious pleasures of power and dominion while we, 'his' women, are locked in the private house without share in the many societies of which his society is composed." Against the chalk marks, already obsolete in 1938 but that still keep appearing under our steps even in the twenty-first century, Lia Cigarini and Luisa Muraro specified in 1992 in a text called *Politics and political practice*: "We don't want to separate politics from culture, love and work and we can't find any criterion for doing so. A politics of this kind, a separated one, we wouldn't like it and we wouldn't know what to do with it."

At the core of this necessity of a politics that transforms life and that can be transformed by life, there wasn't a claim against injustice but

the desire of finding the right voice for one's own body, in order to fight the deep feeling of being spoken by somebody else, that can be called the political ventriloquism.

A quotation by Serena, published in the brochure *Sottosopra* n°3 in 1976, describes a modest miracle that took place at the women convention in Pinarella, "Something strange happened to me after the first day and a half: underneath the heads that were talking, listening and laughing, there were bodies; if I was speaking (and how serenely, and with no will of self-affirmation I was speaking in front of 200 women!) in my speak, in a way or another there was my body that was finding a strange way to become words." What an example of miraculous transubstantiation of the human strike.

### 1890 date of birth of the human strike

In her extensive research around the strike in the nineteenth century, Michelle Perrot talks about the birth of a sort of "sentimental strike" in the year 1890. May 4<sup>th</sup> of that year, in the newspaper from Lille entitled *Le Cri du Travailleur* (*The Worker's Scream*) we can read that "the strikers didn't give any reason for their interruption of the work... just that they want to do the same thing than the others." In this type of movement, young people and women start to play a very important role, Perrot says. In a small village called Vienne militant women encouraged their female comrades, "Let's not bear this miserable condition any longer. Let's upraise, let's claim our rights, let's fight for a more honourable place. Let's dare to say to our masters: we are just like you, made out of flesh and bones, we should live happy and free through our work." In another small village, Besseges, in the same year a young woman of 32, wife of a miner and mother of five, Amandine Vernet, reveals her vocation of natural born leader, "she never made herself noticeable before May 14<sup>th</sup> when she started to read a written speech in a meeting of 5,000 people in the Robiac woods. The day after she had started to speak, and the following days, made more self-confident by her success, she pronounced violent and moving speeches. She had the talent of making part of her audience cry."<sup>1</sup>

In this type of strike, what Perrot calls the emotional strike, the movement is no longer limited to a specific target: what is at stake is a transformation of the subjectivity. This transformation—and that is the interesting point—is at the same time the cause and the consequence of the strike. The subjective, the social and the political changes are

tightly entangled so that necessarily this type of uprising concerns subjects whose social identity is poorly codified, the people that Rancière calls the “placeless” or the “part-less.” They are movements where people unite under the slogan “we need to change ourselves” (Foucault), which means that the change of the conditions isn’t the ultimate aim but a means to change one’s subjectivity and one’s relationships.

According to some interpretations, there have been some components of this kind in the movement of ’68. Young people and women rose up then and claimed new rights that weren’t only political in an acquired sense, but that changed the very meaning of the word “political.” The inclusion of sexuality as an officially political territory is actually symptomatic of this transformation. Sexuality isn’t in fact the right term to be used, because it already designates an artificially separated field of reality. We should rather talk about the rehabilitation of the concept of desire, and analyze how new desires enter the political sphere in these specific moments, during the emotional strikes that we call “human strikes.”

The feminisms that do not pursue the integration in a world conceived and shaped by male protagonists are part of these strikes. We can read on this crucial point in a collective book from 1987 entitled *Non credere di avere dei diritti* (*Don’t believe you have any right*), “The difference of being a woman hasn’t found its free existence by establishing itself on the given contradictions, present within the social body, but on searching the contradiction that each singular woman was experiencing in herself and that didn’t have any social form before receiving it from the feminine politics. We have invented ourselves, so to speak, the social contradictions that made our freedom necessary.” Where invented doesn’t mean made up but found and translated the facts that reveal their dormant political dimension.

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### **The plan of consistency of human strike**

“They call it love. We call it unpaid labour. They call it frigidity. We call it absenteeism. Every time that we become pregnant against our own will, it’s an accident at work. Homosexuality and heterosexuality are both work conditions. Homosexuality is just the control of the workers on the production, not the end of the exploitation. No more smiles? No more money. Nothing will be more efficient to destroy the virtue of a smile. Neurosis, suicide, desexualization: professional illnesses of housewives.”

—Silvia Federici, *The right to hatred*, 1974

"1. The house where we make the most part of our work (the domestic work), is atomized in thousands of places, but it's present everywhere, in town, in the countryside, on the mountains, etc.

2. We are controlled and we depend on thousands of little bosses and controllers: they are our husbands, fathers, brothers etc., but we only have one master: the State.

3. Our comrades of work and struggle, that are our neighbors, aren't physically in touch with us during the work as it happens in the factory: but we can meet in places that we know, where we all go when we can steal some free time during the day. And each one of us isn't separated from the other by qualifications and professional categories. We all make the same work.

(...) If we went on a strike we would not leave unfinished products or raw materials untransformed etc.: by interrupting our work we wouldn't paralyze the production but the daily reproduction of the working class. This would hit the heart of the Capitalist system, because it would become an actual strike even for those that normally go on strike without us; but since the moment we stop to guarantee the survival of those which we are affectively tightened to, we will also have a difficulty in continuing the resistance."

—*Coordination from Emilia Romagna for the salary to the domestic work, Bologna, 1976*

"The worker has the possibility of joining a union, going on strike, the mothers are isolated, locked in their houses, tightened to their children by charitable bonds. Our wildcat strikes manifest themselves as a physical and mental breakdown."

—Adrienne Rich, *Born of a Woman*, 1980

The situation of not being able to draw the line between life and work that beforehand only concerned housewives is now becoming generalized. A strike isn't possible to envisage for most of us, but the reasons we keep living the way we do and can't rebel against anyone but ourselves are to be searched in our libidinal metabolism and in the libidinal economy we participate to.

Each struggle has become a struggle against a part of ourselves because we are always partly complicit with the things that oppress us. The biopower, under which we live, is the power that owns our bodies but allows us the right to speak. According to what Giorgio Agamben writes in *The Coming Community* the colonization of physiology by industry started in the '20s and it reached its peak when photography

allowed a massive circulation of pornography. The anonymous bodies portrayed were absolutely whatever and because of this very reason generically desirable. Images of real human beings had become for the first time in history objects of desire on a massive scale, and therefore objects.

Stuart Ewen explains very well how advertising starts to target heavily women and young people in the fifties, right after the war; women and children were the absolute majority of the bodies portrayed in a promiscuous proximity with goods of consumption. The intimacy between things and human beings creates all sort of symbolic disorders since the very beginning. Since then the consumption shapes the actual life form of human beings—not only what is called life style. In the case of women the confusion and enforced cohabitation with objects within the sphere of desire—male and female desire—is clear for everybody. Advertisements talk to the affects, and tell tales of a human life reconciled with things, where the inexpressiveness and the hostility of object is constantly obliterated by the joy and the beauty that they are supposed to bring to their owners.

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Work is never really present and life has no gravity in advertising: objects have no weight, the link between the cause and the effect of gestures is governed by pure fantasy. The dreams engendered by capitalism are the most disquieting of its products, their specific visual language is also the source of the misunderstanding between the inhabitants of the poorly developed countries and the Westerners. These dreams are conceived as devices of subjectivization, scenes from the life of the toxic community of human beings and things. Where the commodity is absent, bodies are tragically different.

If brought to its last consequences this implicit philosophy leads to the complete redundancy of art—and in this sense the message that we all know so well and that we all receive every day in the streets of the cities or from the television screen must be taken seriously. The artwork is no longer the humanized object—this change started to take place in the nineteenth century with the industrialization of life in general. Duchamp himself explains the birth of the readymade in 1955 in an interview with James Johnson Sweeney by declaring that he came to conceive the readymade as a consequence of the dehumanization of the artwork. The task of making the objects expressive, responsive to human feelings, that for thousands of years has been taken in charge by artists, is now performed by capitalism essentially through



television. Because what is at stake in the capitalistic vision of the world is a continuous production of a libidinal economy in which behaviors, expressions and gestures contribute to the creation of this new human body.

### **The irreversible anthropological transformation in Italy (and elsewhere)**

"I think that this generation (...) of the people that were 15 or 20 years old once they have made this [revolutionary] choice between 1971 and 1972, which in the following years becomes a generalized process in the factories and the schools, in the parishes, in the neighbourhoods, they have gone through an anthropological transformation, I can't find a better definition, an irreversible cultural modification of themselves that you can't come back from and that's why these subjects later, after '79, when everything is over, become crazy, commit suicide, become drug addicts because of the impossibility and the intolerance of being included and tamed by the system."<sup>2</sup>

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That's how Nanni Balestrini describes a form of tragic human strike that took place during the eighties, when the movement of '77 fell under the weight of a disproportioned repression.

The bleed of revolutionary lives from the country makes Italy a nation of disappeared. Without needing a genocide nor a real dictatorship, the strategy of tension and a modest amount of State terrorism achieved this result within a few years.

One should consider that what doesn't happen isn't a disgrace or the legitimate source of resentment against the anonymous and submitted population, but as a consequence of what has happened before.

The space of politics where Berlusconi rose without encountering any resistance was a territory where any opposition had been deported since the repression started to function directly on the life forms, since people couldn't desire in the same way anymore because the libidinal economy they were part of went bankrupt.

One question that still isn't considered with the adequate attention in the militant context is the one of the struggle-force. The struggle-force, like the love-force, must be protected and regenerated. It's a resource that doesn't renovate itself automatically and needs collective conditions for its creation.

Human strike can be read as an extreme attempt to reappropriate

the means of production of the struggle-force, the love-force, the life-force. These means are ends in themselves; they already bring with them a new potentiality that makes the subjects stronger. The political space where this operation is possible isn't of course the same one that was colonized by the televised biopower. It's the one that we can foresee in Lia's words from 1976:

"The return of the repressed threatens all my projects of work, research, politics. Does it threaten them or is it the truly political thing in myself, to which I should give relief and room? (...) The silence failed this part of myself that desired to make politics, but it affirmed something new. There has been a change, I have started to speak out, but during these days I have felt that the affirmative part of myself was occupying all the space again. I convinced myself of the fact that the mute woman is the most fertile objection to our politics. The nonpolitical digs tunnels that we mustn't fill with earth."

Columbus, 28 October 2009

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Published in *Human Strike has Already Begun & Other Writings*, Claire Fontaine (Mute, 2013) pp. 35-52.

## Notes

1. M. Perrot, *Les ouvriers en grève*, France 1871-1890, Mouton, Paris, La Haye, 1974, p. 99-100.
2. N. Balestrini, *L'Editore in La Grande Rivolta*, Bompiani, Milano, 1999, p. 318-319.

# What We Talk About When We Talk About Poetry

JULIANA SPAHR & DAVID BUUCK

**MY FRIEND MEL MCGINNIS WAS TALKING. MEL MCGINNIS IS A POET, AND** sometimes that gives him the right.

The four of us were sitting around this kitchen table drinking gin. Sunlight filled the kitchen from the big window behind the sink. There were Mel and me and his second wife, Teresa—Terri, we called her—and my wife, Laura. We were all writers and we lived in the Bay Area, then. But we were all from somewhere else.

There was an ice bucket on the table. The gin and the tonic water kept going around, and we somehow got on the subject of poetry. Mel thought real poetry had nothing to do with politics. He said he'd spent years union organizing before quitting to go to graduate school.

He said he still looked back on those years in the union as the most important in his life.

Terri said the man she lived with before she lived with Mel was a poet. Then Terri said, "He was really political and he talked about poetry all the time. He would not stop talking about *A*, you know, Zukofsky's poem. He kept saying it was the greatest poem ever written. He would quote it when we were in bed. 'An impulse to action sings of resemblances,' or whatever it was" Terri looked around the table. "What do you do with a man like that?"

She was a bone-thin woman with a pretty face, dark eyes, and brown hair that hung down her back. She liked poetry, but she liked the poets more. She liked the parties.

"My God, don't be silly. That stuff he was quoting made you hot and that was it, and you know it," Mel said. "I don't know what you'd call it, but I sure know you wouldn't call it political. It was poetry, that's all."

Say what you want to, but there was a politics," Terri said. "It may sound crazy to you, but it's true just the same. People are different, Mel. Sure, sometimes this poet may have written crazy. Okay. But he wrote political poetry. In his own way, maybe, but he wrote it. There was politics there, Mel. Don't say there wasn't."

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Mel let out his breath. He held his glass and turned to Laura and me. "The man kept quoting Marx...Mar," Mel said. He finished his drink and reached for the gin bottle. "Terri's a romantic. Terri's of the 'Give-me-a-bunch-of-lines-about-capitalism-so-I'll-know-it's-serious' school. Terri, hon, don't look that way." Mel reached across the table and touched Terri's cheek with his fingers. He grinned at her.

"Now he wants to make up," Terri said.

"Make up what?" Mel said. "What is there to make up? I know what I know. That's all."

"How'd we get started on this subject anyway?" Terri said. She raised her glass and drank from it. "Mel always has poetry on his mind," she said. "Don't you, honey?" She smiled, and I thought that was the last of it.

"I just wouldn't call Zukofsky's uptight aesthetics political. That's all I'm saying, honey," Mel said. "What about you guys?" Mel said to Laura and me. Does it seem political to you?"

"I'm the wrong person to ask," I said. "I write fiction. I don't even know the man, or his poetry. I've only heard his name. I wouldn't know. You'd have to know all the particulars."

Mel said, "The kind of poetry I'm talking about moves you. The kind of poetry I'm talking about, you don't try to talk about Marxism."

Laura said, "I don't know anything about Zukofsky. I thought only boys read him."

I touched the back of Laura's hand. She gave me a quick smile. I picked up Laura's hand. It was warm, the nails short, unpolished, practical. I encircled the broad wrist with my fingers, and I held her.

"His work did have politics," Terri said. She clasped her arms with her hands. "And it is meaningful to many people. They talk about it. They use it to talk with each other. That's a kind of politics. My God," Terri said. She waited a minute, then let go of her arms and picked up her glass.

"What people won't say to get a little action!" Laura said.

"He's out of the action now," Mel said. "Laura's right. No one reads him but a bunch of white guys in Buffalo or whatever."

Mel handed me the saucer of limes. I took a section, squeezed it over my drink, and stirred the ice cubes with my finger.

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"Poor Zukofsky nothing," Mel said. "He wasn't political."

Mel was forty-five years old. He was tall and rangy with curly soft hair. He looked like the poet-professor that he was. When he was sober, his gestures, all his movements, were precise, very careful.

"He knew how to write, Mel. Grant me that," Terri said. "That's all I'm asking. He didn't write the way you write. I'm not saying that. But he knew how to write. You can grant me that, can't you?"

"What do you mean, 'He knew how to write?'" I said.

Laura leaned forward with her glass. She put her elbows on the table and held her glass in both hands. She glanced from Mel to Terri and waited with a look of bewilderment on her open face, as if amazed that such things happened to people you were friendly with.

"What do you mean he knew how to write?" I said.

"I'll tell you what he did," Mel said. "In one part of the book, 'A-9,' he took this form from his classical poet Cavalcanti, this canzone. He took it because this Jew-hating poet that he looked up to was obsessed with it. I'm serious. He was a child of Jewish immigrants. He grew up speaking Yiddish. And then he writes a poem in English using an old

Italian form that this fascist poet that he looked up to had translated. Can you believe it? A guy like him? But he did. See, he was devoted to the tradition, to the form. And so he writes a double canzone, with complicated rhymes and meters. But he makes his poem about labor and love. And he uses the words of Marx to write his poem, he takes Marx and some other writers and he collages the words all together in this complex way to fit the form. But the poem makes no regular sense. The language is all weird and stilted. He puns on the words 'pit,' 'capitalism,' and 'capitulation.' Little things like that. It uses political words, but that doesn't make it political."

"I still feel it when I read it," Terri said.

"But what does it mean?" Laura said. "What do you mean you can feel it?"

Laura is a writer, or might someday be a writer. We'd met in a professional capacity. In the classroom. Before we knew it, it was a courtship. She's twenty-five, fifteen years younger than I am. In addition to being in love, we like each other and enjoy one another's company. She's easy to be with.

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"What does it mean?" Laura asked again.

Mel said, "He wanted to say something about labor, and about love. The poem is about how, if things could speak, they'd have the voices of the people who made them, not just those who own them, you know, like this table here, Marx, all that, but that's the first canzone. Ten years later, after he's married and has a kid, he writes the second part and it's about love."

"So the love rewrites the labor part?" Laura said.

"Some say that," Terri said. "But I think they're together in the poem. That love is labor."

"He was abstract," Mel said. "The music's there, but the meaning, it's all jumbled. If you call that political, you can have it."

"Oh, it's political," Terri said. "Sure it's abstract in most people's eyes. But he felt he needed to write it like that."

"I sure as hell wouldn't call it political," Mel said. "I mean, it's clever, it's poetic, but no one knows what he did it for. I've seen a lot of poems, and I couldn't say anyone ever knew what they did it for."

Mel put his hands behind his neck and tilted his chair back. "I'm not interested in that kind of politics," he said. "If that's political, you can keep it."

Terri said, "In the poem, love is part of the resistance to capitalism. It's about labor as well as love. Labor gets defined by love, a love that is care and attention to the processes of work."

Terri drank from her glass. She said, "But Mel's right—the poem is abstract. It's very formal, but also political. It is all about politics and yet its language is hard to follow. The form pushes away meaning. That pushing away is part of the meaning, maybe. But also in the second half, where the love comes in stronger, after he gets married, it's where he gets all domestic, like us here, out of the union hall and here at the kitchen table. Isn't that a laugh?" Terri said.

She poured the last of the gin into her glass and waggled the bottle. Mel got up from the table and went to the cupboard. He took down another bottle.

"Well, Nick and I know what good writing is," Laura said. "For us, I mean," Laura said. She bumped my knee with her knee. "You're supposed to say something now," Laura said, and turned her smile on me.

For an answer, I took Laura's hand and raised it to my lips. I made a big production out of kissing her hand. Everyone was amused.

"We're lucky," I said.

"You guys," Terri said. "Stop that now. You're making me sick. You're still on a honeymoon, for God's sake. You're still gaga, for crying out loud. Just wait. How long have you been together now? How long has it been? A year? Longer than a year."

"Going on a year and a half," Laura said, flushed and smiling.

"Oh, now," Terri said. "Wait a while."

She held her drink and gazed at Laura.

"I'm only kidding," Terri said.

Mel opened the gin and went around the table with the bottle.

"Here, you guys," he said. "Let's have a toast. I want to propose a toast. A toast to poetry. To true poetry," Mel said.

We touched glasses.

"To poetry, true poetry," we said.

Outside, in the backyard, one of the dogs began to bark. The leaves of the aspen that leaned past the window ticked against the glass. The afternoon sunlight was like a presence in the room, the spacious light of ease and generosity. We could have been anywhere, somewhere enchanted. We raised our glasses again and grinned at each other like children who had agreed on something forbidden.

"I'll tell you about politics and poetry," Mel said. "I mean, I'll give you a good example. And then you can draw your own conclusions." He poured more gin into his glass. He added an ice cube and a sliver of lime. We waited and sipped our drinks. Laura and I touched knees again. I put a hand on her warm thigh and left it there.

"What do any of us really know about poetry?" Mel said. "It seems to me we're just beginners at poetry. We say we write and we do, I don't doubt it. I've read Nick and Nick's read me. But what do we know about the kind of poetry I'm talking about now? The stuff we all read and call avant-garde. Sometimes I have a hard time accounting for the fact that I loved the more traditional stuff too. But I did, I know I did." He thought about it and then went on. "There was a time when I thought I loved that Mary Oliver poem about the geese more than life itself. The one with the line about how 'You only have to let the soft animal of your body love what it loves.' But now I find it corny. I do. How do you explain that? What happened to that love? What happened to it, is what I'd like to know. I wish someone could tell me. Then there's Zukofsky. Okay, we're back to him. He loves his wife and his son so much that he winds up writing a canzone about that love and then Terri's boyfriend quotes it to her in bed." Mel stopped talking and swallowed from his glass. "That's the issue. Who would you read in bed to each other? Yes, that's the real issue. I used to know this woman and we would read Ernesto Cardenal in bed at night. For an entire year we read a few pages each night from Cardenal. Not because he did fancy things with Marx, or counted his syllables just so, but because that guy believed in the world. Am I wrong? Am I way off base? Because I want you to set me straight if you think I'm wrong. I want to know. I mean, I don't know anything, and I'm the first one to admit it."

"Mel, for God's sake," Terri said. She reached out and took hold of his wrist. "Are you getting drunk? Honey? Are you drunk?"

"Honey, I'm just talking," Mel said. "All right? I don't have to be drunk to say what I think. I mean, we're all just talking, right?" Mel said. He fixed his eyes on her.

"Sweetie, I'm not criticizing," Terri said.

She picked up her glass.

"I'm not driving home," Mel said. "Let me remind you of that. I am not driving."

"Mel, we love you," Laura said.



Mel looked at Laura. He looked at her as if he couldn't place her, as if she was not the woman she was.

"Love you too, Laura," Mel said. "And you, Nick, love you too. You know something?" Mel said. "You guys are our pals," Mel said.

He picked up his glass.

Mel said, "I was going to tell you about something. I mean, I was going to prove a point about poetry. You see, that poem was written a number of years ago, but things like it are still being written right now, and it ought to make us feel ashamed when we talk like we know what we're talking about when we talk about poetry and politics."

"Come on now," Terri said. "Don't talk like you're drunk if you're not drunk."

"Just shut up for once in your life," Mel said very quietly. "Will you do me a favor and do that for a minute? So as I was saying, in Bhopal, in like 1984 or so, maybe 15,000 people died? Union Carbide, right? Gas leak all over the place."

Terri looked at us and then back at Mel. She seemed anxious, or maybe that's too strong a word.

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Mel was handing the bottle around the table.

"I remember when it happened," Mel said. "The workers are cleaning the pipes and then there's a reaction, an explosion, a leak, whatever. About thirty minutes later, people start suffocating, coughing. Their eyes burning. They're vomiting. People trampled trying to escape. By morning, thousands are dead. There were mass funerals and mass cremations. Buffalo, goats, dead animals all over the place. Leaves on the trees falling off and all that."

"Folks, this is an advertisement for the National Not Poetry Society," Terri said. "This is your spokesman, Doctor Melvin R. McGinnis, talking about the meaninglessness of poetry." Terri laughed. "Mel," she said, "sometimes you're just too much. But I love you, honey," she said.

"Honey, I love you," Mel said.

He leaned across the table. Terri met him halfway. They kissed.

"Terri's right," Mel said as he settled himself again. "I don't need to retell the story. But seriously, this story is about why I think poetry doesn't make anything happen."

He drank from his glass. "I'll try to keep this short," he said. "Years before all this, in West Virginia, the same Union Carbide dug a three-mile tunnel under a mountain. So the workers hit a, what's it, a silica

deposit. They're not given any masks, even though everyone knew that the miners needed masks. But Union Carbide doesn't bother. So, surprise, most of the workers are all dead within a year. Okay, so, Muriel Rukeyser, now here's your political poet, Muriel Rukeyser writes a poem about it. The poem is fucking beautiful, full of clear language, no need to quote Marx to get the point across. It opens with the poet going down into the valley. She takes the words of the wives of the dead miners and turns it into this lyric song. There's your 'sings an impulse to action' or whatever. It is impossible not to be moved by this poem. It is a clear, strong poem. A famous poem. People read it. And it did nothing. Fifty years later, Union Carbide, Bhopal, boom, nothing."

Mel stopped talking. "Here," he said, "let's drink this cheapo gin the hell up. Then we're going to dinner right? Terri and I know a new place. That's where we'll go, to this new place we know about. But we're not going until we finish up this cut-rate, lousy gin."

Terri said, "We haven't actually gone there yet. But it looks good. From the outside, you know."

"I like pretty words, end of day," Mel said. "If I had it to do all over again, I'd be a lyric poet, you know? Right, Terri?" Mel said. "Tell me about your despair, yours, and I'll tell you mine. But make it pretty." He laughed. He fingered the ice in his glass.

"Terri knows. Terri can tell you. But let me say this. If I could come back again in a different life, a different time and all, you know what? I'd like to come back as Sappho. Playing the lyre. She was ugly, but still it's alright as long as you've got women and song."

"Mel likes to pretend he'd have Sappho's skills with the ladies," Terri said.

"Calling them to him with his poetry," Laura said.

Terri said, "Suppose you came back as Homer. Blind bards didn't have it so good in those days," Terri said.

"Epic poets never had it good," Mel said. "Writing for the tribe. But I guess even Sappho was a vessel to someone. Isn't that the way it worked? But then everyone is a vessel to someone else. Isn't that right? Terri? But what I like about Sappho, besides her love of women and her ugliness, was that there was no Union Carbide, you know? No unregulated chemical companies."

"Vassals," Terri said.

"What?" Mel said.

"Vassals," Terri said. "They were called vassals, not vessels."

"Vassals, vessels," Mel said, "what the fuck's the difference? You knew what I meant anyway. All right," Mel said. "So I didn't grow up going to the symphony. I learned my stuff on the shop floor. I'm a poet, sure, got my degree, but I know I'm just a mechanic dressed up as a poet. Kids pay their money and then turn in their poems and I go in and I fuck around and I move a comma or a period, give them back to them. Shit," Mel said.

"Modesty doesn't become you," Terri said.

"He's just a humble poet of the people," I said. "But sometimes despite your degrees you can't see how poetry works. I read somewhere that the prisoners in Attica passed around handwritten copies of that Claude McKay sonnet 'If We Must Die,' Mel. They even wrote it on the walls."

"That's terrible," Mel said. "That's a terrible example, Nicky. That's a prison riot in which thirty-nine people died. That poem did nothing for them. Dead."

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"Some other vessel," Terri said.

"That's right," Mel said. "Some vassal always comes along and shoots everyone. Or whatever the fuck they want to do."

"Same things we fight over these days," Terri said.

Laura said, "Nothing's changed. Men fighting."

The color was still high in Laura's cheeks. Her eyes were bright. She brought her glass to her lips.

Mel poured himself another drink. He looked at the label closely as if studying a long row of numbers. Then he slowly put the bottle down on the table and reached for the tonic water.

"What about political poetry, Mel?" Laura said. "You didn't finish what you started."

Laura was having a hard time lighting her cigarette. Her matches kept going out.

The sunshine inside the room was different now, changing, getting thinner. But the leaves outside the window were still shimmering, and I stared at the pattern they made on the panes and on the Formica counter. They weren't the same patterns, of course.

"What about politics and poetry?" I said.

"Gets prisoners killed," Terri said.

Mel stared at her.

Terri said, "Go on with you story, hon. I was only kidding, Then what happened?"

"Terri, sometimes," Mel said.

"Please, Mel," Terri said. "Don't always be so serious, sweetie. Can't you take a joke?"

"Where's the joke?" Mel said.

He held his glass and gazed steadily at his wife.

"What about political poetry, seriously?" Laura said.

Mel fastened his eyes on Laura. He said, "Laura, if I didn't have Terri and I didn't love her so much, and if Nick wasn't my best friend, I'd fall in love with you. I'd write you a sonnet in fourteen iambic and rhyming lines. I'd even keep the politics out, just one hundred percent poetry. Read it to you in bed if you like. I'd carry you off, honey," he said.

"Tell your story," Terri said. "Then we'll go to that new place, okay?"

"Okay," Mel said. "Where was I?" he said. He stared at the table and then he began again. "Here's the thing. There are a lot of things I can say that poetry might as well not do. There is no sense in thinking that if we just find the right form, then the politics will be there. If we just make it lyrical, then it will really move people. Or if we just make it experimental, then it will really shake things up. But the content doesn't seem to matter either. Like it also doesn't mean that if we just make it about the local, it will do something locally. Or if we make it about the workplace, it will help us rise up against capitalism. Or to make it all environmental with long lists of endangered species. Or to write another goddamn Union Carbide poem. I could go on and on listing. It doesn't help to make it a series of clever one-liners about capitalism or the war. Or to make it all about the domestic or love or all explicit about the sex everyone's having. Or make it all about the street or the prison and all edgy and with a funky meter or whatever. I mean the only thing poetry has really done that might matter was in the name of cultural tradition. And tradition only matters when the nation has guns, not just poetry. Because poetry hasn't even been all that convincing to people about the greatness of a nation. Look at all those poets in the Caribbean who make fun of Wordsworth all the time, complaining about having to write poems about daffodils in school, on those islands where daffodils don't even grow."

Mel looked around the table and shook his head at what he was going to say.

"I mean, poetry. It doesn't really do much and that is what makes it so fucking nothing."

We all looked at Mel.

"Do you see what I'm saying?"

Maybe we were a little drunk by then. I know it was hard keeping things in focus. The light was draining out of the room, going back through the window where it had come from. Yet nobody made a move to get up from the table to turn on the overhead light.

"Listen," Mel said. "Let's finish this fucking gin. There's about enough left here for one shooter all around. Then let's go eat. Let's go to the new place."

"He's depressed," Terri said. "Mel, why don't you take a pill?"

Mel shook his head. "I've taken everything there is."

"We all need a pill now and then," I said.

"Some people are born needing them," Terri said. She was using her finger to rub at something on the table. Then she stopped rubbing.

"I think I want to read a poem before we go eat," Mel said. "Is that all right with everybody? I'll read my latest poem," he said.

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Terri said, "After that tirade, what would you read? You've just torn down all the things poetry might do. Honey, you know you don't want to read a poem now. It'll make you feel even worse."

"I don't want to talk about poetry," Mel said. "But I want to read a poem, a real poem."

"There isn't a day goes by that Mel doesn't say he wishes he'd stayed organizing rather than teach kids how to write poetry," Terri said. "For one thing," Terri said, "the students only want to talk about themselves. Mel says they just want to write poetry about themselves. If it isn't about them, they don't want to read it. Real poetry doesn't matter to them."

"They don't read real poetry," Mel said. "And if I'm not complaining about having to read their bad poems, then I'm complaining because they haven't turned them in so I can't read them."

"Shame on you," Laura said. "I was one of those students, you know."

"They're bad," Mel said. "Not you, honey, but the rest of 'em. Nick knows, don't you Nicky. Sometimes I think I'll sit down and take my red pen and cross out every line in the precious poems. I'll cross out every line and write a big fat fucking F on the top and then give it back to them."

He crossed one leg over the other. Then he put both feet on the floor and leaned forward, elbows on the table, his chin cupped in his hands.

"Maybe I won't read a poem, after all. Maybe it isn't such a hot idea. Maybe we'll just go eat. How does that sound?"

"Sounds fine to me," I said. "Eat or not eat. Or keep drinking. I could head right on out into the sunset."

"What does that mean, honey?" Laura said.

"It just means what I said," I said. "It means I could just keep going. That's all it means."

"I could eat something myself," Laura said. "I don't think I've ever been so hungry in my life. Is there something to nibble on?"

"I'll put out some cheese and crackers," Terri said.

But Terri just sat there. She did not get up to get anything.

Mel turned his glass over. He spilled it out on the table.

"Gin's gone," Mel said.

Terri said, "Now what?"

I could hear my heart beating. I could hear everyone's heart. I could hear the human noise we sat there making, not one of us moving, not even when the room went dark.

