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# THE ROUTLEDGE COMPANION TO ART AND POLITICS

*The Routledge Companion to Art and Politics* offers a thorough examination of the complex relationship between art and politics, and the many forms and approaches the engagement between them can take.

The contributors—a diverse assembly of artists, activists, and scholars from around the world—discuss and demonstrate ways of making art and politics legible and salient in the world. As such the 32 chapters in this volume reflect on performing and visual arts; music, film and new media; as well as covering social practice, community-based work, conceptual, interventionist and movement-affiliated forms.

The *Companion* is divided into four distinct parts:

- Conceptual Cartographies
- Institutional Materialities
- Modalities of Practice
- Making Publics

Randy Martin has assembled a collection that ensures that readers will come away with a wider view of what can count as art and politics; where they might find it; and how it moves in the world. The diversity of perspectives is at once challenging and fortifying to those who might dismiss political art on the one hand as not making sufficient difference and on the other to those embracing it but seeking a means to elaborate the significance that it can make in the world.

*The Routledge Companion to Art and Politics* brings together a range of issues and approaches and encourages critical and creative thinking about how art is produced, perceived, and received.

Contributors

Caron Atlas, Wafaa Bilal, Claire Bishop, Swati Chattopadhyay, Patricia Ticineto Clough, Dudley Cocke, Jan Cohen-Cruz, Eduardo de la Fuente, Ricardo Dominguez, Mark Driscoll, Boris Groys, Jack Halberstam, Stefano Harney, Shannon Jackson, Joasia Krysa, Steve Kurtz, Suzanne Lacy, Lisa Le Feuvre, André Lepecki, Ana María Ochoa, Toby Miller, Svetlana

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**Randy Martin** is Professor and Chair of Art and Public Policy and founding director of the graduate program in Arts Politics at the Tisch School of the Arts, New York University. He is author of books on the politics of dance, theatre, war, finance, and education.

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23 founder of the Yes Lab. At the moment, the Yes Lab is mainly a series of brainstorming  
24 and trainings to help activist groups carry out media-getting creative actions, focused on their own  
25 campaign goals. It's a way for social justice organizations to take advantage of all that we Yes  
26 Men have learned, not only about our own ways of doing things, but also those we've come in  
27 contact with over the decade and a half we've been doing this sort of thing. The Yes Lab has  
28 offices and workshopping space at New York's Hemispheric Institute.

29  
30 **Gregory Sholette** is an artist and writer whose books include: *It's The Political Economy, Stupid*  
31 and *Dark Matter: Art and Politics in an Age of Enterprise Culture*. He exhibits at Station Independ-  
32 ent Projects, NYC, is an Associate of Harvard University's GSD program, and lead faculty for  
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34  
35 **Robert Stam** is a specialist in film theory and history, and has published widely on Brazilian  
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37 on a study of transnational patriotism in an international context. Stam has been awarded the  
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43 *America* (1991), *Disappearing Acts: Spectacles of Gender and Nationalism in Argentina's 'Dirty*  
44 *War'* (1997), and *The Archive and the Repertoire: Performing Cultural Memory in the*  
45 *Americas* (2003), *PERFORMANCE* (2012). She is the recipient of the Guggenheim Fellow-  
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6 *Nuyorican in El Barrio* and has written a personal memoir by the same name. She also co-edited  
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8 Bassheva Manjon.

9  
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12 *Identity* (2010) and *WINTER: Poetics and Politics* (2013). She is currently writing a book with  
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20  
21 **Ultra-red** is a sound art collective founded in 1994 by two Los Angeles AIDS activists. The  
22 collective’s current twelve members work as organizers and educators with community-based  
23 organizations and social justice movements in Germany, the United Kingdom, and the United  
24 States. [www.ultrared.org](http://www.ultrared.org)

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# INTRODUCTION

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Art and politics—what once was thought as a narrow intersection now opens to an increasingly expansive landscape. No longer a single genre or form, art elaborates what can count as politics from the solitary expressions of a lone creator, to the interventions on the surfaces of an urban landscape, to the graphic iconography of a mass mobilization, to the grassroots organizations of those not conventionally represented in the great arts temples. The vast territories that comprise the myriad relations between these terms are themselves magnified by ever more generative conceptions of what is touched by the esthetic and what is covered by the political. The public actions of politicians are not infrequently judged in the language of performance, while the performances or practices of artists can be treated as transgressive of a national sensibility and not simply a violation of personal taste. At issue is not simply whether there is diminished tolerance for esthetic variety but what is driving the expansiveness of art in and as politics and politics as and in art.<sup>1</sup>

Such capaciousness stands against what by now might seem the default position of the arts; namely that they exist for themselves, with their excellence discernable only by designated experts and therefore art and politics stand outside one another.<sup>2</sup> What this assertion omits, however, is that the exalted autonomy of art is achieved through the political agency of artists and others who would seek to render art into a sphere of its own. Moreover, this separation is effectively from a circumstance in which art is inside institutions of church and state and therefore always already political, in the sense of serving a potent institutional presence, to one in which arts' politics might be a consequence of the work it does in the world, including calling into question the whole machinery that designates what gets to be considered politics. The very narrative of esthetic autonomy pertains as much to the sphere in which art operates as to the motive of artists themselves, enshrined in the value of artistic freedom. What served as a means of rationalizing artistic methods and pursuits, once so self-confidently universal, has now been recast as the very particularistic story of what the West values in itself and what it is willing to impose on others in the name of democracy.<sup>3</sup> Artistic freedoms, in this reckoning, while not itself a form of politics demonstrates a general political will that upholds all manner of expression so long as it does not challenge the self-anointed democratic order.

From this universalizing perspective, art would be humanistic in scope, transcendent in reach, and masterful in value. Partisanship to a class or cause would purportedly compromise art's

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1 generalizability to represent the aspirations of all of humanity, and therefore political art would  
2 be sequestered to a kind of genre, and one whose external demands would already compromise  
3 the inner pursuit of creativity's unbridled truth. If the pressures of the political compromised  
4 artistic possibility from achieving its full flower on its own grounds and conditions, the for-  
5 mulation of a clear boundary between what belonged to art and what was outside it would  
6 leave that very relationship passive and superficial. Accordingly, art would reflect society as if  
7 the stable and immutable partition between the two was made from a mirror. The esthetic  
8 offered itself as a realm of contemplation, a protected sphere where beauty could be discovered  
9 and displayed. Art would lay itself bare to be gazed upon, would shine back the light that was  
10 directed toward it, but lacked agency to negotiate its relation to the world let alone reconfigure  
11 worldly sensibilities.

12 Without doubt, strands of this Victorianism persist, whereby a separation of human  
13 activities is rendered into distinct and mutually exclusive spheres of public and private,  
14 objective and subjective, male and female, scientific and esthetic values. Yet it was even at  
15 its height fragile and selective—contested by all manner of avant-gardes and alterities, mass  
16 and popular expressions, complicated genealogies of race, class, sexuality, gender, religiosity,  
17 ethnicity, and self-constituting cultural identities. This complexity informs an abiding  
18 paradox: artists are at once undervalued, marginalized, dismissed and at the same time,  
19 treated as the bellwether of morality, the source of potentially contagious excess of expres-  
20 sion, the authentic challenge made by free-willed individuals to political authority.<sup>4</sup> Art is in  
21 short too weak to support itself and too strong to be left unanswered. It must be patronized  
22 in the double sense of being subsidized and condescended to by those who recognize the  
23 true worth it cannot obtain for itself in the high court of the marketplace where prices are  
24 discovered and value is disclosed to the world.<sup>5</sup> At the same time, this delicate expression  
25 incapable of speaking for itself must be censored by those who see in it a voice of funda-  
26 mental values that might compete with their own monopolistic claims to grasp those  
27 expressions supportive of the proper order of things.<sup>6</sup>

28 If this double consciousness informs the ways art is treated politically, a corollary schizo-  
29 phrenia between excess and insufficiency of impact and efficacy suffuses art that deems itself  
30 political. Political art can be framed as an all or nothing affair, as making all the difference or  
31 mattering not at all, of unlocking the doors to a better world, or being but the gilded cage in  
32 which alternative visions are imprisoned. The esthetic qualifications in political art are dis-  
33 missed as being insufficient to the standards of excellence because they are partisan and not  
34 universal; the politics are similarly minimized for being merely symbolic or insufficient in  
35 their impact to affect the actual changes the world demands. This contradiction is taken to be  
36 a feature of the art and not of the evaluative criteria which would disallow such practices  
37 from mattering to begin with, thereby evading the bad faith of their supposedly disinterested  
38 judgment. But it is the purported objectivity of this judgment based on expert knowledge  
39 that immunizes such criticism from its own political dispositions and operations and therefore  
40 seeks to refute exactly that work which would challenge who speaks for art and in what  
41 name it is spoken for.<sup>7</sup>

42 It would be difficult to suggest that there is less expertise in the world now than say forty  
43 years ago when the professionalization of the arts through attendance at art schools began to  
44 take off in earnest. Instead, what seems to have shifted is the division of labor between artists,  
45 critics, and publics, where once only those who hold offices as critics are in a position to judge  
46 and now critical judgments are intimate to practices of consumption, daily life, informatics, and  
47 cultures of measure. Certainly publics have more capacity to make evaluations about what they  
48 do and do not like than ever before, thanks not only to social media, but to the incessant data

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1 mining of information that includes continuous rating and ranking of preferences that was once  
2 the province of specialized expertise. On the side of artistic production, the incorporation and  
3 insinuation of critical self-appraisal as well as challenges to critical convention is part of so much  
4 of the contemporary artistic repertoire.

5 Opening the expanded field of art and politics, beyond formal, institutional, professional  
6 designations that complicates rather than effacing the creative division of labor in which  
7 knowledge comes to matter in novel ways is a feature of the world we inhabit.<sup>8</sup> Grasping the  
8 dynamics of this expanded field—the very project to which this Companion is committed,  
9 requires moving through these contradictions, mining their deposits, combining them with  
10 other elements, pursuing available routes where their entanglements lead. The industrialization  
11 of culture, knowledge, education, art, and design are but some of the factors that have expan-  
12 ded artistic expression and how what counts as art is decided. If the private sphere, where  
13 esthetic sensibilities are said to issue from is no longer enclosed, but rather social movements of  
14 various inflections have been dedicated to an explicit decolonization of these enclosures,  
15 thereby subjecting the very forms of life expression to a sense of contingency, contestation, and  
16 consequence that reverberate through and expand the currencies of political value, then art and  
17 politics will be joined together through some of the more fundamental re-ordering taking place  
18 in society.

19 Ours is a society characterized by unprecedented wealth that seems to demand an  
20 unparalleled embrace of austerity. When financial institutions found themselves unable to  
21 maintain the liquidity or salability of their assets (or even to ascertain with clarity what assets  
22 they held on their balance sheets), the entire tax base was pledged as collateral to bail them  
23 out in 2008. Within short order, these recipients of public assistance were back to profit-  
24 ability, and their wealthiest investors and managers saw their incomes return to what they  
25 had been before crisis was declared. The result among artists is not simply mounting  
26 inequality that divides the divide between wealthy celebrity and self-starting or starving artists  
27 as well as the poorer nonprofits unable to count on income from grants and foundations,  
28 but of an evident abundance of the capacity to create art and for art to be insinuated more  
29 extensively in a whole range of settings.<sup>9</sup> Record prices for art works are fetched at auction,  
30 while student debt from art school and higher education reaches unprecedented heights.  
31 These social conditions for an expansiveness regarding art and politics must confront the  
32 kinds of approaches that would generate a conceptual austerity in how this charged field is  
33 to be evaluated.

34 A collection of this scope has the benefit of being able to gather together many voices in the  
35 same place without presuming that they must speak as one. These are friends with benefits.  
36 Perhaps counter-intuitively, the most effective companion would want to begin with a certain  
37 agnosticism toward what might be considered art and what can count as politics. Too hasty an  
38 exclusion or conclusion regarding either term quickly forecloses what can be said of the relation  
39 between them. The salience of political art, no less than art generally, is diminished at the get  
40 go by a strictly definitional approach which seeks to enclose and exclude what can count before  
41 considering what it would mean for something to have at once a specific esthetic and political  
42 efficacy. It then becomes necessary to inquire into what political art does, how it accomplishes  
43 its effects, how it engages and disrupts received understandings, and how its impact reverberates  
44 beyond its given moment of reception.

45 The aim of this book is to map the contours of a terrain that is still in formation, and if  
46 expansion of what political art can be understood to be is an ambition and not simply an  
47 assertion, then what goes into these relations and what can be made of them must be a con-  
48 sequence of this collected endeavor and not simply its precondition or occasion. In practical

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1 editorial terms, this openness makes possible a compilation of a whole series of diverse sites  
2 where the relations between art and politics are enacted: from state entities, governmental  
3 institutions and legislative processes to organizational nodes of the art world that includes pro-  
4 fessional training and socialization of creative labor, production, dissemination, and evaluation of  
5 artistic products; public and private claims to esthetic ownership and benefit; self-organization and  
6 organizational affiliation of artists including with social movements and protests, collectives, and  
7 social practices. Far from describing a genre, attaching to a medium, or defining an esthetic, the  
8 ways in which artists conjure the political in their work generates a vast array of genres—whether  
9 these be community-based or movement attached, conceptual or avant-garde, public or inter-  
10 ventionist, utopian or dystopian. More salient than genre then would be the question of how  
11 artists organize their creative activities and how they affiliate with various audiences and organi-  
12 zational entities.

13 Given this diversity, a serviceable mapping of art and politics will need to generate some  
14 classificatory categories. We can start with the double formulation of arts politics implicit in  
15 what has been said so far. Political forces bear upon the arts, situate them, circumscribe their  
16 spaces of operation and efficacy, formulate their terms of value, locate artistic practice within  
17 social and cultural relations of identity and difference. These forces are not singular or constant  
18 and their shifting configuration across cultural and historical situations evades any simple notion  
19 of context as the outside that gets in and gives shape to arts politics. But art is not simply an  
20 object to be located within an existing societal field, or a hollow receptacle to be filled by its  
21 social surround. Art bears its own political agencies, organizational capacities, and powers of  
22 dissemination, persuasion, and reformulation, to say nothing of inscribing ways of knowing and  
23 being. The question of esthetic valuation is not vitiated by the political, but can also focus  
24 attention on the form, poesis, and sensibility that politics assumes, the space it occupies, the  
25 judgments of inclusion and exclusion that it presupposes.<sup>10</sup> The concrete politics of specific  
26 artistic practices, the understanding of what brought them into being and of what efficacy they  
27 promise, must be the result of this double relation between the politics that make art and the  
28 politics that art makes.

29 Making good on the complexity of these relations results in a rethinking of the active-pas-  
30 sive, outside-inside, structure-agency dichotomies that inform the reflection notions that still  
31 hover over considerations of political art. As should now be evident, this series of binaries limits  
32 conceptions of how both the esthetic and the political operate. If art and politics share a series of  
33 constraining epistemological dilemmas, they also co-inhabit a generative problematic. Both are  
34 obliged to speak a language of critique and of possibility, to develop a vocabulary of is and  
35 ought, to set out what's wrong and what might set it to right. Of course, such political language  
36 may not take the form of language at all, but may traverse other sensorial forms and media;  
37 whether these be aural, visual, tactile, kinesthetic, preconceptual, distributed, or even the sensate  
38 conditions that make up matters of taste.<sup>11</sup> We are indeed a long way from the modernist  
39 sorting of taste into good and bad, high and low, the best and the worst that was part of the  
40 Arnoldian definition of culture in the nineteenth century.<sup>12</sup> In conventional politics critique  
41 and possibility are too often placed in separate quarters of theory and practice. We must first  
42 know what is wrong in order to do what is right; we need to explain how things are in order to  
43 devise ways of doing them differently. But if thought is variously materialized in art and every  
44 formalization bears ways of knowing as well as being, then both the temporal and spatial seg-  
45regation of conception and execution are thoroughly complicating in artistic fields, especially  
46 those bent on engaging and transforming their worlds. A similar divide of conception and  
47 execution, thinking and doing, has shackled artistic endeavor with a range of ills from anti-  
48 intellectualism to an inability to elaborate the value of what it does in the world.<sup>13</sup>

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1 In response, two political temperaments are discernable in contemporary artistic practice—  
2 the interventionist and the utopian. Interventionist work, also called tactical media, moves  
3 into existing spaces, practices, and sites, inhabits them and discloses their otherwise inscrutable  
4 conditions of operation, presumed logic, or normative expectations.<sup>14</sup> The utopian imagines  
5 and abets a move elsewhere, envisions the possibility of a different world or principle of  
6 worlding even if fleeting and ephemeral by means of esthetic materialization.<sup>15</sup> Together, the  
7 interventionist and utopian enjoin the means of making the familiar strange (defamiliarization)  
8 so that prevailing rules and norms can be considered contingent and fungible; and making the  
9 strange familiar (refamiliarization), so that the seemingly impossible ambition of social trans-  
10 formation appears plausible and actionable.<sup>16</sup> Describing interventionism and utopianism as  
11 temperaments rather than types of political art affords consideration of both dynamics at play  
12 in any given instance of work. The impersonations of corporate spokespersons by the Yes  
13 Men, for example, seize existing media apparatuses to get the powerful to say (and do) the  
14 right thing at the same time that their very enactment suggests that we could inhabit just such  
15 a world.<sup>17</sup> Critical Art Ensembles' assumption of the mien of science, as in their reenactments  
16 of biological weapons testing, both claim the methods of state as their own, and disseminate  
17 the means to do what was thought impossible.<sup>18</sup> Both examples also suggests ways in which  
18 political art does not simply resist established agents of authority but compels corporations and  
19 governments to disclose their own resistance to the critical values they might take as their  
20 own in a putatively democratic society. The Yes Men continuously confront the claims that  
21 assuming the mantle of corporate authority through their impersonations are unethical; and  
22 Steve Kurtz of the Critical Art Ensemble was made keenly aware that the state considers the  
23 tools of science part of its arsenal when they arrested him on charges of terrorism for traf-  
24 ficking in simple and benign biological materials.<sup>19</sup>

25 The operations of critique and possibility have also figured in the distinction between  
26 political and activist art.<sup>20</sup> The former would emphasize art's capacities to embody, materi-  
27 alize, render sensible, or give form to feelings and ideas that open consideration of what the  
28 political entails.<sup>21</sup> Activism places art in some relation of delegation to a constituency, an  
29 engagement with audience, a means of animating and articulating what is already in  
30 motion.<sup>22</sup> Certainly this distinction has the potential of re-inscribing some delineation  
31 between inside and outside, surface and surround, form and context. But equally detectable  
32 is the twinned capacities of representation as portrait and proxy, as a screen of political  
33 ideation and a scene for the production of its value, as a means of giving voice to the people  
34 and of embodying its mass.<sup>23</sup>

35 If these questions of how to value artistic work are raised under the banner of the political, so  
36 too are the organizational integuments explored through much of what is called social  
37 practice.<sup>24</sup> Collectives and squats, laboratories and ensembles, each with their own complicated  
38 relations to the conventional organizational architectures of commercial and nonprofit or  
39 nongovernmental enterprise, are a thickening weft of the artistic landscape. Here, too, they  
40 struggle for survival and are exemplified as best practices as harbingers of new creative econo-  
41 mies, traverse the sanctioned and unsanctioned, entrepreneurial, and precarious.<sup>25</sup> At the same  
42 time that its labor is disavowed and discounted, artistic labor processes are lionized as models for  
43 cancelled career trajectories and life flexibility. According to this mythos, artists work for love  
44 not money; they gladly give sweat equity only to be displaced from the neighborhoods whose  
45 real estate they transvalued when gentrification and tourism push them aside.<sup>26</sup>

46 The question of how to situate art in relation to notions of economy more broadly has its  
47 own complex histories and genealogies. One venerable trajectory is to treat artistic work as the  
48 alternative to capitalist principles or exchange for profit-taking gain, labor alienated to

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1 employers, and materialistic pursuits. The arts and crafts movement articulated by John Ruskin  
2 and William Morris in the late nineteenth century emphasized self-reliance outside the capture  
3 of mass labor and commercial markets.<sup>27</sup> The sense that art is an extension of the gift, a form of  
4 prestation or potlatch where giving is for reciprocity rather than gain, continues to inform ideas  
5 about art.<sup>28</sup> Further, the recent turn toward the dematerialization of the object seems to stand  
6 for a rejection of market-crazed materialization of everything.<sup>29</sup> Yet it may be worth compli-  
7 cating each of these trajectories to make the most of the political expressions they display. The  
8 contemporary correlate of arts and crafts production would appear to be a maker culture in  
9 which an alternative ethos of production and consumption focuses on esthetic questions of  
10 how, what, where, and by what labor conditions, supply chains, and evaluative energies goods  
11 get made.

12 Yet if the nineteenth-century version of the alternative economy was an exit strategy to the  
13 socializing entanglements of a market economy, a maker culture looks more like an effort to  
14 treat labor as capital in a global frame that challenges the indifference to the causes and effects of  
15 production and accumulation which so much collaborative art takes as its own challenge. There  
16 may be a temptation toward self-exoticization in the gift-based arts impulses that associate pri-  
17 mitive exchange with more authentic human arrangements for creating life together. It may  
18 turn out that the gift is not a throwback to pre-capitalist forms that could somehow be returned  
19 to despite the issues of global scale; but that gifting is itself a form of social hedging in which  
20 obligations are tendered so that they might engender more socially robust forms of mutual  
21 indebtedness. This approach to debt, hinted at in artistic strategies termed relational esthetics  
22 where the terms of exchange are featured in the kinds of participation elicited through the art  
23 work, takes on new resonance in the context of the vast mutual indebtedness and wealth-  
24 creating capacities of the new financial order.<sup>30</sup>

25 This last shift, sometimes characterized as a change from the real economy to a fictitious, one  
26 may also prove as much a dilemma as a resource for emerging political arts practices and  
27 evaluation. As with finance itself, the disbursed, distributed, interconnected, incompleteable,  
28 volatile, and socially expansive temporal and spatial dimensions of current art-making may be  
29 more generatively treated as a new materialism than a kind of dematerialization. Emblematic  
30 here is the figure of the derivative, which in finance pertains to the bundled attributes of  
31 underlying values like home mortgages or currency or exchange rates that make the future  
32 actionable in the present and make the global and the local commingle without merging into  
33 one. In art, derivative work is something of an anathema, but the sampling, pastiche, reassem-  
34 blage, networking, and other approaches to artistic assemblage may be better appraised from  
35 their valuation as derivative than in terms of norms of authenticity and originality, something  
36 that the postmodern critique of modernist self-possessed individual genius also sought to over-  
37 turn. Finally, if artistic risk is a divergent genealogy of self-appreciating gain that takes volatility  
38 and social enhancement in a different direction than the destructive and seemingly all-con-  
39 suming perquisites of finance as it has recently been lived, then art may provide the basis for  
40 redirecting the immanent potential of social life at a moment when the imagination of such  
41 prospects has escaped conventional discourses of politics and economics.<sup>31</sup>

42 Artistic labor set to work can also be intimately aligned and imbricated in larger social  
43 movements, political organizations, and revolutions. From the Bolshevik, Chinese, Cuban  
44 revolutions to the Black Arts movements, punk and feminist art, and more recently, the  
45 uprisings and occupations that span the insurrections from Tahrir Square to Zuccotti Park,  
46 art has materialized in its own formal innovation the larger aspirations and integuments of  
47 social transformations.<sup>32</sup> This further complication of an inside and outside of the forces that  
48 bear upon and are generated through the arts leads to a core analytic couplet for art and

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1 politics—self-organization and affiliation. Here, too, the vast array of practices, experiments,  
2 installations, performances, designs, pedagogies, critical vocabularies, and the like make legible  
3 and tangible the means of valuation that have proven so elusive in standard approaches to  
4 contemporary politics, mired in the fixities of interests and outcomes, subjective experience  
5 and objective position, sovereignty and legitimacy, rights, and freedom. Art cannot escape any  
6 of these forces, but it may provide a more plastic and performative medium for grasping and  
7 directing the forms and flows that politics can take. Especially when these mobilizations are  
8 misread as incoherent, lacking in direction or cohesiveness, of uncertain efficacy or value, art  
9 may prove a more effective terrain in which to articulate the sensibilities through which  
10 contemporary politics is embodied. For this the operative “and” must be permeable in both  
11 directions—toward a discernment of what the political does to/with/from art; and for an  
12 articulation of how art enables a transvaluation of the political.  
13

**A Note for Readers**

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16 The preceding may read like a manifesto, but it is actually intended as a kind of editorial brief  
17 both to lay out the shifting sands in need of mapping and to invite the cartographers to participate  
18 in the endeavor. The premise to be addressed from multiple locations is that whereas art and  
19 politics are plentiful, the means of evaluating their efficacy, especially when they assume a novel  
20 form, is incommensurate with this abundance and frequently finds scarcity and insufficiency.  
21 While contributors will consider this claim in relation to their own offerings, the point is not that  
22 each will prove the point, but that the volume will as a whole make this assertion. The  
23 cumulative effect of the chapters is hopefully to expand recognition of what art and politics can  
24 be, of where it can issue from and how it can achieve its effects. Accomplishing this requires  
25 several dimensions of diversity and representation. Authors hail from different epistemological  
26 and disciplinary addresses. It is as important to assemble expertise in cultural policy, geography,  
27 political theory, organizational and curatorial studies, as to enlist experience across performing  
28 and visual arts, new media, and digital arts, community-based, and conceptual practice. Some of  
29 these authors are deeply conversant in philosophical and methodological specialization; others  
30 profoundly engaged with artistic communities and constituencies. In all of these cases, writers will  
31 be imagining a world from their respective location.

32 This Companion makes no claim to be an atlas or encyclopedia of art and politics the world  
33 around; rather, it aims to provide different points of entry and departure from diverse  
34 geographical, cultural, disciplinary, and practical considerations. As such the volume provides  
35 accompaniment to perspectives on art and politics that are too infrequently in conversation:  
36 analyses of organization, institutions, policies, political economies, geographies, associated with  
37 the social sciences; critical elaborations and contextualizations of artistic practices and initiatives  
38 rooted in arts and humanities. The emphasis is on contemporary conditions of art and politics,  
39 informed by a historical sensibility and sensitivity to how we got here and became the way we  
40 are. The point is not to exclude the rich art historical archive, but neither to organize the  
41 volume around conceptions of periodization or historical genealogy that assert a pre-given  
42 grammar to the organization of this emergent knowledge.

43 One reason that the divide between theory and practice is especially untenable in the art  
44 world has to do with the large numbers of artists who are sophisticated conceptually, literate  
45 theoretically, and actively involved in writing, publishing, and distributing appraisals of art  
46 worlds. Within the academy, artistic training has thickened its own intellectual armature from  
47 minimal requirements in history and criticism to cultural studies of arts, critical reflections on  
48 professionalization, and forms of civic or community engagement. It is the aim of this volume

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1 to have the potential for course adoption in the numerous theory courses that populate art  
2 school curricula, but also becoming an object of study among the various arts collectives,  
3 hybrid programming spaces, and cultural centers around the world. Universities are having to  
4 rethink themselves as learning places, production centers, partners, and collaborators with  
5 other nodes of creative and critical knowledge production. The credentialing process, key to  
6 remaking art from a manual craft to a conceptual field, never had the kind of firm grasp on  
7 the labor market evident in medicine, but may need to be rethought in more distributed and  
8 sustainable terms as the critical operations of art extend way beyond the circumscribed  
9 duration of formal education.<sup>33</sup> Concomitantly, arts presenters, curators, organizers, centers,  
10 are convening the kinds of critical self-reflection on their own conditions of practice and  
11 terms of intervention in the world that might once have seemed unnecessary or needlessly  
12 academic. Performing Arts Forum in St. Erme France, The Brooklyn Commune, 16 Beaver,  
13 Whitechapel, The Queens Museum all do intensive knowledge-making work as part of their  
14 production schedule, an embrace of the labor of theoretical engagement that has been called  
15 “the educational turn.”<sup>34</sup>

16 There are a wide range of compilations that bear upon the relations between art and  
17 politics, and clearly the engagements between art and Marxism, structuralism and its after-  
18 math, feminism, queer theory, postcolonialism over the past century have generated vast  
19 literatures which have been variously mapped.<sup>35</sup> What becomes evident in considering  
20 these various volumes is how much artistic fields still organize publishing programs. Much  
21 is still done within the visual arts or performance studies, or media studies with their  
22 attendant examples and theoretical points of reference. Yet within these fields para-  
23 doxically, the distinctions between live and mediated, to say nothing of the performative  
24 turn in the visual arts and the emphasis on ensembles, collectives, and collaboration that  
25 focuses on the labor of art work, cuts across creative fields. Much recent publication con-  
26 tinues to be informed by the case study or exemplary instance, and the institutional and  
27 structural entailments that emanate from social science informed analysis tend to be kept  
28 separate or to themselves to omit engagement with questions of artistic form and materi-  
29 ality. It may now be impossible to produce the kind of magisterial synthesis evident in  
30 Ernst Bloch’s *The Principle of Hope*, which ranged across various artistic media in the service  
31 of a grand utopian vision; or even the dazzling sweep across the arts found in Fredric  
32 Jameson’s *Postmodernism: The Cultural Logic of Late Capitalism*.<sup>36</sup> Yet in both cases the  
33 mediations between the esthetic and institutional politics tend to be displaced by a focus on  
34 the ways in which art represents social totality. Certainly, a shift in perception and a sudden  
35 expansion of a sense of scope and scale of possibility are vital resources that art can enable  
36 in any political mobilization, but that does not answer the question of whether art is a part  
37 in some pre-given whole that a sufficient mapping of its mediations might disclose. When  
38 art helps us grasp the ways in which time and space are contingent, fungible, and generative  
39 rather than units of reality that are externally scaled, then esthetic form comes to matter all  
40 the more for the ways in which it suggests different modes of collective inscription and  
41 imbrication in features of otherwise different lives. Nor are either of these comprehensive  
42 texts sufficiently conversant with work that challenges western and northern hegemonies  
43 despite Jameson’s own formulation of Marxism and its others as a founding problematic for  
44 the journal *Social Text* and his considerable attention to questions of the third world and  
45 then globalization. Hence, one would need to turn to many different sources to generate  
46 the dialogue across difference aimed for in this *Companion of Art and Politics*. The collection  
47 is divided into four sections, each with its own introduction of the contributions therein.  
48 The sections are as follows:



*Introduction*

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**Part 1: Conceptual Cartographies**

These chapters examine the social, political, structural, historical forces that bear upon the arts, situate and locate them within hierarchies of value and practice. They attend to the double meaning of value that art bears as quantitative and qualitative, exchange and use, economic and cultural, public and private. These frames incorporate various understandings of classification and diversity, identification and differentiation, domination, exploitation, subordination, and appropriation. They provide keys to an understanding of the world as such and establish the terms under which certain objects and practices can be considered art and art in turn would be articulated with larger social and historical scales, hierarchies, and temporalities.

**Part 2: Institutional Materialities**

The proximate politics of art, its conditions of production, formations of labor, locations of subjectivity are arrayed across an intricate institutional archipelago. Centers of training and professional socialization, nodes of production and dissemination include studios and laptops, broadcasters, theaters, galleries, and museums. So, too, legislative arrangements, juridical categories of property and other rights, governmental bodies all bear upon artistic work and institutional spaces in both direct and indirect ways. Institutions are arrayed in their own value-conferring hierarchies, whether uptown and downtown, public and private, formal and informal, commercial and nonprofit. Artists too are instantiated in all manner of organizational arrangements—they form unions and professional associations, join social movement, and participate in cultural flows.

**Part 3: Modalities of Practice**

Art is more than the object of political forces that bear upon it. Art makes a way in the world and artists through their work together and apart bear an agency that generates a critique of what is and a sense of what might be. While all artistic practice engenders a politics—whether it articulates a political language for itself or not—the myriad expressions of art that understand themselves explicitly in political terms continues to expand and to be expansive. This section focuses on those explicit modes of engagement, the forms of esthetic, methodological, and organizational innovation in which worldly claims and alternatives for artistic life are themselves propagated. While understood by various terms of practice, theoretical claims, assertions, and capacities are indeed a vital aspect of the politics that they generate.

**Part 4: Making Publics**

If art makes a world, it does so not simply for itself but for others. Increasingly, questions of co-creation, audience participation, public or civic engagement have become vital dimensions of artistic endeavor but also of an expanded sense of politics, esthetic or otherwise. How to figure these matters of representation, delegation, efficacy, transformation, enhancement of critical capacity and what exactly constitutes the work of publics, or the valuation of community begins to describe a wider arc of reception than simple meaning making. If art makes legible what publics might need and desire, what knowledges and embodiments are valued and what society moves toward, its politicality cannot be derived from its own form but from the debts, longings, and imaginings it unfurls and enfolds among larger populations.

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## Notes

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  - 48
- 1 Concomitant with this expansiveness is a burgeoning literature across a whole range of genre and media. Some useful references are: *Art & Agenda: Political Art and Activism*, R. Klanten, M. Hubner, A. Bieber, eds. (Verlag, 2011). Compilation of recent practice from street and protest art to various activist expressions, including representation from the Global South. *Art & Activism in the Age of Globalization: Reflect No. 8*, Lieven De Cautier, Ruben De Roo, Karel Vanhaesebrouck, eds. (NAi Publishers, 2011). Treats phenomenon of globalization itself as driving force in dissemination of political forms and modalities of art. *Art School: (Propositions for the 21st Century)*, Steven Henry Madoff, ed. (MIT, 2009). Takes art school as a way of reflecting upon the institutional turn more broadly and pedagogy more specifically to collect alternative approaches to professional socialization in the arts. Whitechapel: Documents of Contemporary Art (series), *The Everyday; Chance; Utopias; Participation; Beauty; Appropriation; Failure; The Studio; Education; Situation; The Artist's Joke; Ruins: The Sublime; Beauty; The Archive; Design and Art* (21 titles to date, each edited by a prominent art theorist or artist). Distributed by MIT Press. Impressive in its sweep, each volume in the series takes on a specific concept that in some ways parallels a genre approach to the question of art and politics. *Social Works: Performing Art, Supporting Publics*, Shannon Jackson (Routledge, 2011). Reflects both the meshing between visual and performing arts and the integration of community-based and social practice into professional art fields. *Move. Choreographing You: Art and Dance Since the 1960s*, Stephanie Rosenthal (MIT, 2011). A consideration of the impact of postmodern dance on the fields and practices of the visual arts. *Radical Street Performance: An International Anthology*, Jan Cohen Cruz (Routledge, 1998). Illustrative of the medium specific (theater) and genre based (street performance) and richly international examples that have been gathered together in earlier collections. *Art and Politics: A Small History of Art and Social Change Since 1945*, Claudia Mesch (I. B. Tauris, 2011). An art historical survey of the emergence of postwar political art practices—broadly conceived—that have affiliated with social movements internationally.
- 2 The notion of esthetic autonomy receives its most potent philosophical formulation in Immanuel Kant's *Critique of Judgement*, and is subsequently articulated by such nineteenth-century writers as Théophile Gautier and Edgar Allen Poe as "art-for-arts sake." There are, especially in the Marxist tradition positions on artistic autonomy associated with Theodor Adorno in *Aesthetic Theory* and Herbert Marcuse *The Aesthetic Dimension*, that are the basis for arts political agency freed from the normative constraints of the dominant order. The Eurocentric cant of the claim is identified by African writers such as Chinua Achebe in *Morning Yet on Creation Day*.
- 3 These contradictions of the West's civilizing mission carried out in the name of democracy have received nuanced analysis in Edward Said, *Culture and Imperialism*; Michael Taussig, *Mimesis and Alterity*; Timothy Mitchell, *Carbon Democracy*.
- 4 A point made forcefully by Carol Becker, "The Artist as Public Intellectual." In *Surpassing the Spectacle: Global Transformations and the Changing Politics of Art* Lanham, MD: Rowman and Littlefield Publishers (2002), 11–20.
- 5 Marjorie Garber, *Patronizing the Arts*, Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2008.
- 6 Ngugi wa Thiongo, "Enactments of Power: The Politics of Performance Space." *Penpoints, Gunpoints and Dreams*, Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1988.
- 7 Such arguments came to be closely tied to the neoconservative positions arrayed against what it took to be culture wars during the 1980s and 1990s. Representative perspectives can be found in the collection of essays that originally appeared in the journal, *New Criterion*, and collected in *Against the Grain: The New Criterion on Art and Intellect at the End of the Twentieth Century*, edited by Hilton Kramer and Roger Kimball. Lanham, MD: Ivan R. Dee, 1995.
- 8 This notion of art in an expanded field was initially articulated by Rosalind Krauss in her essay "Sculpture in the Expanded Field," *October*, Vol. 8. (Spring, 1979), pp. 30–44.
- 9 Holly Sidford has documented the growing disequity and inequitable distribution of resources between large wealthy nonprofits where 5 per cent receive over half the funds, and smaller organizations especially among communities of color where these ratios are reversed. See her report, *Fusing Arts, Culture and Social Change: High Impact Strategies for Philanthropy* National Committee for Responsible Philanthropy, 2011. <http://www.ncrp.org/paib/arts-culture-philanthropy>.
- 10 This is the perspective developed by Jacques Rancière in a series of books on the politics of the sensible in which ethics and esthetics combine to engage the scene and sensibility of what gets registered and recognized as political form. See *The Politics of Aesthetics*, Bloomsbury Academic, 2013.

Introduction

- 1 11 The sorting of different dispositions within a social space or habitus was the basis of Pierre Bourdieu's  
2 seminal study in the sociology of art, *Distinction: A Social Critique of the Judgment of Taste*, Cambridge:  
3 Harvard University Press, 1984.
- 4 12 Mathew Arnold, *Culture and Anarchy*, Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2009 (1869). Arnold means to  
5 distinguish culture as a matter of excellence, the best that has been thought and known rather than a  
6 simple elitist claim of class privilege, but his conception is often associated precisely with a meritocratic  
7 view of elitism that preserves class hierarchy. At roughly the same time (1871), E. B. Tylor articulates  
8 the anthropological view of culture as a whole way of life, in *Primitive Culture: Researches into the  
9 Development of Mythology, Philosophy, Religion, Art, and Custom*, Cambridge: Cambridge University  
10 Press, 2010, which equally renders culture as a universal equivalent across all human societies.
- 11 13 "Theory and Practice: Revisiting Critical Pedagogy in Studio Art Education," in Susan E. McKenna,  
12 *Art Journal*, Vol. 58, No. 1 (Spring, 1999), pp. 74–79.
- 13 14 Nato Thompson and Gregory Sholette, *The Interventionists: Users Manual for the Creative Disruption of  
14 Everyday Life*, North Adams, MA: MoCA, 2006; *Cutting Across Media: Appropriation Art, Interventionist  
15 Collage, and Copyright Law*, Kembrew McLeod (ed.), Rudolf Kuenzli (ed.), Durham: Duke University  
16 Press, 2011; Rita Raley, *Tactical Media*, Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2009.
- 17 15 The foundational text here is Ernst Bloch's *The Principle of Hope Vols I-III*, Cambridge: MIT Press,  
18 1995; more recently, Fredric Jameson has reprised the genre in his *Archaeologies of the Future: The Desire  
19 Called Utopia and Other Science Fictions*, London: Verso, 2007; and Jose Munoz has explored the political  
20 affect of queer futurity in *Cruising Utopia: The Then and There of Queer Futurity*, New York: New York  
21 University Press, 2009.
- 22 16 The concept is attributed to the Russian formalists in the early part of the twentieth century. See  
23 Viktor Shklovskij, "Art as Technique." *Literary Theory: An Anthology*, eds. Julie Rivkin and Michael  
24 Ryan. Malden: Blackwell Publishing Ltd, 1998.
- 25 17 *The Yes Men: The True Story of the End of the World Trade Organization*, The Disinformation Company,  
26 2004, and [www.yeslab.org](http://www.yeslab.org).
- 27 18 Full documentation of Critical Art Ensemble's work can be found at <http://www.critical-art.net/>.
- 28 19 Documentation of the arrest and ensuing legal struggles is available on [caedefensefund.org](http://caedefensefund.org) and the case  
29 was portrayed in a film by Lynn Hershman-Leeson, *Strange Culture* (2007).
- 30 20 The distinction is explored in the essays collected in the volume edited by Nina Felshin, *But Is It Art?  
31 The Spirit of Art as Activism*, Seattle: Bay Press, 1995. As Felshin points out, "The fact that a political  
32 work is publicly sited, in exclusively physical terms, does not guarantee comprehension or public par-  
33 ticipation. Political art, in short, is not synonymous with activist art." (p. 21). In contrast, "Shaped as  
34 much by the 'real world' as by the art world, activist art represents a confluence of the aesthetic, socio-  
35 political, and technological impulses of the past twenty-five years or more that have attempted to  
36 challenge, explore, or blur the boundaries and hierarchies traditionally defining the culture as repre-  
37 sented by those in power" (p. 10).
- 38 21 Meg McLagan and Yates McKee, eds., *Sensible Politics: The Visual Culture of Nongovernmental Activism*,  
39 Cambridge: Zone/MIT, 2012.
- 40 22 Grant Kester has explored this concept of the delegate in his work. See *Conversation Pieces: Community  
41 and Communication in Modern Art* Berkeley: University of California Press, 2004; and *The One and the  
42 Many: Contemporary Collaborative Art in a Global Context* Durham: Duke University Press. Miwon  
43 Kwon takes a more skeptical view regarding community and representation in *One Place After Another:  
44 Site Specific Art and Locational Identity*, Cambridge: MIT Press, 2004.
- 45 23 The foundational confusion of representation as portrait and as proxy that unduly separates the eco-  
46 nomic from the political lies at the base of Gayatri Spivak's critical engagement with Marxism, post-  
47 structuralism and postcolonialism in her essay "Can the Subaltern Speak?" in *Marxism and the  
48 Interpretation of Culture*, eds. Cary Nelson and Lawrence Grossberg. Urbana: U of Illinois P, 1988: 271–  
313.
- 49 24 Nato Thompson, *Living As Form: Socially Engaged Art From 1991-2011*, Cambridge: MIT Press, 2012;  
50 Tom Finkelpearl, *What We Made: Conversations on Art and Social Cooperation*, Durham: Duke University  
51 Press, 2013.
- 52 25 Richard Florida, *The Rise of the Creative Class, 2nd Edition*, New York: Basic Books, 2012; Luc Bol-  
53 tanski and Eve Chiapello, *The New Spirit of Capitalism*, London: Verso, 2007; Stefan Nowotny and  
54 Maurizio Lazzarato, Suely Rolnik *Critique of Creativity: Precarity, Subjectivity and Resistance in the "Crea-  
55 tive Industries,"* MayFly, 2011.

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- 1 26 Andrew Ross, "The Mental Labor Problem," *Social Text* 63, Summer, 2000, pp. 1–32; Matteo Pas-  
2 quinnelli, "Creative Sabotage in the Factory of Culture: Art, Gentrification and the Metropolis" in  
3 *Animal Spirits: A Bestiary of the Commons*, Rotterdam: NAI Press, 2009.  
4 27 Oscar Lovell Triggs, *Arts & Crafts Movement*, Parkstone Press, 2009.  
5 28 Ted Purves, *What We Want Is Free: Generosity and Exchange in Recent Art*, Albany: SUNY Press, 2004.  
6 29 Dematerialization is itself associated with the feminist critique of masculinist objectivism. See Lucy  
7 Lippard, *Six Years: The Dematerialization of the Art Object from 1966 to 1972*, University of California  
8 Press; reprint edition 1997.  
9 30 Nicolas Bourriaud, *Relational Aesthetics* Paris: Les Presse Du Reel 1998. For a recent look at the politics  
10 of participatory art, see Claire Bishop, *Artificial Hells: Participatory Art and the Politics of Spectatorship*,  
11 London: Verso, 2012.  
12 31 I explore these aspects of the social logic of the derivative across economy, polity, and culture (with  
13 special reference to dance) in my forthcoming book, *Knowledge, LTD: Toward a Social Logic of the*  
14 *Derivative*.  
15 32 While the literature on art, revolution, and social movements is vast, one recent survey is illustrative of  
16 these entanglements, see, Nicholas Lambert *A People's Art History of the United States: 250 Years of*  
17 *Activist Art and Artists Working in Social Justice Movements*, New York: New Press, 2013. Good doc-  
18 umentation of the esthetic sensibilities of the recent global uprisings can be found at the independent  
19 media site, [www.globaluprisings.org](http://www.globaluprisings.org).  
20 33 For an account of the MFA which emerged as a standard credential after the Second World War  
21 effected this shift from art as manual labor to discursive field, see Howard Singerman, *Arts Subjects:*  
22 *Making Artists in the American University*, Berkeley: University of California Press, 1999.  
23 34 Paul O'Neill and Mick Wilson, eds., *Curating and the Educational Turn*, Open Editions, 2010 and  
24 Felicity Allen *Education* (Whitechapel Series), Cambridge: MIT Press, 2011.  
25 35 Perhaps the most comprehensive survey in one volume is Charles Harrison and Paul J. Wood, eds., *Art*  
26 *in Theory 1900–2000: An Anthology of Changing Ideas*, Blackwell Publishing; 2nd edition, 2002.  
27 36 Bloch, op. cit. Fredric Jameson, *Postmodernism, or the Cultural Logic of Late Capitalism*, Durham: Duke  
28 University Press, 1990.

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## PART I

# Conceptual Cartographies

### Introduction

These chapters explore some of the various ways in which the relations between art and politics can be mapped as matters of theory and practice. We start with Columbian ethnomusicologist Ana María Ochoa's "On the Zoopolitics of the Voice and the Distinction Between Nature and Culture," which advances an understanding of the political as grounded in a conception of the musical. Art is conventionally situated within the broader domain of culture and the notion of culture which supposedly distinguishes the realm of the human has historically been defined by an understanding of nature. Culture is at once a condition of and path toward development and, in this, having a voice is constitutive of whom and what can count as political participation. The colonial project which sorts what kinds of subjects are deserving of self-rule distinguish vocal elements that manifest the animal in the human upon which concepts of personhood are based. Against this, an anti-colonial zoopolitics of sounding like an animal embeds sound circulation in social relations and in turn a different political being than giving voice to the voiceless as a civilizing mission.

If the Western genealogy of art emerges from its location in the field of culture situated as a particular way of life, art under capitalism is situated in the double bind of a displacement of labor and a speculative form of capital valorization. This is what Marina Vishmidt demonstrates in "The Aesthetic Subject and the Politics of Speculative Labor." She observes certain resonances between the modernist autonomy of art as an ends in itself, and what has come to be called the autonomization of labor and capital as speculative or self-generating forms of activity. Art opens this double ground of creation of value that requires no work, that are expressed in a shared utopian vocabulary of self-investment and human capital evident in some initiatives of self-organized artistic labor and of finance-driven capital. The shift from wage labor as the basis of mutual association of workers to increasing entanglements of debt are indicative of a shift of the formal subsumption of labor to capital to a more comprehensive real subsumption that bears the potential of a broader interdependence through a more general social reproduction that these emergent value forms portend.

The assumption that there is a line of descent, often referred to as periodization captured in such artistic movements as classical realism and modernism, implicates a particular assumption of linear time without exploring the politics of that esthetic temporality, commonly formulated in

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1 terms of necessary innovation. John Roberts’ “Art and the Politics of Time-as-Substance”  
2 troubles these waters that he reveals, also circumscribe how politics get conceived within the  
3 esthetic field. He notes that both realism and modernism downgrade the political topicality of  
4 art, which leads to a question of what constitutes the time of the art work as such. What does,  
5 he asks, the gap between art’s content and effect allow it to do politically? He also poses the  
6 challenge of how to avoid the reduction of the political as an already given content or effect  
7 that may be an attribute of activist art. Ultimately, he insists that by specifying the temporality  
8 of art as a research praxis in an expanded field of what is being considered esthetic activity, will  
9 evade the facile dismissal of art’s politicality that is too often affixed to critical judgment and  
10 practical intervention.

11 If esthetics has at their root various approaches to sense-making, we cannot separate the  
12 artistic engagements from their material and embodied entailments with the senses that have  
13 been articulated as various disciplines—even as these boundaries and borders are being redrawn.  
14 The work of art therefore does a kind of double duty analytically and methodologically, and in  
15 the case of its relation to politics, opens the prospect of not only recasting how art gets valorized  
16 but of how the political is set to work. André Lepecki’s “The Choreopolitical: Agency in the  
17 Age of Control” focuses this issue well when he asks how can dance and choreography con-  
18 tribute to an understanding of the political. He affiliates these two dimensions of dancing as the  
19 materialized labor of the illocutionary force of the score, where bodies are set in motion  
20 through acts and techniques of inscription. Choreopolitics becomes the expanded vision of the  
21 relation between movement and politics between the undertheorized distinctions between  
22 formal and informal, legislative and quotidian, elite and grassroots. Instead, he offers the deli-  
23 neation between the command and domination associated with the coterminous modes of  
24 contemporary power found in sovereignty, discipline, and control, which he terms policy and  
25 planning, which emphasizes the immanent capacities to set bodies in motion.

26 Any relation between art and politics imagines a third term in which situates and opens those  
27 specific dynamics to the social world. This work of contextualizing has a long trajectory among  
28 various sociologies of art. Eduardo de la Fuente in “Thinking Contradictory Thoughts: On the  
29 Convergence of Aesthetic and Social Factors in Recent Sociologies of Art” provides a critical  
30 and attentive tracing of these routes through a consolidation of various tendencies to a phase of  
31 self-questioning to wind up with what could be called a new sociology of art. These recent  
32 efforts remap the aesthetics-sociality nexus as part of a field-rendering and societal transforma-  
33 tion. The resulting art-sociology sets out a robust and expansive definition of art; it is able to  
34 engage with the quotidian and mine the analogies and metaphors that invoke art; is resonant  
35 with new esthetic thinking; and can focus on various expressions of embodied thinking. Perhaps  
36 most expansively, this emergent arena of art-sociology is able to serve as a kind of meshing  
37 ground for cognate endeavors of urban and spatial studies; leisure and tourism, event manage-  
38 ment, economics and organizational studies that bring attention to unexpected lines of causality  
39 and agency.

40 If there is an iconic instance of the articulation of art and politics, it would arguably be with  
41 the Bolshevik Revolution of 1917, which both consummated a series of avant-garde artistic  
42 movements from futurism to constructivism to suprematism, and catapulted these artists to  
43 national political prominence. Boris Groys’ “Becoming Revolutionary: On Russian Suprema-  
44 tism” ponders the relation between artistic and political revolution. He focuses on two central  
45 figures of the Russian avant garde in the challenges they faced to articulate and negotiate the  
46 relation between revolutionary art’s critique of domination and its capacity of mobilization  
47 toward the utopian promise of social and formal innovation. The dense succession of avant-  
48 garde artistic movements leading to and affirmed by the victory of the Soviets gave political and

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1 esthetic weight to the revolutionary charge that effective innovation would not only introduce  
2 formal novelty, but would provide a way of visualizing and realizing the destruction of tradi-  
3 tion. This in turn, however, sets up a paradoxical circumstance for such art and politics that  
4 simultaneously must achieve a destabilization of the old order and a means of stabilizing the  
5 assertive rule of the revolution itself.

6 The tendency of both modernization and modernism was to be directional. As time goes on,  
7 things are to get better; social progress and esthetic innovation therefore go hand in hand. The  
8 promise of more and better prospects lie on the utopian horizon of the future; where success is  
9 required and failure cannot be tolerated. This is precisely the premise that Lisa Le Feuvre calls  
10 into question in “Failure Over Utopia.” She notes that when failure is released from the eva-  
11 luable strictures of normative success it opens to worlds of contestation, ruptures of expecta-  
12 tions that in turn afford opportunities to amplify doubt and uncertainty on which art can traffic  
13 so effectively. This revaluing of failure allows her to also rethink the very positioning of utopia  
14 as subjective ideals whose desires, in reality, necessarily fails but are nonetheless useful in their  
15 failure. What this dialectic of failure and utopia ultimately enables is a widening sense of possi-  
16 bility and contingency as to how value is defined both through and for art and therefore to help  
17 specify what is at stake in any desire for societal transformation that art may come to bear.

18 This section concludes with a return to the aural register, this time in the hands of an activist  
19 sound collective Ultra-red. Their contribution based on a series of collaborative projects, “What  
20 Did You Hear? Another Ten Theses on Militant Sound Investigation,” is a conceptual carto-  
21 graphy of how to politicize art by inviting an audition in the form of reception to their own  
22 work. They begin with a fundamental distinction, not between political and a-political work,  
23 but between activism, which mobilizes and unleashes a cascade of materiality; and organizing,  
24 which mines and attends to the consequent repetition and accumulation of what has been  
25 unleashed through such interventions. Echoing the first chapter, they insist that listening is  
26 never natural. Rather, it necessitates and generates literacy. Listening (whether to sound, voices,  
27 music, or ambient noise, which their various projects instantiate in a range of spaces); can  
28 facilitate an encounter for further collaboration that opens to the stranger and outsider upon  
29 which the oscillation between activism and organizing depends if it is to be self-expansive and  
30 amplify the surround of the political.

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# 1

## ON THE ZOOPOLITICS OF THE VOICE AND THE DISTINCTION BETWEEN NATURE AND CULTURE

*Ana María Ochoa*

One of the central tenets of the history of Western modernity has been the division between nature and culture as distinct spheres in which it has been generally understood that nature is a passive background against which humans constitute culture. Latin America and the Caribbean were crucial to the historical constitution of the history of such a distinction due to the centrality of the region in the emergence of the idea of the moderns. Key events of modern history such as the conquest and ongoing genocide of indigenous peoples in the Americas, the transatlantic slave trade, and the history of trade of animals and plants across the Atlantic have been crucial to the way the relation between nature and culture has been understood and politically used by moderns since the sixteenth century. In this chapter I explore how the notion of culture itself is historically defined by our understanding of nature. The mutual definition of both terms and their political use depends on the politics of life through which they are constituted. In this chapter I present a fragment of such a history by exploring how the idea of “having a voice” as a metaphor for political participation took form in the nineteenth century through the rise of the notion of orality developed in relation to the emergence of republican ideals that were forged in this early postcolonial period. I explore how, through the definition of the politics of life as present in the voice, specific notions of nature and culture were developed in Latin America and the Caribbean as central to the moderns’ constitution of a political notion of the person. The examples I use to illustrate this process are from the history of the voice in Colombia in the nineteenth century and from the broader nineteenth-century colonial archive.

### **Orality as a Pedagogy of Governmentality**

One of the problems of the voice in the history of Western philosophy since Aristotle is that it has the potential of manifesting the animal in the human animal (Aristotle 1986, 2012). Thus one can think of the history of the voice in the West as one of trying to elucidate which vocal elements manifest the animal in the human. In the process what emerges is a politics of life that seeks to distinguish between human and other animals as part of the history of the relation between voice, reason, and sentience. One example of such thinking is Colombian philologist and acting



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1 president between 1892 and 1898 Miguel Antonio Caro's (1843–1909) presentation of such a  
2 topic in his *Manual of Elocution*. He states:

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4 Not only man, but also animals have the gift of the voice, and use a certain sonorous  
5 language, but it is inarticulate. Animals use a language similar to that of man when  
6 they cry or scream of happiness or terror, when they whine or complain, ultimately,  
7 when they emits voices without speaking (*cuando vocea sin hablar*). This is the inarticu-  
8 late language common to man and animal that expresses faculties that are also  
9 common to one and the other: the sensitive faculty that consists in expressing pleasure  
10 and pain and the estimative (*estimativa*) faculty through which the animal appreciates  
11 (and man too) instinctively, without the use of reason, that which is convenient or  
12 repugnant to his physical nature. Thus if a hurt or wounded animal flees howling, it  
13 expresses an act of its sensitive faculty – pain; if it gives voices to ask for food (*si da*  
14 *vozes para pedir alimento*), to announce danger or something similar, it expresses an act of  
15 its estimative faculty ... . Articulate, human language expresses acts of a superior  
16 faculty to those two previously mentioned and peculiar to rational beings – the intel-  
17 lectual faculty (*la facultad intelectiva*). If a man in pain whimpers, showing his pain, he  
18 has made use of inarticulate animal language. But if he wants to express that same pain  
19 through words ... in that case, he expresses directly what he thinks about what he  
20 feels and indirectly the sensation he is experimenting.

21 (*Caro 1980 [1867]: 448–449, translation by the author*)

22

23 Following Aristotelian ideas on the voice, he distinguished between sentience and biological  
24 needs (such as eating) as animal dimensions of the human, versus intellect or reason, present in  
25 words as the site in which logical ideas manifest. Since, in this philosophical perspective, only  
26 humans have language, then the presence of reason in the voice through language was used to  
27 distinguish between humans and non-humans and between the human and non-human  
28 dimensions of the person.

29

30 Such a philosophical understanding of the politics of life in the voice has often implied a political  
31 history of cultivation and regimentation of the voice with the purpose of distinguishing between its  
32 human and non-human dimensions. Thus, voices, which are technically highly manipulable  
33 through the training of pronunciation and through different techniques of vocalization, were  
34 trained to manifest such a reason in order to constitute a politically viable notion of the person. A  
35 series of “fantasies of magical omnipotence” (Connor 2006) were ascribed to the capacities of the  
36 voice to shape the political subject and the people. This also gave rise to the education of the  
37 senses, a crucial aspect of the relation between the ear, sight, and the voice, as a central aspect of a  
38 modern, enlightened pedagogy (Schmidt 2002). Steven Connor (2006) situates such a history of  
39 cultivation of the voice as occurring more intensely from the eighteenth century onward. The idea  
40 of orality, as a mode of speech in need of cultivation emerged, partially, out of this history.

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42 This is seen, for example, in the ways that manuals of eloquence and elocution multiplied  
43 during this period to develop a pedagogy of proper speaking, thus separating citizens that did  
44 not know how to speak or voice themselves properly from those that did. This is a fragment of  
45 a longer history in which distinguishing between those who spoke well and those who did not  
46 became a means of constituting social inequality in the history of the modern (Ramos 1989,  
47 Bauman and Briggs 2004). According to Venezuelan philologist Andrés Bello (1781–1865), for  
48 example, a foundational figure of the educational system in Chile in the nineteenth century and  
a major figure in Latin American language history and ideology, “the grammar of a language is  
the art of *speaking* it correctly, that is, according to good use, exemplified by educated people”

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1 (Cuervo 1905: 1, my emphasis). Bello's definition is pledged to the performative distinctions of  
2 correct speech, and, as a "pedagogical dispositive" it comes to occupy "an intermediate space  
3 between (irreflexive) speech and the rationality of writing" (Ramos 2003 [1989]: 68). Orality,  
4 then, instead of an opposition to the lettered world, designates a historical mode of audibility of  
5 the voice linked to the rise of the grammaticalization (as it was then understood) of speech.

6 In Colombia, and other countries of Latin America this implied implementing an ideal of *bien*  
7 *decir* (correct speech) that distinguished between improper and proper uses of pronunciation,  
8 recitation, and elocution. The problem of *bien decir* (correct speech) became a central issue as  
9 Hispanic American nations were becoming independent republics since the processes of political  
10 independence from the colony generated tremendous anxiety among creole elites about the  
11 possibility of fragmentation of the Spanish language (Rama 1984, Ramos 1989). No single  
12 sovereign power reigned any longer over all the Americas to guarantee the cohesion of the  
13 Spanish language thus generating the specter of diversification of pronunciation across the vast,  
14 unconnected territories of the Americas and the potential development of different, unintelligible  
15 languages. The problem of conservation of a unified language for Ibero-America appeared as a  
16 key postcolonial issue. In such a project, the work of Venezuelan grammarian Andrés Bello was  
17 highly influential (Ramos 2003). Thus the rise of this ideology of voice that sought to standardize  
18 pronunciation in the name of a rational ideal of personhood was closely related to the rise of  
19 republican ideals and to the postcolonial processes of independence in Latin America in this  
20 period. Miguel Antonio Caro, avid reader of Bello's work, was perfectly aware that the creation  
21 of the idea of "a people" as a politics of political representation required, in the first place, the  
22 constitution of the idea of the people as a governmental body to which the idea of a proper  
23 means of communication was central. He thus found the accents of people from different walks  
24 of life a confusion of and an impediment to such a process:

25  
26 As with the notion of "the public" (*el público*), one can ask of her [pronunciation], where  
27 does one see it? Where does it live? And it is no less mobile and multiple than the  
28 public. The rich man does not pronounce like the poor man, the person from city A  
29 like that from town B, the person that was born in one year as that which delayed their  
30 arrival into the world for ten, twenty years. To give the scepter of orthography to that  
31 of pronunciation, is to give it to the one hundred headed monster. and just as once the  
32 sovereignty of the people has been proclaimed, the most insignificant local person  
33 comes to be called a people, once the sovereignty of pronunciation is proclaimed, the  
34 most obscure bad habit in speech becomes pronunciation. What a Babel tower!

35 (Caro [1867] 1980, 356–357)

36  
37 So for a figure such as Miguel Antonio Caro, the means of creating a public involved not only the  
38 creation of a representative government but also a people that could be called such by sharing  
39 features of speech. This meant imposing a homogeneous notion of language that never existed as  
40 such in the country (Von der Walde 1997) in order to contain the heterogeneity vocalization.  
41 Manuals of elocution were pedagogically used in schools to enable such a process.

42 But if there was a proper form of orality there was also its opposite – different types of  
43 "untamed" vocalities. Such untamed vocalities were either seen as signs of animality in humans  
44 (as in the "howling" of natives, see next section) or, as survivals or historical remnants, among  
45 the lower classes, of former modes of correct speech, and thus a basis for a positive valuation of  
46 popular expressivity. Due to its tendency to change across generations and territories, language  
47 was considered "a living body" (*un cuerpo viviente*) (Bello 1905: viii). Thus the role of the phi-  
48 lologist was to uncover the proper mode of a word by studying the history of change of that

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1 word through the science of etymology. Etymological techniques emerged as the means to  
2 control language's tendency, as a "living body", towards diversification across time, by selec-  
3 tively determining the correct origin of a word in order to authorize its proper use in the pre-  
4 sent. It was used as a "strategic maneuver of territorialization and temporalization" (Povinelli  
5 2011: 16) for determining proper heritage through lexical comparison in order to weed out the  
6 vices of ill-advised linguistic transformations.

7 On the one hand, the speech of the lower classes needed to be corrected because proper  
8 speech (*el bien hablar*) was "one of the clearest signs of cultivated and well born people" and an  
9 "indispensable condition" of all those who aspire to use, "for the benefit of others," their skills  
10 in writing and speaking (Cuervo 1987 [1907]: 4). Incorrect speech was thus a sign of "vulgar-  
11 ity" (ibid. 8) that needed to be eliminated. However, some of the words and verbal lore within  
12 that vulgar speech stood as highly valuable archaisms, monuments to the past that survived in  
13 the present and were a key to identifying the proper form of a word.

14 If Latin America and the Caribbean were the lands whose colonial histories of transculturations  
15 and creolizations continually marred original expressive purities (Trouillot 1992), then such processes  
16 demanded a zoopolitics of heritage in order to establish a selective process to determine proper  
17 origin, a eugenesis of the tongue to find the proper term. Etymology's methods and assumptions  
18 informed the emergence of a notion of culture marked by the idea of appropriate management of  
19 heritage so crucial to the consolidation of patrimony as a national *pater familias*, a masculinization of  
20 descent as a temporalizing technology of the state. Here emerges another notion of orality – that  
21 which seeks to value "vulgar" speech by assigning it a proper heritage. The etymology of words  
22 became a central means of folkloristic research in Latin America, one that was racialized in different  
23 ways in different historical moments in the search for either indigenous, African, or Hispanic roots  
24 of folklore. The notion of patrimony owes much to such a politics of heritage.

25 The idea of orality then involves two contradictory impulses—that which seeks to recognize  
26 an archaic value in the language of the people in order to build a national folklore through a  
27 politics of descent, and that which seeks to purify the modes of speech in order to create a  
28 proper citizen.

29 The centrality of orality in the creation of the notion of the popular, in Latin America and the  
30 Caribbean, has always involved the contradictory political and cultural impulses of these ideas  
31 through different cultural policies. On the one hand it involves the management of two contra-  
32 dictory notions of culture: the recognition of a culture of the people as constitutive of the folklore  
33 or popular culture of the nation and the notion of culture as something that needs to be taken to  
34 the people through education because, supposedly, they lack a proper culture (as in the idea of a  
35 pedagogy of correct speech). This contrasts with notions of the recognition of a people as a cen-  
36 tral element of republicanism. Even though the people are recognized as a category of govern-  
37 mentality, specific persons within "the" people—such as Amerindians, Afrodescendants or  
38 women—are often denied the access to specific political rights, frequently through the argument  
39 that they do not "speak well." Thus the notion of the popular has been historically constituted at  
40 the crossroads of these contradictory political and cultural impulses (Martín-Barbero 1989). The  
41 idea of "having a voice" as a phrase that means political representation comes from a long political  
42 history of valorization of the political subject through contradictory notions of the voice. But this  
43 is not only a Latin American history. As Bauman and Briggs (2003) also show, the emergence of  
44 the idea of orality, a type of speech, was used in Europe and the United States as well to distin-  
45 guish between proper and improper modes of speaking in order to create social hierarchies, the  
46 use of the voice as a means to social exclusion and inclusion.

47 However, not all forms of popular vocalization could be brought into the politics of the state.  
48 The howling of natives, so present in the colonial archive around the world, was often used by

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1 moderns as the limit against which to define not only a notion of the person but ideas of speech  
2 and music. But, if we read the archive against this occidentalizing grain, we can also understand  
3 such repeated descriptions of the howling of the natives as a sign that for many indigenous  
4 peoples of the world “sounding like an animal” rather than a problem was a sign of a mode of  
5 relation across species that involved a completely different zoopolitics, a different notion of  
6 culture and its relation to nature from that valued in the modern West.

### 7 8 **The Howling of Natives and the Colonial Archive** 9

10 One of the characteristics of the colonial archive is the repeated presence of natives that howl like  
11 animals (Tomlinson 2007, Ochoa forthcoming) in a type of vocalization in which human voices  
12 seem to embody animal sounds, and in which the boundaries between song, speech and strange  
13 vocalizations seem to be blurry and difficult to establish. The other capacity of the natives that  
14 appears again and again in the colonial archive seems to be a great penchant for imitation of foreign  
15 languages, songs, and sounds (Taussig 1993, Seeger 1987). As stated at the beginning of this chapter,  
16 voice implies a *zoé* (Ludueña 2010), a particular politics of life that involves addressing different  
17 conceptions of the boundaries between the human and non-human according to the uses of the  
18 voice. In the colonial context of the Americas, which brought together peoples from different  
19 places and backgrounds, such a definition of life through the voice was certainly a contested political  
20 issue. Let us recall that a central question unleashed by the conquest of the Americas and by the  
21 transatlantic slave trade was that of the degree of humanity of Amerindians and black Africans. Thus  
22 both colonial policy and the emergence of new nations in the Americas were historically con-  
23 stituted through a particular *zoé*, or notion of life that was used to distinguish the difference between  
24 the human as a species from “the political community of humans” (Ludueña 2010, 13), that is, those  
25 that were thought worthy of being considered persons with full legal rights. I use the term zoo-  
26 politics as it appears in Ludueña (2010) instead of the more common biopolitics, derived from  
27 Foucault’s work on the politics of life. Ludueña, following Derrida and Mallet (2008), questions the  
28 neat division between *bíos* as “something like a qualified life, and thus the more proper subject of  
29 politics while *zoé* represents, to say it in some way, a natural life originally excluded from the world  
30 of the city” (Ludueña 2010, 28). Such a distinction, that assumes a passive nature upon which a  
31 politics is inscribed generating as it were a humanly politicized nature, has also been questioned,  
32 with a different vocabulary and approach, by the history of science (Stengers 2006, Latour 2004), by  
33 recent developments in anthropology that question the category of nature (Escobar 2008, Descola  
34 1996; Viveiros de Castro 2010) and by the “speculative turn” in philosophy (Bryant, Srineck, and  
35 Harman 2011). In our case, the howling of natives seems to be one of the instances of sound that  
36 brings up questions about the contested ground for a zoopolitics of the voice.

37 In the West, for approximately the past three hundred years or so, there has been an  
38 increasing distinction between language and music, speech and song, as separate fields of prac-  
39 tice and knowledge. But in many cultures of the world, song and speech, music and language  
40 belong to a mutually constitutive realm of expressivity (Faudree 2012). If one explores the  
41 nineteenth-century archive, in which the distinction between music and speech became central  
42 to the institutionalization of both linguistics and musicology in the rise of the university as an  
43 institution, one finds that the howling of natives becomes the limit against which the idea of a  
44 proper music or a proper language were repeatedly measured.

45 One of the central defining features of the notion of music in the West in the nineteenth  
46 century became the idea of identifying a clear pitch. Guido Adler’s 1885 foundational statement  
47 for musicology, *The Scope, Method and Aim of Musicology*, begins with the central role of the  
48 clear measurement of pitch in identifying organized tones as the essence of musical knowledge:

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1 Musicology originated simultaneously with the art of organizing tones. As long as natural  
2 song breaks forth from the throat freely and without reflection; as long as the tonal pro-  
3 ducts well up, unclear and unorganized, so long also there can be no question of a tonal art.  
4 (Adler 1981 [1885])  
5

6 Eduard Hanslick’s controversial theories of musical form and affect state that nature  
7 “provides material for the production of material, that is, of sound of high or low  
8 pitch; in other words the measurable tone. The latter is the primary and essential  
9 condition of all music, whose function it is to so combine these tones as to produce  
10 melody and harmony, its two main factors.  
11 (1891 [1885]:145).  
12

13 And he adds, “When South Sea islanders rattle with wooden staves and pieces of metal to the  
14 accompaniment of fearful howlings, they are performing *natural music*, that is, *no music at all*”  
15 (author’s emphasis) (146).

16 Repeatedly, not only in these scholars but also in others, the idea of identifying a tone was central  
17 for defining an idea of music. But one of the characteristics of “howling” is a type of vocalization in  
18 which the production of a specific pitch is not an objective. Rather, it is a type of vocalization that  
19 values the possibility of fuzzing the idea of a specific pitch, which seems to incorporate different  
20 types of noises, guttural uses of the voice, sliding melodies, and the imitation of sounds of animals.  
21 They are not concerned so much with producing a clear pitch but with the possibility to train and  
22 use the voice to imitate different sonic sources, including the sound of animals. Thus, if for the idea  
23 of music that moderns constructed in the nineteenth century in the foundation of musicology, a  
24 highly identifiable pitch was central, it was not so for other forms of vocalization. For moderns, this  
25 meant then that the howling of indigenous peoples signified their lack of humanity and their degree  
26 of animality, in a zoopolitics in which the distinction between the animal and the human dimen-  
27 sions of the voice was crucial to define the limit of the very idea of music.

28 But based on the relation between the ethnographic and historiographical archive, it is possible  
29 to arrive at a different zoopolitics of the voice. First, initial colonial encounters involved not only  
30 trying to understand the “nature” of the “other”—a question both indigenous peoples from dif-  
31 ferent parts of the world as well as Westerners asked (Lévi-Strauss 1955)—but it also involved the  
32 imitative exchange of vocal and instrumental sounds that had never been heard before (Carter  
33 1990) and the imitative reproduction of such sounds in voices that had never carried them. If for  
34 the colonizers the issue of translation became a crucial item of conversion in a political theology  
35 of transformation of language and territory (Hanks 2010), for the natives the possibility of the  
36 creation of what we understand as “new” genres; that is, creating from different formal fragments  
37 of narration, speech and song-making, became a mechanism of response to the colonial situation.  
38 The penchant for imitation of the natives rather than a condition of a problematic sensorial acuity  
39 often interpreted as a sign of intellectual lack was to the contrary, a type of understanding of uses  
40 of the sonic, in which borrowing sounds from different beings—be they foreigners, birds, or other  
41 non-human beings such as deities—was a common practice. It signals a mode of constitution of  
42 relations between different types of beings and the person through the voice. In such an ontology  
43 the common condition of animals and humans is not animality, but rather humanity (Viveiros de  
44 Castro 2010, Sahlins 2008). In such a world culture it is not meant to represent a person (as  
45 implied in the idea of to have a voice) but rather “consists in the way people draw analogies  
46 between different domains of their worlds” (Strathern 1992: 47). This implies a “condition of a  
47 knowledge that cannot be represented, an auditory knowledge that is constitutionally environ-  
48 mental and situational. It corresponds to the participatory, or echoic, production of meaning”

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1 (Carter, 1990, Australian Sound Design Project). Thus, the implication is that language to have  
2 significance does not necessarily have to mean something, in which meaning is assigned to the  
3 idea of the sign as mediating between concept and sound. Rather meaning in sound is understood  
4 as a mode of “echolocation” in which what is emphasized is not “meaning but the meaningfulness  
5 of direction” (Wagner 2001: 137). What counts, acoustically, is a type of orientation towards the  
6 other, towards “the environment”. Thus the mimetic use of sounds, the penchant of the natives to  
7 try to imitate but not necessarily very well, the sound of other languages, musics, or sounds from  
8 the environment can be seen in a different light. Fidelity of the copy is not the acoustic ideal here  
9 as in our sense of production. “Mishearings”, ambiguous or “erroneous” rearticulations of a given  
10 sound are integrated into an ideal of sound circulation that seeks more to embed the person in a  
11 series of relations with other entities rather than separate that person. Here what is important is the  
12 relation between listening and vocality as a mode of emplacing oneself in relation to other beings  
13 and to one’s surroundings. This implies an emphasis on the voice as that which is used to enhance  
14 its potentialities for establishing relations between different entities and the world rather than for  
15 creating a sense of autonomy by undermining such relations. With such an emphasis, the idea of  
16 “hearing voices” often becomes a mode of sensorial connection between worlds, as is practiced for  
17 example in certain religious traditions, even in the West, that undermine a type of enlightened  
18 understanding of the senses present in the notion of proper speech (Schmidt 2000) and highlight  
19 instead a hearing that challenges the containment of the sensorial. Underlying this is a radically  
20 different conception of the relation between voice, human, and non-human entities than the one  
21 implied in the ideas of an autonomous subject, music, and language.

22 One of the characteristics of voice, across many different cultures, is its understanding as a  
23 “powerful emanation from the body” (Rosoloto 1974: 76). Voice is of the body, in terms of vocal  
24 chords, but of the world in terms of the substance through which it resonates—air for humans,  
25 water for many animals, for example. As such, it is often used to mediate between different entities  
26 and the world. This often means that voice also has the capacity of “attaching” itself to other ele-  
27 ments, thus it is often subsumed under the idea of language, or music, or representation, obscuring  
28 its particular acoustic dimensions and/or highlighting its ambiguous nature (Dolar 2006). Due to  
29 this capacity, the voice can be used as means for persons to disembody themselves into objects as in  
30 ventriloquism (Connor 2000), to politically navigate the demands of propriety of the body in the  
31 use of a highly sensual expressivity of the voice, something used by female vocalists from different  
32 traditions to exert their vocal authority in the midst of contradictory processes of modernization  
33 and valorization of the body (Weidman 2006, Ciucci 2012, Fiol-Matta 2010), to travel between  
34 human and non-human entities as when animals teach humans songs (Seeger 1987) or when  
35 valued stylistic sonic dimensions appear as spread between human and entities of nature (waterfalls,  
36 mountains) in a mutually constitutive acousticality, to incarnate other worldly beings in a body of  
37 this world as in rites of possession (Matory 2005), or is presumed to represent an autonomous or  
38 unique individual, as in the predominant recent Western philosophical and political tradition  
39 (Weidman 2011). The voice, then, is a force used in different ways for a politics of definition of  
40 entities. But in those instances where the purpose is a politics that does not seek to separate humans  
41 from non-human entities but rather to use it as a mode of echolocation, we have a lesser purpose of  
42 representation than one in which the relation between voice, entities, and “the environment” or  
43 what we call “nature” mutually constitute each other through different practices of voicing.

44 We can then rethink the howling of natives across the history of the colonial empire, as a type of  
45 voicing that is valued precisely because it permitted the appropriation of non-human sounds for  
46 modes of vocalization used in locating oneself in relation to the environment. This is a vocality  
47 used to move between the human and non-human realms in their ontological constitution in a  
48 history of differentiation in which the variation of the human and other entities through the

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1 transformatory possibilities of the voice gains precedence over using the voice as a means of poli-  
2 tical representation of the person. This voice does not exist to “separate” humans from their  
3 surroundings but to enable such a relation. In such a concept, the environment is not something  
4 “out there” to be saved and a “voice” something to be gained or given. Such ontologies politically  
5 imply not “giving a voice” to “the other” (a politics of the representative state) but rather  
6 acknowledging that vocality and echolocality require the mutual constitution of the person and  
7 other entities of nature, that is of the person and the territory. The struggle for indigenous peoples  
8 to keep or regain control of their lands around the world is because the mutually constitutive  
9 political relation between the constitution of the person and other entities of what we call “nature”  
10 is a key political relation, one that makes us rethink that, in a time when neo-extractivist policies  
11 take precedence, such as today, the struggle of indigenous peoples is best understood as one in  
12 which the relation between the politics of the person and that of the territory are mutually con-  
13 stitutive and related. This requires us to acknowledge a different understanding of the voice as that  
14 presented by representative politics. Thus one can think of the history of the colonial as one in  
15 which different metaphysics of the voice, different understandings of the place of the voice in  
16 relating the realms of nature and culture have been historically deployed for different political ends.  
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## 2

# THE AESTHETIC SUBJECT AND THE POLITICS OF SPECULATIVE LABOR

*Marina Vishmidt*

### **Introduction**

The rationale of this chapter is to outline the connection between the contradictions of the social development of artistic labor in capitalism and the formation of the aesthetic subject in modernity as the displacement of labor from the category of art, bringing it into closer affiliation with the speculative forms of capital valorization. I start with a brief survey of how artists have approached and appropriated the politics of labor, following the role of labor within artistic practices in a historiographical and analytic key. Then we will see how the speculative category of real subsumption can function in a discussion of artistic production, allowing us to trace the emergence of the aesthetic subject as a displacement of labor and a reification of an oppositional space—though not necessarily an antagonistic one—to the social relations of capital accumulation and the society of work. This is a space of autonomy that, however, has significant affinity to the “autonomization” of capital from labor. Whereas capital and art once confronted each other as heteronomy and autonomy, now they seem to share a certain utopian vision of an “automatic subject” that can valorise itself indefinitely. This affinity of course has certain limitations—art can at best be a flattering self-image of capital, which is actuated by profit and is thus as far as it can be from the core aesthetic principle of “purposiveness without a purpose.”

Crucial to the determination of how the dialectic between autonomy and heteronomy for art is displaced in the present is the status of the concept of “real subsumption.” Real subsumption plays a central role in accounts of the restructuring of the valorisation processes of capital and their relation to labor as it has developed over time. While we can start by thinking about how artistic production has been differentially “really subsumed” by the industrializing circuits of art markets, fairs, biennials, urban branding strategies, or even education and social services, this should be situated as part of a broader trend. The annexation of art by “culture” and “culture” by the economy has been seen as a symptom of the “seizure” of previously “untouched” areas of subjectivity and social life by the valorization process, or, conversely, the socialization of capital in cultural consumption. Processes such as these have been theorized in terms of the periodization of phases of capital accumulation and of the relation between capital and labor within them. (Endnotes 2010: 140). The developmental tendency, then, for the relation between capital and labor is that labor not only appears more and more, but is experienced as, a

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1 moment of capital. This registers both in the objective parameters of reproduction mediated by  
2 financial rather than welfare state institutions and in the subjective parameters of “human capi-  
3 tal” ideology. Some theorists have also suggested that debt represents a concrete instance of the  
4 change in the class relation wrought by financialization. Insofar as debt has the effect of indivi-  
5 dualizing the subject’s relation to capital – whereas the wage once served as a common basis for  
6 struggle—it disguises the capital relation of exploitation as “self-investment”(Federici 2012).  
7 Thus, the term “human capital” is hardly an ideological vector pure and simple; it simply  
8 describes the structural condition of workers in the era of financialization.

9 The status of class antagonism in this era of “self-investment” also undergoes a significant  
10 change—labor can no longer be affirmed as a positive counter-pole in a vision of a non- or  
11 post-capitalist future. We now need to construct an account of capital formation “from the  
12 inside out,” that is to say, when capital is presupposed at the affective and operative level of the  
13 individual subject insofar as she constitutes a free individual, rather than a worker or any other  
14 socially determined role.

15 To do this, we will need to revisit the autonomy/heteronomy nexus as it has played out in  
16 the emergence of the artistic subject as both the emblematic and oppositional figure of mod-  
17 ernity, internalizing the abstraction of the capital relation as the innermost truth of its existence  
18 in the world. Beyond the “death of art” (Hegel), the artistic (“creative”) subject takes on the  
19 self-expanding dynamism of the “automatic subject” of capital and is advanced as a role model  
20 for all labor. At the same time, the artistic subject marks the division of social labor which  
21 produces art and labor as socially, and even ontologically, distinct institutions. It could even be  
22 said that it is precisely through the dissolution of the artwork into the field of wider social  
23 relations (social, participatory, relational and “invisible” forms of art) that the recuperation of  
24 this dissolution as individual artistic capital is upheld most forcefully, with the artist emerging as  
25 both a de-skilled “service worker” and manager and curator of social creativity or the “general  
26 intellect”(Fraser 1997: 111–116; Buchloh 1990: 105–143; Mattin 2011: 284–307). The artist as  
27 both not-worker and utopian model of labor which mediates these shifts in productive relations  
28 serves as an analogue of capital’s boundless creativity and transformative agency, even or espe-  
29 cially in times of crisis and decline, when this figure takes on oppositional contents within forms  
30 which remain very much the same. As Adorno has noted:

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32 A contradiction of all autonomous art is the concealment of the labor that went into  
33 it, but in high capitalism, with the complete hegemony of exchange value and with  
34 the contradictions arising out of that hegemony, autonomous art becomes both pro-  
35 blematic and programmatic at the same time.

(Adorno 2005: 72).

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38 In this sense, the challenges to art’s autonomy which have themselves solidified into an ortho-  
39 doxy in the past three or four decades have by and large accommodated themselves to the results  
40 of these challenges; that is, a conception of artistic practices and artistic institutions that are more  
41 and more defined by the heteronomy of the market.

42 Artistic autonomy thus becomes a style, a form of “taste” that positions art as a refined con-  
43 sumption of objects and social relations, whose relationship to art’s heteronomous conditions of  
44 existence must be disavowed. These disavowals can take the form of registering unjust material  
45 conditions on a discursive level while reproducing them in the practico-inert everyday of the  
46 institution. The conservatism which generates these disavowals is often framed as a pragmatic  
47 defence of art’s independence and ability to nourish its socially utopian potentials, a stance  
48 which underpins many recent defences of the “bourgeois art institution” from the depredations

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1 of the market. The artist, meanwhile, seems to retain a commitment to autonomy as a  
2 professional standard, though it is now mediated by the character masks of the manager, the  
3 researcher, or ethnographer. This quick typology of the objective parameters of how autonomy  
4 appears in the field of art today centers on the figure of the artist as a figure exempt from the  
5 relations of exploitation that obtain elsewhere in society. The artist is a figure who can be  
6 “autonomous” because she belongs to a productive structure that allows her to appropriate and  
7 produce cultural material as the expression of her subjectivity rather than for profit or survival.  
8 She is beyond the capital relation; she has the enviably protean nature of capital itself—as close  
9 as “human capital” can get to the idyllic state capital imagines for itself as an entity unencum-  
10 bered by labor, regulation or deflating asset prices. In this way, the formal autonomy of the  
11 artist aligns with the “automatism” of capital as engine of accumulation and self-valorization  
12 that both includes and expels “alien” labor.

13 The autonomy of art arises with the autonomy of capital as a central phenomenon of modern  
14 experience. It invents a category of social relation which is not one, a social relation of  
15 exemption—aesthetic judgement or “taste”(Kant 1987: 43–95). This forms a central thread of  
16 what I call “speculation as a mode of production” because it is through aesthetic judgement that  
17 we can come to perceive more clearly the oppositionality of art in its separation from labor and  
18 use-value, an oppositionality very different to the negativity posed by labor, in its character as  
19 the “enemy within” for capital, with a subversive content predicated on its affirmation of use  
20 over exchange. But it may be precisely this underdetermined form of social negativity belong-  
21 ing to art which becomes pivotal when that antagonism is dissolved by the restructuring of the  
22 relations between capital and labor, when the ascendancy of finance sees the very “use-value”  
23 of labor put into question by its main consumer, capital.

24 Concomitantly with the loss of definition for labor, art assumes a new economic centrality as  
25 its indeterminacy is put to work in the more “speculative” modes of accumulation. This  
26 encompasses both the market and the public institutions of art, although the socially reproduc-  
27 tive role assumed by the latter is increasingly destabilized as the legitimization art supplies for  
28 speculative capital is “de-leveraged” through austerity programs.

29  
30 **Is Art Working?**

31 For an adequate understanding of the role of labor in current artistic production, the idea of the  
32 artist as a manager, an engineer of social processes which she may capitalize, needs to be thought  
33 in conjunction with the increasingly pervasive politicization of the artist as a worker: a notion  
34 with many historical antecedents which cannot be explored fully here. The question here would  
35 be what happens when labor becomes not just a thematic or image for artistic production, but  
36 when artistic production is re-imagined as itself a form of labor, and the kinds of political forms  
37 this produces. Artists and cultural workers assuming the organizational forms and demands of the  
38 labor movement such as fair pay and equitable working conditions can be briefly encapsulated in  
39 the history of Artists Unions in the UK and US in the 1970s, the Art Workers Coalition in New  
40 York in the late 1960s to the mid-1970s, as well as current groups such as W.A.G.E. (Working  
41 Artists and the Greater Economy) and the PWB (Precarious Workers Brigade). There is also a  
42 sub-rosa tradition of artists “withdrawing” their labor, such as the Art Strikes initiated by,  
43 respectively, the Art Workers Coalition (1970), Gustav Metzger (1977–1980) and Stewart Home  
44 (1990–93). (See Home 1989.)

45 There are many paradoxes thrown up by redefining artistic production as wage-labor  
46 (however the wage is calculated). One of these might be that the division of social labor that  
47 produces the artist as a separate kind of “non-professional” professional cannot be reconciled  
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1 with a simple agreement that art be valued through the same metrics as all other kinds of work,  
2 particularly when capitalist work across the board is being rendered precarious, contingent, and  
3 self-realizing for everyone on the classically reactionary model of the autonomous (starving)  
4 artist. Yet this fragile homology between artistic labor and labor in general does furnish the  
5 political core of initiatives by artists and cultural workers to organize on the traditional lines of  
6 labor politics. These initiatives seem to multiply at a time when artistic production increasingly  
7 does not result in object commodities, but in ‘services’. As Hito Steyerl (2011) writes, what that  
8 means is that such services are instantly commodified themselves. But are they? While remain-  
9 ing art? Here we can recall Marx’s comment about labor which does not produce use-values:  
10 “If the thing is useless, so is the labour contained in it; the labour does not count as labour, and  
11 therefore creates no value” (Marx 1990: 131). If it was use-value producing labor, it wouldn’t  
12 be art; and, come to think of it, a great variety of waged labor these days hardly produces use-  
13 values either. It is in this light we would have to reinterpret the late conceptual artist Hanne  
14 Darboven’s statement:

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I have a good conscience; I’ve written thousands of slips of paper. In the sense of this  
responsibility – work, conscience, fulfilment of duty – I’m no worse a worker than  
anyone who has built a road.

*(Adler 2009: 106)*

21 In other words, it is no longer self-evident that the type of artwork Darboven was doing—  
22 obsessive and repetitive, logically motivated handwriting—can or should be deemed tantamount  
23 to manual labor in its usefulness, just because so much wage-labor looks and acts like Darboven’s  
24 (though perhaps not as much as Bartleby, the scrivener’s would) and has no pretence to either  
25 diligence, duty, or social utility. Thus labor solely quantified by wages, without a narrative of  
26 social utility apart from “servicing” the financialized infrastructure, cannot be “qualified” by such  
27 traditional virtues, nor can art ennoble itself by drawing an analogy between its dedication and  
28 the commitment of workers.

29 Aware of the thorny conceptual and practical issues besieging the task of quantifying artistic  
30 labor, a group like W.A.G.E. focuses their campaign on the distribution of resources in public  
31 institutions. Dealing with technologies such as contracts, budgets, and certificates of good  
32 practice (and wielding the threat of sanctions from funders) W.A.G.E. is programmatically  
33 challenging the mystification of artistic labor as an “investment’ which may recompense its  
34 maker in the future. They set out to break the cultural tie between artists and (financial) spec-  
35 ulators by repositioning artists as workers: a gesture of another kind of speculation, that is,  
36 speculating about a state of the world different from what it is.

37 This bears directly on the relationship of art-making to speculation as a form of production.  
38 Besides artistic work—whether it is recognized as ‘labor’ or not—unpaid labor in the cultural  
39 sector (typically internships, as well as the more humdrum self-exploitation characteristic of this  
40 work) is paradigmatic of speculation as a mode of production since this kind of labor is pre-  
41 sented as a speculative investment in one’s human capital, with its hallmarks of affective excess,  
42 self-management, and submissive auto-valorization. However, it should not be disregarded that  
43 the prominence of unpaid labor in the cultural sector is more than anything else pointing to the  
44 larger de-valorization of labor in the economy: that is, it is very much an index of a structural  
45 problem of dwindling resources and aggravated social inequality.

46 The strategy of organizing around the means of compensation for artists and cultural produ-  
47 cers reveals a number of paradoxes when seen through the filter of labor politics. The artistic  
48 mode of production is so mystified and individualized that labor regulation could indeed only

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1 be performed by a much more omnipotent state than we are ever likely to have, and even that  
2 would hardly touch on the opaque and unregulated primary and secondary art markets. W.A.G.  
3 E. proposes a form of certification or voluntary code of best practice that arts institutions can  
4 sign up to, indicating their commitment to pay cultural producers properly. What this misses is  
5 first that an unregulated market like the sphere of art production and mediation does not  
6 voluntarily self-police and second, that art institutions operate within a capitalist social space  
7 whose iron law is that the rewards of the powerful few come at the expense of the weak many;  
8 a structural fact not amenable to moral pressure. The professionals at the lowest rung of the  
9 ladder are unpaid so that institutions can function on inadequate budgets; artists don't receive  
10 fees so that there's more money to pay salaries to administrators to fund-raise from wealthy  
11 donors. If one of the distinguishing features of art production is that by and large it is not  
12 organized through the same structures as nor accessible to the same forms of measure as other  
13 kinds of labor, then it is difficult to see how the political forms of labor organization can play  
14 more than a metaphorical role in pointing out certain social injustices of this kind within the  
15 institution of art (van den Berg and Passero 2011: 174–175). Further, this kind of pointing will  
16 swiftly need to point to itself, as the expansion of the art world, however unequal the dis-  
17 tribution of its rewards, is a symptom of extreme wealth inequality, a symptom of vast amounts  
18 of money being accumulated and invested in e.g. the art market and not e.g. in social repro-  
19 duction (Fraser 2011: 114–127). Additionally, as John Roberts and Gregory Sholette have  
20 written, art increasingly functions as a sink for disguised un- and underemployment, as statisti-  
21 cally larger numbers of people try, with varying degrees of success, to monetize their free  
22 creative activity in a hostile economic landscape (Sholette 2010; Roberts 2007).

23 Besides the paradoxes from the side of labor and the commodity, there are also paradoxes to  
24 be found on the side of art. If what is most characteristic of progressive art since Modernism is  
25 to desire the end of art, to dissolve into life, then redefining art as wage-labor fits into that  
26 tradition, while continuing to insist on the cultural exception that determines a price for it as far  
27 as the state and market are concerned – and to accept the power of capital, which ensures the  
28 existence of divisions of labor and classes which defines the whole social existence of art in its  
29 current form. As already noted, this move can mean that the real class divisions that underpin  
30 the maintenance of regimes of paid and unpaid labor, mental and manual labor, art work and  
31 “shit work,” are obscured. Also, the move of construing art as labor reduces art to one of its  
32 dimensions, namely what it shares with all capitalist work: the commodity form. A labor politics  
33 of art boils down artistic production to the “absolute commodity” Theodor Adorno speaks  
34 about (Adorno 2007: 28; Martin 2007: 15–25) or to abstract social labor in its generality,  
35 vitiating the critical inflection art still possesses as “the antithesis of that which is the case”  
36 (Adorno 2007: 159).

37 However, raising the issue of the links between art and labor in the speculative mode of  
38 production can have other, equally if not more urgent, critical and political consequences. Art's  
39 role in social reproduction—the “concealment” of labor Adorno mentions in our epigraph – is  
40 problematized when this role is redefined as labor, that is, as production. This is also the lesson  
41 of the 1970s' feminist Wages for Housework movement, and indeed any instance when a social  
42 relation accepted as natural and exceptional to the laws of market exchange is redefined as  
43 labor, thus alienated, and alienable: political. It is not only a matter of recognition: once the  
44 disregarded is revealed as fundamental, like unwaged labor for the system of waged exploitation,  
45 the relations in that field can be configured anew. On the terrain of art, probably still the most  
46 elegant and symptomatically precise gesture of this kind was the feminist conceptual artist  
47 Mierle Laderman Ukeles' (1969) “Maintenance Art Manifesto” and artwork. Laderman Ukeles  
48 dramatized the nominalist protocols of Conceptual Art when she performed domestic labor as

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1 an artwork, what she called “Maintenance Art”(Lippard 1979: 20–21). Ukeles would bustle  
2 around exhibits with a duster and cleaning fluid, wash the steps of the museum, and hound the  
3 administrative staff out of their offices on her cleaning rounds. The point was that the work of  
4 maintenance made all other kinds of work possible—waged labor, artwork, even “the revolu-  
5 tion.” In proposing a world in which “maintenance” activities were just as legitimately a part of  
6 the art as the objects or even the more ephemeral propositions or documentations that  
7 announced conceptual art, she was suspending the division of symbolic and physical labor that  
8 ensured work and art remained matter and anti-matter, autonomy without a taint of hetero-  
9 nomy. If the daily uncompensated labor performed mainly by women in the household could  
10 migrate to the museum and seek legitimacy as art, then it was no longer self-evident that this  
11 labor was any less “creative” than the kinds of activity hitherto enshrined as art, and no less  
12 public than socially necessary wage-labor. It could even be said that her work synthesized the  
13 political stakes of identifying with “work” at that time (late 1960s and early 1970s) for art and  
14 for the feminist movement, since identifying with work was a way of reaching for some sort of  
15 political collective agency (and, inversely, the political stakes of upgrading housework to art-  
16 work). The debates around art’s relationship to work sounded very similar to the domestic labor  
17 debates; both were seen as taking place outside the social contract of waged labor. This was  
18 correct on one level, a descriptive one. Yet both feminism and radical cultural politics like the  
19 Art Workers Coalition drew their strength from either disproving this premise or mining the  
20 marginality for political effect.

21 As one of the driving forces of Wages for Housework, the Marxist feminist scholar and  
22 activist Silvia Federici, wrote in 1984:

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Yet, the demand for wages for housework was crucial from many viewpoints. First it  
recognized that housework is work—the work of producing and reproducing the  
workforce—and in this way it exposed the enormous amount of unpaid labor that  
goes on unchallenged and unseen in this society.

(Federici 2012: 56)

30 As soon as an activity, and the identity of those who perform it, is alienated in this way, its  
31 stability as a social relation is suspended. In the field of cultural production, it allows the question  
32 to be posed of what it is about the organization of society that impels some to work for no money  
33 whatsoever because the alternatives seem even worse. Considered in a purely formal manner, it is  
34 here that the question of “self-abolition”—of the proletariat, of social existence under the  
35 category “woman” or “homosexual” or “black”—also becomes a question for artistic labor. This  
36 returns us to the decomposition of the class relation discussed in the first part of this chapter. The  
37 relations between the negativity of labor for capital and the political affirmation of labor within  
38 capital can be seen in analogy to art’s heteronomy and autonomy. Art cannot affirm itself as art  
39 within the relations of capital—its autonomy—without using that autonomy to disclose the  
40 horizon of its own erasure, whether that means merging with life (heteronomy) or wider social  
41 transformation (overcoming the autonomy/heteronomy contradiction). It is clear that the ana-  
42 logy between the self-abolition of art and the self-abolition of the proletariat, or other forms of  
43 social self-abolition, is questionable at a greater level of concretion, which would bring into focus  
44 the class relations of art and its “exceptionality.” However, there is the formal correspondence in  
45 the relation of art to capital and unpaid domestic work to capital that looks like a relation of the  
46 “supplement,” that which is necessary but must be depicted as incidental. The constitutive  
47 exception, whether it is reproductive labor in the home or the unquantifiable reproductive labor  
48 of the cultural worker or the serviceable artist: the “under-laborer” who is the condition of

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1 possibility of the system's ability to reproduce itself as a whole, the "work" that must disappear in  
2 order for "the work" to appear, whether that work is the waged worker or the art installation.  
3 A further question here would be how the participatory, post-conceptual and relational art  
4 practices of the past several decades have sought to internalize and exhibit this "work" as part of  
5 "the work" that emerges thereby.

6 How does the social relation of capital mobilize and valorize the desire to be "not-labor" that is  
7 the founding moment of art in the capitalist modernity? How does the artist emerge as a sub-  
8 jectivity which allegorizes the real abstraction of capital, equating ceaseless flux, change, and  
9 competition with personal and social freedom? At the same time, this alignment generates a  
10 negativity which seeks its content in opposition to capital's rule, if not always to its logic, as the  
11 above indicates. As Adorno sketched it half a century ago: art de-functionalizes subjectivities but  
12 only as an exception which proves (even if it on occasion contaminates) the rule. Art is where the  
13 use-value that legitimates social production in a capitalist society elsewhere are suspended. Such a  
14 suspension of use value is performed within the limits set by the accumulation needs of capital,  
15 within and beyond the workplace. It can be contended that it is precisely art's micro-alienation  
16 from productive labor and commodity relations that in the age of creative work, creative industries  
17 and creative cities, acts to socialize capital on the macro-level, fulfilling art's oft-cited role of being  
18 "the commodity that sells all others." Thus, the affect of emancipation and critique that comprises  
19 the "surplus value" of art in this schema is not simply or merely ideological, but wholly structural,  
20 flourishing as it does in an era of seemingly indefinite capitalist crisis.

21 Concomitantly, we might look at how art practices and art parameters have globally become  
22 aligned with the restructuring of labor into ever more arbitrary, placeless, transient, and per-  
23 formative modes of generating value, including even the value of its non-reproduction. By  
24 "non-reproduction" here, I refer to brakes put on expanded social reproduction by debt in the  
25 case of labor (and capital), or, in the case of art, its self-referential continuation beyond, and by  
26 means of, its own exhaustion and ambiguity. So here we can approach real subsumption as the  
27 restructuring by direct integration into capital of arenas of social life that had been principally,  
28 though contestably, separate instances from value accumulation—social reproduction as the  
29 consumption of use-values, art as the production of useless or "higher" values. This heralds a  
30 loss of mediation on the one hand and its proliferation on the other, when capital's media-  
31 tions—financial and managerial mechanisms – expand into and reshape in their own image  
32 instances of relative autonomy where this autonomy has recently become a barrier for further  
33 accumulation, a barrier that comes to seem ever more intolerable in periods of crisis. Thus the  
34 separation of art and labor, premised on the self-consistent identity of each, is transformed by  
35 real subsumption, with the decomposition of the sites and senses of work on the one hand, and  
36 the untenability of proper places and pursuits for art on the other. Hence, the politics stemming  
37 from each also – use versus exchange in the traditional iterations of labor politics, and the cri-  
38 ticality of useless art against reigning use-values in social reality—themselves are hollowed out  
39 by the rationalization that come with real subsumption. This was already the case in the pre-  
40 vious global socio-economic crisis, the one which heralded the onset of the "neoliberal" era. In  
41 the speculative mode of production that has prevailed since then, art's attempts to model or  
42 embody greater social utility itself relied on a vast expansion of debt-financed social spending  
43 and culture-led urban development. A vast array of types of "social speculation" pursued by  
44 means of contemporary art thus claimed critical purchase in the midst of this abundance,  
45 inequitable as it was. The current crisis punctuates, though it cannot be said to introduce a sharp  
46 break into, the self-understanding of such practices. The kinds of supportive infrastructures that  
47 social practice art has dedicated itself to prototyping in recent years seem objectively more  
48 urgent than ever, now joined to an invigorated activist and collectivist impulse in the wake of

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1 Occupy. But if the respective erosions of art and labor come as symptoms of a crisis, can there  
2 be a contestational as well as a palliative reflection on the current situation, and can those  
3 struggles also potentially disclose a re-composition, precisely around the crisis of “value” that  
4 the social forms of art and labor manifest in their own ways?

5 Here, we must be careful to distinguish art’s relationship to real subsumption from the claim  
6 that art itself is really subsumed; or, stated otherwise, art’s conceptual or “imaginary” sub-  
7 sumption and the real subsumption determining labor must be held apart if we are to track how  
8 art and labor converge and diverge in the recent period of capital accumulation, and the shift in  
9 the mechanisms of subsumption this has brought with it. If we refer to the exegesis given by  
10 Marx of the category of subsumption (in its formal and real variants), it will be clear that the  
11 production process of art, as discussed in the previous chapter, is not subsumed at all, neither  
12 really nor formally. I have previously discussed this in terms of art having a relationship to the  
13 value-form while itself not being determined by the law of value; it is this condition of differ-  
14 ence which allows it to have a relationship to the social instance that is thus determined, namely  
15 abstract labor and its concrete articulations. And this, in turn, is what allows us to really situate  
16 art within the speculative mode of production as “speculative labor.” As John Roberts writes in  
17 a recent essay:

18  
19 Artistic praxis certainly plays a part in the accumulation of capital, through opening  
20 itself up to interdisciplinary and environmental forms of situatedness – as I have said.  
21 But as speculative labour art lies outside of the value process: most artists, most of the  
22 time, don’t have to work harder and faster in order to produce a range of prototypes  
23 to a given template and to a deadline.

(Roberts 2012)

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26 My hypothesis is that art’s non-compatibility with the category of real subsumption is clear when  
27 the category applied to the characteristic production processes of art, and that this is important for  
28 reading the specific political potential of art in the speculative mode of production and in capital  
29 in general, with regard especially to its relationship to general “social technique,” as Roberts also  
30 writes. However, if we refer instead to the broader application of real subsumption that has been  
31 outlined so far in this chapter, it is equally clear that we can discuss art as pivotal—again, due to its  
32 specificity as a “non-labor”—to real subsumption seen as a tendential process of capital investing  
33 the whole of social reproduction with its value imperatives.

### **The Specialist of Non-Specialism**

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36 Let us stay with the category of real subsumption as a shorthand for describing the socialization of  
37 capital through mediations outside of the direct site of the wage-relation—the sphere to which  
38 Marx originally applied the term—in accord with contemporary theorists in the Italian post-  
39 Autonomia current, but also other contemporary Marxist currents such as the communization  
40 theorists. “Real subsumption” can be broadly conflated with “speculation as a mode of pro-  
41 duction” according to the preceding definitions I have given this term, insofar as real sub-  
42 sumption in these two currents is often used to designate the absorption of affect and subjectivity  
43 into the capital relation; or, to be more exact, the remoulding by capital of how this subjectivity is  
44 produced. In order to trace how the subject of contemporary work is modified by this kind of  
45 real subsumption into the subject of “human capital” and how that connects to the subject of  
46 artistic labor, we need to specify what kind of subjectivity was created in the division of social  
47 labor under capital between those who go to work and those who make art.



*Aesthetic Subjects and Politics of Speculative Labor*

1           Following on from the general lens that has been established through the concept of real  
2 subsumption, I would now like to focus more closely on the production of artistic subjectivity  
3 within it, as its constitutive exception. In artistic subjectivity (which is more properly called  
4 “aesthetic subjectivity” to encompass the viewer/consumer as well as the producer of art, also  
5 since the classic philosophies of the aesthetic such as those of Kant or Hegel are more concerned  
6 with the viewer), the subject of labor is transformed into the subject of judgment.

7           What follows from this? At first it seems as if we are presented with the artist as a con-  
8 servative figure, where the direct relation to the world or with social reality entered into by the  
9 worker is replaced by a mediated one which is purely reactive; the artist as an empty, abstract  
10 subject who takes no position and who evaluates the world rather than changes it.  
11 Alternatively, we can see the artist as a radical figure, whose formal relationship to the world  
12 is free from the mediations and power hierarchies imposed on the worker, as well as  
13 the entrenched understanding of reality imposed by repetitive alienated labor. This latter is the  
14 artist as the abstract subject of unconditioned freedom who gains a critical purchase on the  
15 world due to her (productive) alienation from its utilitarian reason. As we track the general-  
16 ization of the abstraction of value as pure creative subjectivity in the current moment as spec-  
17 ulative mode of production, we can return to the earliest moments of their contact to  
18 understand what has changed. To what extent was the splitting of the subject of aesthetics from  
19 the subject of productive labor, inseparable from the development of culture in modernity,  
20 already a reaction to the grip of abstract value on social relations? In other words, what are the  
21 subjective grounds for the split between autonomy and heteronomy which makes art possible  
22 in capitalist modernity?

23           Giorgio Agamben has recently located the production of subjectivity as pure abstraction in  
24 the figure of the artist—recoded into the “man of taste,” thus, as indicated above, crossing  
25 between the making and the appreciation of art. He offers an exploratory genealogy of the  
26 subject of aesthetics primarily with reference to Hegel’s philosophy of art. To risk an as yet  
27 unfounded leap, what he discovers at the root of this genealogy is the demand for self-  
28 annulment, a Hegelian imperative of sublation. Can this be placed alongside the communist  
29 revolutionary principle of the “negation of all that exists” and the self-abolition of the pro-  
30 letariat, as noted earlier? That which is nothing but its relation to capital can only overcome  
31 this condition by annihilating the relation itself. For this, there must be a moment of alie-  
32 nation, where what is most concrete is transformed into the most incidental and contingent  
33 (Agamben 1999: 35)

34           For Hegel, the more reflexivity art develops, that is, the closer art gets to philosophy, the more  
35 it renders itself redundant, its proper sphere of activity becoming merely to illustrate, using its  
36 own means, the philosophical endpoints which overdetermine the very possibility of its con-  
37 tinuation as art (Kosuth 1969/1991: 13–32). Art can only realize itself by disappearing. For  
38 Agamben here, following Hegel, art as a specific kind of production of a specific kind of object is  
39 also liable to vanish on attaining to the condition of absolute freedom. It becomes simply dis-  
40 cernment or taste, a capacity for selection. The subjectivity of the artist only registers as the  
41 measure of its own emptiness; or, as the power to choose from “indifferent prosaic objectivity”  
42 and render the selection a proof or example of this subjectivity at work, a purely gratuitous act.  
43 However, when we look at the thematic of such a “self-abolition” for art in Adorno, we  
44 encounter a more relational concept, one whose horizon is materialist rather than metaphysical:

45  
46           Art and artworks are perishable, not simply because by their heteronomy they are  
47 dependent, but because right into the smallest detail of their autonomy, which sanc-  
48 tions the socially determined splitting off of spirit by the division of labor, they are not

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1           only art but something foreign and opposed to it. Admixed with art's own concept is  
2           the ferment of its own abolition.

(Adorno 2007: 5)

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5           With reference to the proposition that what is most characteristic of art in our period is to desire  
6           the end of art, be that in the axiomatic manner of Hegel, or in the performative blurrings  
7           between art and labor in present-day work, art, and social action alike (Rancière 2002, 2004,  
8           2009), it seems that this can also become a transcendental parameter, a criterion, a normative  
9           command. The wish for the end of art can become, or rather has long since become, the primary  
10          principle of its continuation. As Agamben notes, this end is in fact the beginning of autonomous  
11          art. This is testified by the role of criticality as a mark of seriousness and ambition in art as it is  
12          currently produced and taught, even if the ubiquity of such criticality opens itself to charges that  
13          it “adds value” to an otherwise consistently conservative sphere of discourse and practice. For  
14          Adorno, the “foreignness” of art to the reality principle, the very fact that a society based on  
15          exchange-value could find no use for it but to sell and collect it, was already a sign that its  
16          autonomy was potentially realizable: art could help bring about a world in which it no longer  
17          existed as the legitimating exception to the rule of value over the social and natural world.  
18          However, it may be that Agamben's point is more relevant in an era when it is artistic subjectivity  
19          that has been discovered to have a use-value all across the social field, a use-value historically  
20          derived from art's refusal to be art in the era that coincided with Adorno's later years and has  
21          lasted into the present.

22          The content of artistic subjectivity is then its form, the form which emerges from the split  
23          with wage-labor which creates the possibility of “art itself.” The contingent, or “inessential,” is  
24          the primary characteristic of the artist's subjectivity since it is via this that she develops the sin-  
25          gularity of apprehension, or “taste,” which makes of her consciousness a productive form for  
26          any content it might encounter, and enables her to transform this content by means of the  
27          singularity she has cultivated. Production is a moment of consumption, and vice versa. As the  
28          truth of artistic subjectivity is found in this detachment, contingency colors its relationship to  
29          the world in (at least) two ways: the artist's autonomy and the autonomy of her production is  
30          founded in this detachment. It is at once utterly dependent on this detachment for its (non-)  
31          identity, and at the same time retains an agnostic attitude towards it, disavowing dependence  
32          and reifying detachment as the non-specialized specialism that distinguishes art in the social  
33          division of labor. Its scepticism towards content—here for “content” one might speak of con-  
34          stituted social reality, or heteronomy—allows it to approach it as form, thus acceding to its  
35          demands without taking them seriously, as long as there is a possibility of continuing to repro-  
36          duce oneself as an artistic subject within this heteronomy; on the other hand, it occludes the  
37          form-determination of this reality, that is, by the historically specific form of value which has  
38          engendered precisely these objective contents, and delivered them to the faculty of judgment at  
39          the core of artistic subjectivity and artistic labor.

### Conclusion

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43          In this chapter, I have proposed a constellation—with pretensions to a narrative—between the  
44          concept of real subsumption in Marxian theory, and the place of art in social reproduction. I have  
45          further tried to develop what is distinctive about aesthetic subjectivity as it comes to represent the  
46          central character in speculation as a mode of production, once this latter concept has been  
47          articulated with real subsumption as the reshaping by capital of the processes of social  
48          reproduction as well as production and consequently the role art is called upon to play. Art as a

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1 form of “speculative labor” comes both to serve as the model for all kinds of work while  
2 providing a distinctive and desirable prototype of liberated—non-capitalist—labor which can  
3 either be antagonistic or conciliatory. These are two outcomes whose premises are not  
4 determined by the concept of art itself but precisely by what “role it is called upon to play.” The  
5 “politics” of speculative labor, then, inhere both in this and in the detachment of art from use-  
6 value and useful labor, which can only be attained in their capitalist modalities to the same degree  
7 that art and labor can only be irreconcilable in capital, however “speculative” this capital may  
8 become in its operations.

9 We know that capital tends to externalize its costs, and that unwaged and unmeasured labor  
10 is not only the source of value for it (the process transpiring in paid work which expands across  
11 the whole of society with gendered and raced division of paid and unpaid labor, work, and  
12 non-work) but the central mystification that traps people in compulsory activity as an  
13 expression of autonomy. The critical, as well as positivist, division between production and  
14 reproduction in art and in other kinds of labor can obscure this systemic tendency, and end up  
15 calling for an economic recognition that would measure and support both equally, or revalue  
16 one at the expense of the other, ignoring that it is in the interests of profit as a *social* as well as,  
17 or rather than, an economic relation to keep them apart only to bring them together; that is, to  
18 eliminate payment across the board and replace it with a speculative approach to one’s own  
19 activity as (possible) commodity more like that of the artist. Therefore, bringing a feminist  
20 analysis of reproduction to art, reminding us of its formal symmetry with the pure form of value  
21 and thus with capital, is only a first step: to show what it excludes. We need to take the further  
22 step, though one that was often left implicit in the historical instances of reproduction politics in  
23 the feminist movement, such as Wages for Housework. That step would have to be a destruc-  
24 tive one: a challenge to the wage-relation that homogenizes all activity with money, a challenge  
25 to the division of labor that produces art—art as a refusal of work that ends up sustaining the  
26 rule of exploitation as exception, and which itself increasingly is organized according to an  
27 industrialized, customer-facing model. If, as Adorno writes in *Aesthetic Theory*, “only what is  
28 useless can stand in for the stunted use value,” then it is the distorted and attenuated form of  
29 art’s autonomy as a *speculative intransigence to the existing*, including work, that can be the source  
30 of its political powers. And yet, identifying with work, especially with the disregarded and dis-  
31posable subjects of that work, can indeed be the first step for such a politics of artistic inquiry  
32 and making, since capitalist work is structurally the antithesis of capitalist art, even if practically  
33 they sit on the same continuum.

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### 3

# ART AND THE POLITICS OF TIME-AS-SUBSTANCE

*John Roberts*

What unities both classical realism and modernism is a resistance to, and downgrading of, political topicality in art. Both abjure the idea of art chasing the political vicissitudes of the moment in order to secure popularity, clarity of effect or didactic purpose. Indeed, both positions certainly concur on one thing: political topicality invariably leads to the sins of propaganda, moral righteousness and a paucity of affect. In Georg Lukács, for instance, the primary test of the good or successful realist novel is the complex distance it takes from a coarse naturalism and “the petty commonplace superficial truth of everyday life”;<sup>1</sup> this is based, as is well known, on a rejection of literary characterization as the ‘mouthpiece of the Zeitgeist’ (following Marx’s literary reflections). The intellectual physiognomy of character should

go beyond the correct observation of everyday life. Profound knowledge of life is never confined to the observation of the commonplace. It consists rather in the invention of such characters and situations as are wholly impossible in everyday life.<sup>2</sup>

In other words, the compelling realist work instantiates the vivid and distinctive *exception* to the naturalist everyday and taken-for-granted. Similarly in modernist artistic theory it is the transmutation of the naturalistic sign (August Strindberg’s theory of the modernist image and Clement Greenberg’s theory of painterly modernism) that defines modernist painting’s exclusion from the world of everyday appearance and daily cognitive verities.<sup>3</sup> The modernist painting must produce a dishabitation from ‘mere’ descriptive or appellative content. Of course, we know in actuality what all these positions end up producing: an inert classicism, on the one hand, and a modernist teleology of painterly form, on the other, that, in their respective ways, both fundamentally misunderstand and bypass the great technical and cognitive revolution of art and the avant-garde in the first two decades of the twentieth century, reflected in Lukács’ and Greenberg’s adventitious judgements on the avant-garde itself; Lukács preferring Maxim Gorky to James Joyce, and painterly figuration to photographic montage (John Heartfield), and Greenberg, demoting Constructivism, Dada and Surrealism to the level of ‘anti-art’, without any thought to questions of art and praxis, and the problem of art as ‘intellection’ (or ‘abstraction’ in Hegel’s philosophical sense), rather than ‘sensuousness’ per se.<sup>4</sup> Yet, this shared antipathy on the part of a classicizing modernism and realism to the question of topicality and the everyday does point to a fundamental and recurring problem: what is the *time* of the

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1 artwork? In what ways and to what ends is the artwork impactful, when it is released into the  
2 world and the circuits of reception?

3 What classical realism and modernism share is a sense that topicality – or everyday political  
4 relevance – is always temporally self-defeating, insofar as the would-be effectivity or empathic  
5 qualities of such works are always ‘after-the-fact’ given that a work’s political content never  
6 coincides with its projected or ideal audience, and, therefore, is simply an empty signifier of  
7 political *commitment*, rather than an actual and transformative intervention within a political  
8 process. Indeed, because the gap between ‘political effect’ and ‘political process’ is so great,  
9 claims to ‘political relevance’ are just hubris – particularly when such belatedness soon turns into  
10 the ‘political past’ and to the evocations of history. Moreover, as Greenberg and Lukács inti-  
11 mate, this constant dissipation of art’s political effect produces an internal pressure on the part of  
12 realist artists confronted with the iniquities and concerns of the moment, to trade in the clichés  
13 of struggle and resistance in order to secure a life for the image beyond fast-fading topicality,  
14 leading to all kinds of crude cognitive short cuts.<sup>5</sup> Today this presumed ontological gap  
15 between ‘political content’ and ‘political effect’ is most famously pursued by Michael Fried and  
16 Jacques Rancière, in their respective adaptation of Roland Barthes’ late modernist notion of the  
17 ‘pensive’ spectator,<sup>6</sup> who speaks for the ‘freedom’ of the spectator through his or her resistance  
18 to the entreaties of the artwork’s political disclosures and therefore to the would-be instru-  
19 mentalizing production of the viewer as a subject of political truth. (This model is very much  
20 based on Barthes’ dislike of the declarative documentary image holding the spectator to ‘cog-  
21 nitive ransom’ – particularly the atrocity picture; *Camera Lucida* (1982) is his theoretical  
22 destruction of this ‘ransom’).<sup>7</sup> For Rancière the freedom of the spectator (his or her emancipa-  
23 tion) is premised on the intuitivistic assumption that people know all about the realities of  
24 global capitalism and therefore don’t need to be reminded of them; political art or a partisan  
25 politics of art, for Rancière, is a kind of pleonasm.<sup>8</sup> But if Fried and Rancière recognize the  
26 limitations of art’s ‘political effect’, this limitation is turned, as in Greenberg, into a structural  
27 misapprehension of the purposefulness and critical horizons of art’s political function, by  
28 allowing the ontological gap between political content and political effect to stand in for art’s  
29 political value *as such*. As a result this position may legitimately define the limitations of the  
30 political effects and effectivity of art, but it does so without examining what this gap *allows* art to  
31 do politically.

32 The key issue, therefore, is how much the activist position and its ‘pensive’ critics both pro-  
33 duce a reduction of the political. Once the political effects of art are predicated on a model of  
34 immediacy, instantaneity or transparency, naturally, it is no surprise that art is unable to live up  
35 to these criteria in any consistent sense, for each and every artwork ‘arrives late’ in some sense,  
36 that is, arrives athwart the demands and requirements of direct action, given these requirements  
37 and demands necessarily shift and move on. Of course, under certain circumstances this belat-  
38 edness does in fact break down, narrowing the gap between the cognitive disruptions of the  
39 artwork and its possible connection to the political process. We see this most obviously in the  
40 revolutionary or pre-revolutionary moment, or during a period of state crisis (as during May  
41 1968 in Paris or recently in the events preceding, and after, the demonstrations in Tahrir Square  
42 in Cairo in 2012), in which the quickly devised and distributed artwork responds to the  
43 demands and contingencies of direct action, by taking an ideological lead – the poster, street  
44 theatre or documentary film. But overall, this is rare, driven as it is by the requirement of art  
45 under these conditions to embed itself without ambiguity in the political process in order to  
46 meet the political ‘situation’ head on. Hence, this state of exception is not the situation for most  
47 art, most of the time. To assume otherwise – as a number of activist artists willingly do – is to  
48 produce and reproduce the cognitive short cuts, instrumentalities and hubristic ambitions that

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1 the critics of art's 'political effectivity' repeatedly decry. Indeed, on this basis, to derive art's  
2 political function wholly from this state of exception – that is from a sense of the continuous  
3 and chronic crisis of capitalism – is to permanently assert that the time of the artwork is *always*  
4 grounded in the heat of revolutionary time or activist time and any other time – pensive-time  
5 or contemplative-time, the time of the long-view – diminishes the active relation between  
6 artwork and political process. This is why the activist time of the artwork is driven by the need  
7 of the artist to meet the daily demands of the political process; in fact, to find a secure point of  
8 identity with it, for not to do so is to fail the demands of the political process itself. Conse-  
9 quently the outcome of this is art's relationship to politics has no interest in being 'out of time',  
10 for this abandons art to what no politics of art can possibly contemplate without courting  
11 'ineffectualness': temporal delay or invisibility. Precisely because art is able to produce extra-  
12 artistic use-values, it must act on these possibilities at *all* times, *in* time, and assume a directly  
13 transformative role for itself in everyday experience.

14 If this has an air of desperation and hysteria, this is because the relationship between art and  
15 politics in these terms produces a positivistic inflation of art as praxis. In other words, in  
16 assuming there can be no special dispensation for art praxis as opposed to political praxis, art  
17 must always drive to align itself directly with the political process, be cognate with it, on the  
18 basis that the political slogan shouted on the street or printed on a leaflet and the image and text  
19 produced for a publication or for use on a march share a symbolic language. As such, the drive  
20 on art's part for an immediate relevance and functionality suffers from a fundamental temporal  
21 *impatience*, that fails to relativize both the temporality of art *and* political praxis, as a necessary  
22 condition of the emancipatory capacities of art and the production of an emancipatory politics  
23 of time. This is why this kind of openness to temporal compression derives from an activist  
24 indifference to the atemporal labours of art itself, to the fact that the job of art under capitalism  
25 is not just to return a picture of capitalism to capitalism, but to make the free labour of art a  
26 space of resistance to the temporal pressures of the value-form (a pressure which politics itself is  
27 unable to escape).

28 There is another kind of temporal functionality at stake for art, therefore, under these condi-  
29 tions. The true functionality of art's emancipatory force lies not in its daily symbolic and  
30 political contestation with capitalist reality – as part of a counter-hegemonic struggle it can't  
31 possibly win – but in its non-identitary value, those long-range strategies of negation and  
32 counter-imaginary disaffirmation, that refuse or step outside of the historical reifications and  
33 temporal compressions of the capitalist value-form and capitalist work-time itself,<sup>9</sup> and that  
34 point to a time beyond the production of value. Competing politically on value's terms,  
35 therefore, by constantly traversing the intensity of the moment and capitalism's production of  
36 the everyday, weakens the very thing that art and revolutionary politics are able to share: a  
37 withdrawal from the centripetal pressures of the moment and 'relevance' in order to produce  
38 use-values that are not at the behest of instrumental or capitalized reason, of transparency and  
39 immediacy. Thus stepping aside, stepping back from, withdrawing, disappearing, finding the  
40 renewal of speech in silence, is not the temporality of artistic quietism or political muteness, but  
41 a space where the work of non-identitary production can be done. For it is in this space that  
42 the extensity and expanded research conditions of art as the negation of capitalist temporality  
43 (compression, repetition, foreclosure; the dead time of commodity-time) can be produced and  
44 secured. Winning the 'open-time' of research-time for art, then, is crucial in enabling art to  
45 produce a range of critical and non-compliant use-values that generate a complex normativity  
46 for praxis. And this has been the fundamental epistemological and ontological drive of the  
47 avant-garde in the twentieth century down to today, through the conjunction of general social  
48 technique (post-medium specificity) and art's participation in the collective intellect.

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1           The avant-garde is not a succession of non-painterly styles, but, rather, a struggle over art's  
2 emancipatory place in the division of labour. Thus the appropriation of time – of research  
3 time – as a centrifugal and extended time is where art makes its emancipatory and cognitive  
4 stand in a culture where the instant judgement-at-glance, the instant political intervention, and  
5 means-end accounting and effectivity prevail. Hence art praxis and political praxis cohere not  
6 under the exigencies of the political process as such, but under the critical space of the research  
7 programme as the laboratory and political crucible of art's negation of the value-form. The  
8 temporal compression of art praxis *into* the moment and intensity of the activist confrontation,  
9 then, is not actually the problem here: art praxis, at some points and under certain conditions,  
10 needs to open itself up to these forms of spontaneity in order to drive art and politics toge-  
11 ther – for maximum clarity of effect. Activist praxis is certainly correct on this. But, under the  
12 day-to-day operations of capitalist culture this compression is a manifestation of how the  
13 political use-values of art are easily confined to a weak and enfeebled concept of art praxis as  
14 representation. By 'beginning and ending' in direct political action the actionist model fails to  
15 see how complex normativity in art actually derives *from* the productive gap between the  
16 temporality of art praxis and the temporality of political praxis. Art praxis functions as political  
17 praxis not on the basis of its emancipatory identity with direct action, but on the basis of its  
18 emancipatory *withdrawal* from the logic of the commodity's temporal compression and  
19 acceleration. In other words if art's time is a time that is 'out of joint' with the calendrical time  
20 of value-form, it also out of time with the assumption that the best way to confront the  
21 compression and acceleration of this calendrical time is by operating in its (linear and  
22 centripetal) space.

23           Hence art praxis-as-research practice is the name I give here to the antipodal form of this  
24 calendrical logic; that is, it seeks to produce a temporal space of production and reception for  
25 the artwork that require the kind of affective and cognitive skills on the part of the artist and  
26 spectator, that negates both the compressive space of the capitalist sensorium and its compressive  
27 activist counter-force: a centrifugal space in which the artist, artwork and spectator (and other  
28 future spectators) are part of an unfolding and dispersed process, whose counter-hegemonic  
29 content is built and shaped by those who participate in the production and reception of the  
30 work and its extension into other research contexts. This is not counter-hegemony as a model  
31 of activist disclosure, but as a form of *Bildung*; of art as a space of re-functioned subjectivization;  
32 of political *self*-transformation as a condition of a collective process of learning. 'We don't need  
33 life as a work of art, or the work of art as life. We need a total reassessment of what art can give  
34 us and how it becomes part of our everyday life', as Chto Delat put it.<sup>10</sup> As such this centrifugal  
35 space for art is by definition a post-medium one; a space in which the concept of the 'art in the  
36 expanded field' loses its morphological and sculptural characteristics as 'installation art', to  
37 become the technical transformation of the conditions of art's temporal and spatial possibilities  
38 as such, as was the readymade before it.

39           The time of the research programme and the centrifugal conditions of art's post-medium  
40 condition – its dispersed production and reception – is the time of art's reception, then, pulled  
41 out of its familiar compressed 'judgement at a glance'. Post-1960s neo-avant-garde art and film,  
42 of course, drew on this as the defining principle of its anti-spectacularity (as in Andy Warhol  
43 and Bruce Nauman). But today such formal extensity cannot in and of itself secure the living  
44 time of an anti-calendrical temporality. Six-hour marathon films or videos of repetitive gestures  
45 or movements, or mundane events – the spectacle 'slowed down' so to speak – have become a  
46 pathologized and aestheticized (and as such an interminable) antipode to temporal impatience,  
47 cognitive compression and judgement at a glance. This is why my understanding of centrifug-  
48 ality in the contemporary post-medium artwork, with its disparate constellations of meaning,



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1 cognitive discursiveness, has little in common with the mere extension of the artwork's dura-  
2 tion; centrifugality is not simply the negation of instantaneousness. Rather, as the space of *Bil-*  
3 *dung*, it is where art-praxis as research is both enacted and made legible as time-as-substance,  
4 that is, the space where the cognitive particularities of art are given palpable form and therefore  
5 made amenable to those who are willing to give over their time to the 'distracted' and  
6 'incomplete' character of the process. 'Giving over time', accordingly, is an active force here  
7 and not a masochistic act of perseverance in the face of the extreme durational forms of early  
8 neo-avant-garde work. It is a 'learning space' in which the production of a counter-  
9 subjectification is the outcome of the beholder's affective investment in the centrifugal and  
10 distracted conditions of the work's reception.

11 The intersection of praxis-as-research in production and centrifugality-as-beholder research  
12 in reception, therefore, defines a kind of readerly ideal horizon of art's temporality in a cultural  
13 context where compression and speed are fused to the instantaneousness of aesthetic judgement,  
14 and where the fast cut and the cognitive switch within network culture weaken thinking and  
15 judgement at a distance. The issue, therefore, of art's living temporality, is crucially a question  
16 of the artist's or group of artists, enacting in a discursive and 'unfinished' form, the extended  
17 temporal conditions of praxis-as-research. For it is precisely through this unfinished exchange  
18 between the research immanent to the work, and the (undecided) research interests of the  
19 beholder/participant, that the temporality of the artwork can secure a working space of resis-  
20 tance and noncompliance with the prevailing commodity-time and as such, in turn, contribute  
21 to the production of a politics of time-as-substance. Non-compliance or temporal obstinacy<sup>11</sup>  
22 becomes, therefore, not a matter of masochistic perseverance, or contemplative embeddedness,  
23 but of cognitive *extensivity*, in which the time of the artwork is the time of its extension by the  
24 beholder/participant into living social relations. This is a temporal situatedness, then, that avoids  
25 the epistemological trap of defining the time of the artwork simply through its singular con-  
26 frontation with the time of compression. Art's relationship to *Bildung*, consequently, is closer to  
27 primitive cadre building in which artists, beholder/participants and future beholder/participants  
28 (as artists or non-artists) participate in an extended community of producers and users in which  
29 the time of art's production, and the time of its reception, establish an emancipatory connec-  
30 tion. Situatedness, in these terms, provides the extended material conditions for the temporal  
31 life of art praxis-as-research.

32 Where and how art praxis situates itself in relation to political praxis and the political process  
33 is therefore crucial. In pursuing the temporal conditions of the research programme under the  
34 routine conditions of capitalist reproduction, art is necessarily both *behind* and in *advance* of the  
35 political process. This is because there has to be a gap or fissure between the time of art's  
36 production and reception and the actualities of the production of art as a mode of political  
37 engagement in order for art to do its non-identitary and negative work. Otherwise the praxis  
38 of art is indistinguishable from the compressive means-end rationale of non-aesthetic reason  
39 and therefore from the language of determinate 'results': the neo-liberal language of account-  
40 ability and activist impatience alike. Consequently, reason in art is the cognitive, representa-  
41 tional and praxiological *work* art does on those conditions and structures of foreclosure and  
42 compression, as the constitutive means by which art is sustained as an open-ended and  
43 speculative research programme.

44 The asymmetry between the 'time' of art praxis and the 'time' of political praxis is an  
45 emancipatory one, then, insofar as it registers art's fundamental place within the critique and  
46 displacement of time of the value-form as the time of measure. Capitalism must always restore  
47 time-as-measure (value) at the same as it destroys, time-as-substance (the interrelationship of  
48 past-present-future; time as cooperation).<sup>12</sup> Indeed, capitalism kills time as a condition of

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1 reifying time-as-measure. But the very fact that time-as-measure has to restore itself reveals how  
2 uncertain and contested time-as-measure actually is. It can never permanently enforce its con-  
3 ditions of reproduction, given that the real subsumption of living labour is never permanently  
4 secure. This is because the time of production is the time of cooperation – and not machinic  
5 linearity – the time-of-measure is always under threat. In fact, one of the fundamental contra-  
6 ditions of the present period is that capital’s attack on the mass, factory-based labour militancy  
7 of the 1970s, through the neo-liberal reorganization and disaggregation of the labour force, is  
8 that it released new forms of collectivity and exchange at the point of production, which  
9 workers in the new service and cognitive sectors have willingly taken advantage of. Now, this  
10 does mean that time-as-measure is being destroyed ‘from within’, as some post-operaist think-  
11 ing presupposes.<sup>13</sup> Capital’s analytic instruments are constantly being renewed and refined across  
12 the new service sector in order to deal with living labour’s (relative) erosion of time-as-measure  
13 released under the new conditions of production.<sup>14</sup> But nevertheless, time-as-cooperation as  
14 time-as-substance is the obstinate and immanent force that makes a politics of time indivisible  
15 from any revolutionary post-capitalist perspective. Art praxis-as-research, therefore, is the self-  
16 conscious manifestation of this time-as-substance. But this is not because today’s avant-garde has  
17 a coherent ‘politics of time’ or claims to operate in solidarity with the organized working-class.  
18 Rather, the expansion of art praxis-as-research is the consequence of art’s transformed place  
19 within the intellectual division of labour. Under neo-liberalism’s pressure to transform the free  
20 labour of art into abstract labour, on the one hand, and the dissolution of art into actionism or  
21 aestheticist compliance, on the other, reflection on time-as-substance has become crucial to the  
22 survival of art’s (socialized) autonomy. The ‘politics of time’ immanent to living labour’s resis-  
23 tance to time-as-measure necessarily converges with art’s resistance to the cultural and political  
24 forces of temporal compression. This is why the fundamental struggle for any politics of art  
25 today is not the struggle for representation or praxis alone, but for the radical untimeliness or  
26 atemporality of art’s conditions of production and reception as such.

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## 4

# THE CHOREOPOLITICAL

## Agency in the Age of Control

*André Lepecki*

### 1.

In an interview published under the title “Control and Becoming,” Toni Negri asked a pointed question to Giles Deleuze: “Why is the relation between movement and institution always problematic?” We could expand Negri’s question with the following one: given the problematic relation movement and institution then. How can dance and choreography contribute to an understanding of the political in our times? Is it at all possible that these particular forms of artistic expression may offer ways to approach, analyze, critique, and perhaps re-invent the political dimension, one that seems always somewhat beyond the reach of danced actions, choreographed bodies, staged movements, and representational behaviors? And, if we decide to answer positively to these questions, how can we then consider the specificity of dance and choreography’s relations to the political? How can we move away from the somewhat generic formula offered by Jacques Rancière over the past decade or so that equates art and politics in the current “aesthetic regime of the arts” with one another given their sharing, according to the French philosopher, of the same constitutive “kernel” or “element” he called “dissensus”?<sup>1</sup>

I would like to pursue these questions by aligning them with an overview of some developments in experimental choreography over the past two decades. What I will be proposing is that the many tensions emerging between choreographic imperatives (or the illocutionary force of the score) on one hand, and their execution by dancers (or the materialization through labor, of those scored imperatives) on the other, reveal a particular political-aesthetic dimension that reflects, refracts, and attempts to answer one of the crucial questions of our times: how to claim agency for our movements and actions within our highly (even if subtly) choreographed societies of control, societies where, “nothing is left alone for long”? (Deleuze 1995: 175).

### 2.

Even if we agree with Rancière’s terms, the generic nature of his approach cannot offer a full account of the specificity of dance and choreography’s contributions to both thinking and producing the political dimension. The aesthetic specificity of dance and choreography includes: corporality, the ongoing tension between presence and absence, a high degree of ephemerality in the witnessing and production of the dance piece, the display of dance’s workers as laborers serving

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1 the work of dance, the calibration of movement and stillness in the general economies of per-  
2 ception and valuation, and the activation of historicity thanks to dance's deep relation to trans-  
3 temporal and trans-spatial transmissibility. These elements, when bundled together as necessarily  
4 constitutive of dance and choreography, prompt us to ask under which guises and dynamics, under  
5 which velocities and stillnesses, bodies and gestures, regimes of presence and regimes of absence, acts  
6 and non-acts, objects and techniques, words and spaces does *a choreographic dimension of the political*  
7 *emerge*. A dimension that, by emerging, subverts, reinvents, and liberates some overdetermined  
8 views on what constitutes "dance" and "choreography" but even more importantly, I would claim,  
9 liberates overdetermined, cliché understandings of the "proper" political dimension in which our  
10 lives and actions seem to be trapped, pre-defined, regimented, and policed.

11 This quest for dance's particular connections to the political informs Randy Martin's crucial  
12 argument—in his groundbreaking book *Critical Moves*—that the task for critical dance studies is  
13 to "explore not simply the politics of dance but also *what dance has to offer politics*" (Martin  
14 1998:14, emphasis added). Noting that dance's contributions can never be set "a priori" and  
15 require instead particular and detailed approaches to the material and historical conditions under  
16 which dances and choreographies emerge, Martin nevertheless identifies two points of articula-  
17 tion that bind the political to the choreographic. According to him, it is because dance acti-  
18 vates bodies (even if activating stillness) and demands from those bodies a commitment to action  
19 that "the study of dance can help one appreciate the context for 'mobilization' and 'agency'"  
20 (14). Moreover, for Martin, this "political specificity" characteristic of dance overflows the  
21 boundaries of aesthetic confinement to reveal "an entire political horizon" (14). It is towards  
22 this political horizon that I would like to move, by taking the question of agency (or dancing)  
23 within formations of pre-established movements (or choreography) as an entryway to analyze  
24 and map the conditions under which contemporary power builds its particular forms of  
25 entrapment—the entrapment (filled with movement!) Gilles Deleuze called, after Michel Fou-  
26 cault, "control societies" (Deleuze 1995).

27 Moving through dance and choreography towards a broader political horizon, yet always  
28 bound to localized forms of danced expressions, requires supplementing Martin's view with  
29 Andrew Hewitt's intriguing, somewhat misunderstood, often critiqued, but extremely useful  
30 concept of "social choreography," which Hewitt defines thusly: "I use the term social choreo-  
31 graphy to denote a tradition of thinking about social order that derives its ideal from the aes-  
32 thetic realm and seeks to instill that order directly at the level of the body" (Hewitt 2005: 3). As  
33 an ideological apparatus that derives from the aesthetic realm images for implementing social  
34 order that are subsequently reified and then forcefully inscribed in and through bodies in  
35 motion (the dancer's body, the people's body), choreography becomes for Hewitt a non-  
36 metaphorical concept, one that crisscrosses the aesthetic formation of corporeal disciplines and  
37 gestural systems with social expressions of those formations. As Hewitt concludes:

38  
39 dance has served as the aesthetic medium that most consistently sought to understand  
40 art as something immanently political: that is, as something that derives its political  
41 significance from its own status as praxis rather than from its adherence to a logically  
42 prior political ideology located elsewhere, outside art (6).

43  
44 Hewitt's book is concerned primarily with modernist dances from the late 19th century and  
45 early 20th century (Vaslav Nijinsky, Isadora Duncan, Ruth St. Denis) and with the ways  
46 gesture, mobility, and bodily control (or lack thereof) are represented in the literature of that  
47 period (Honoré de Balzac, Oscar Wilde, Jean Cocteau). But Hewitt's insistence on the  
48 *non-metaphoric dimension* choreography offers in its capacity to account for, discern, and

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1 critique the multiple forces at play within formations of power (and within power's  
2 structures of imagining, producing, and reproducing pre-determined, policed, or normative  
3 modes of moving and behaving) is quite helpful in any analysis of how dance impacts the  
4 political by reinforcing the centrality and materiality of the dancer's agency.  
5

6  
7 **3.**

8 Dance and choreography display and practice how bodies get to be mobilized as well made  
9 passive. Both show how *dispositifs* orient gestures and subjectivities. In this way, both offer ways  
10 to identify those elements that momentarily, yet quite literally, inform the “movement” com-  
11 ponent in the expression “political movement.” And even though, as Mark Franko recently  
12 suggested, “dance [ ... ] does not operate directly in the political sphere, and thus dance is not  
13 strictly speaking political” (Franko 2007: 14), we can still insist on the fact that dance and  
14 choreography simultaneously *express* the political conditions under which it materializes, *and*  
15 produce and “carr[y] inevitable *political effects*” (14, emphasis added). Franko's particular under-  
16 standing of the ways dance and choreography participate (or not) of the political realm obviously  
17 begs the question of defining what the “political sphere” might indeed be. The only way that,  
18 for me, Franko's statement makes sense, is if his notion of the “political sphere” is defined (or  
19 confined) by the conglomerate of policy-making institutions and agencies, by legislative and/or  
20 executive activities, and by the counter-activities of non-governmental/legislative social actors  
21 such as unions, political parties, professional organizations, lobbyists, etc. If this is the case, if this is  
22 indeed Franko's particular understanding of the political sphere, then his statement on the limits  
23 of dance's operational capacities within such sphere makes sense.

24 However, countering this particular understanding of politics as the set of daily activities per-  
25 formed by macro-political professional agents, another definition of the political can be offered.  
26 This would be an understanding of the political that refuses, indeed, radically resists, being con-  
27 tained by the daily business of politicians (and parapoliticians) and the busybodies of policymakers  
28 (even in corporate life). This other definition of the political invokes a dimension of similarly  
29 incessant, but certainly much more invisible, minor, or micropolitical daily labor (usually sub-  
30 stantially performed away from, and against, the interests of institutional politics) of carefully re-  
31 reorienting life, art, affect, desire, the corporeal, the incorporeal, the gestural, the linguistic,  
32 movements, actions and voice towards ever more emancipatory, joyful, ethical, and co-responsive  
33 modes of living—individually and collectively. This other understanding of the political dimen-  
34 sion (perhaps forever virtual, perhaps forever utopian, but certainly not centered around the per-  
35 manent issuing of policies and always minoritarian) remains that broad horizon one must keep in  
36 mind in the minutely daily negotiations that fabricate, out of bodies and out of gestures, the sin-  
37 gular potentialities of micro-political movements. Recently, Fred Moten and Stephano Harney  
38 offered such a vision of the political, which they called “planning” in contradistinction to “policy”  
39 (Moten and Harney 2013). We could define their notion of “planning” as a kind of soft, non-  
40 authoritarian, choreography, predicated on the notion that a (micro)political life takes place  
41 against and away from the constant urge to fix life, remediate life, set life in balance that obsesses  
42 the policy-driven politician. Departing from a more explicitly choreographic point of view, Erin  
43 Manning also offered recently another articulation of this alternative political horizon: “Politics: a  
44 tentative attentiveness to the conditions through which an event expresses itself, a tentative con-  
45 structing toward a holding in place of a distributed relational movement, an attending, in the  
46 event, of the how of its deformation” (Manning 2013: 148).

47 This particular definition of politics, of the political, is what both dance and choreography  
48 offer to an expanded vision of what constitutes *political movement*. A movement requiring a

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1 choreographic imagination taking the dancer, the choreographer, and their audiences away  
2 from certain predetermined images of what such a movement is supposed to look like, to sound  
3 like, and to move like – regardless of whether this movement takes place inside or outside the  
4 boundaries of art. To this expanded vision of the relations between movement and politics I  
5 like to call “the choreopolitical” (Lepecki 2013).  
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The formations of the choreographic are many and varied—expanding dance beyond the field of the esthetic. To understand nonmetaphorically the political nature of choreographic practices is to embrace what Paul Carter once called “a politics of the ground” (Carter 1996)—one always attentive to the *concrete placing* of all the elements that constitute and form, animate and orientate, each specific dance situation (including supposedly asignifying or extraneous elements to the work, such as climate, political regime, accidents, local laws, geological formations, and so on).

Within this framework, I have recently been exploring the tension between the concepts of “choreopolitical” and the concept of “choreopolicing.” The dynamics between the two are crucial for an understanding of the dynamics between movement, conformity, revolt, and politics in our neoliberal and neocolonizing times, when it is imperative to reimagine the ways movement and political protest find new articulations, expressions, and intensities for themselves. Very succinctly, the notion of choreopolicing derives directly from the understanding that Jacques Rancière’s notion of “police” (which he opposes to “politics”) is essentially a choreographic one. We can think here of how Rancière affirms that the police is not only an institution, or an individual cop, but a whole system that assigns and maintains bodies, subjects, and their modes of circulation to preestablished spaces, considered the only ones *proper for (proper) circulation*. In other words, the police is whatever system that enforces the fiction forming the path that precedes the subject. Such precedence helps shape subjectivity thanks to a confined or impoverished experiencing of mobility within the social space—subjectivity is gained by conformity to fit the path assigned as proper. To this system, or abstract machine Rancière gives the name “police.” In contradistinction, choreopolitical movement would not be just “improvised” or “free” movement, which would be a weak definition of both politics and movement. Rather, choreopolitics extracts from choreography the capacity to make plans (plans of immanence as much as plan(e)s of composition) able to function simultaneously as cartography of policed ground, mapping the situation, as much as being able to propose and activate what Gilles Deleuze and Félix Guattari call “programs” as “motor experimentation” (Deleuze and Guattari 1987: 151). Inspired by Stefano Harney’s and Fred Moten’s *The Undercommons*, particularly through their distinction between “policy” and “planning,” choreopolitical planning rescues choreography from being understood only as synonymous with normativity, as prescribed or forced mobility, or as a system of command and obedience (all of which certainly are part of choreography, historically as well as esthetically). Since, for Harney and Moten, “planning” is always diagrammatically unfolding, since it always takes place away from those places where the most prized subjectivity is to be a busybody permanently defining the other as in need of being fixed through permanent policy-making, since it is a practice of joyful sociability, then choreopolitics would be the planning of such activation of movement away from pre-established paths. Choreopolitics is predicated on a gathering and activation of that urgently necessary (but so often curtailed, censored, or controlled) capacity to make plans for alternative collective modes of existence, away from conformity, sad affects, tamed (even if hyperactive and “vital”) bodies, prescribed routes, which define choreopolicing.

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1 With a new understanding of movement and politics, dance and choreography can rear-  
2 tulate the political itself so that politics may also reimagine itself alongside a refigured under-  
3 standing of dance and a refigured understanding of choreography. In this mutual rearticulated  
4 reconfiguration, the main energy, impetus, and motions are whatever is needed to break free  
5 from the neoliberal agitation of permanently controlled circulation and from the contemporary  
6 microfascist formations of individualistic, intra- and interpoliced collectives.

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10 But the question remains: what is at stake in this choreopolitical reimagining of the political? It is  
11 here that the tensions between choreography and dance (or rather, the tensions between systems  
12 of commanding movement and subjectivities for executing those commands) should be analyzed  
13 in order to discern the limits of agency in our control societies.

14 Let us start with the question of choreography, or rather, with the question of choreography as  
15 commanding force. William Forsythe once referred to classical ballet as an “art of command” (in  
16 Franko 2007: 16). If this is the case, it follows that to dance within the choreographic regime is to  
17 embrace an art of obedience. Indeed, the question of obedience and command are central for the  
18 very possibility of choreographic transmissibility. A specific work will not reemerge back into visi-  
19 bility unless its dancers agree to follow, as strictly and as correctly as possible, the authorial com-  
20 mands/commandments that fix the work as *that* specific work. It is the necessity of diminishing as  
21 much as possible any divergence in execution, of maximally reducing any possibility of dis-  
22 obedience, that has defined choreography as a very strict disciplinary apparatus. Dancers are trained  
23 to fulfill the technical requirements of certain movements, but they are also trained to surrender a  
24 certain degree of their autonomy as agents for movement. Again Franko citing Forsythe: “William  
25 Forsythe has recently identified the connections between dance and politics in the relation between  
26 dancer and choreographer in that *the choreographer curates the dancer’s autonomy*” (16).

27 The interestingly chosen word “curating” camouflages as much as reveals the dynamics at  
28 stake: to curate means to care, but also to care under the force of a transcendent principle of  
29 sovereignty, under which bodies dance inasmuch as they surrender their autonomy, or delegate  
30 it, to the choreographer. Curating masks a perverse “taking care”—very far away from the  
31 attending Manning defined as constitutive of the choreopolitical dimension. When the chor-  
32 eographer “takes care” of the dancer’s autonomy in her stance, his caring gains a theological and  
33 juridical connotation very close the one that defines the power of the sovereign. According to  
34 the *Oxford English Dictionary (OED)*, the “curator” is first of all: “A person appointed as guar-  
35 dian of the affairs of someone legally unfit to conduct them him- or herself, such as a minor, an  
36 insane person, etc.”. Second, the curator is: “One who has the cure of souls,” has custody over  
37 one’s animus, animation.<sup>2</sup> In other words: in order for choreographers to curate autonomies, an  
38 institutional unconscious logic of “underage” or “unreasoned” dancers must be in place so that  
39 choreography may be executed under a sovereign (authorial-commanding) force. It is here that  
40 the question of the dancer’s agency within systems of command, curating, and control emerges  
41 as essential to help us rethink our current political imagination and help us plan on how to  
42 move (or not) inside and outside its domain.

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44 **6.**  
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46 Between the mid-1990s to the mid-2000s several choreographic works explicitly aimed at  
47 deconstructing, analyzing, and critiquing choreography as representational apparatus that confines  
48 and orientates both dancers and audiences within a narrow regime of perceptibility and valuation.



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1 The most relevant examples include several of French choreographer's Jérôme Bel's pieces: *Jérôme*  
2 *Bel* (1995), *The Last Performance* (1998) and the extraordinary *Véronique Doisneaux* (2004),  
3 commissioned by the Paris Opéra. In all of these works, choreography appears as an element to  
4 be reckoned with, compositionally and politically, and therefore it appears under a very precise  
5 definition, as a powerful *dispositif* that truly distributes the sensible and predetermines behaviors  
6 and perceptions according to a double logic revealed by the writings of Jacques Rancière and  
7 Giorgio Agamben on art and politics. If Rancière establishes that different aesthetic regimes must  
8 be defined according to their distinctive capacities to operate dissensually (i.e., to create art objects  
9 that specifically explore and expand the fissures of representation), or to operate consensually (i.e.,  
10 fill in the gap between what is being shown and what is possible to be said of what is being  
11 shown), Agamben defines the notion of "*dispositif*" according to a logic that is fully corporeal and  
12 choreographic. For Agamben a *dispositif* (or "apparatus" as it is problematically translated into  
13 English) is "literally *anything* that has in some way the capacity to capture, orient, determine,  
14 intercept, model, control, or secure the gestures, behaviors, opinions, or discourses of living  
15 beings" (Agamben 2009: 14). Affirming that our contemporary world is one where *dispositifs* take  
16 command, one where every single *thing* orientates and conditions behaviors, gestures, and pos-  
17 tures, Agamben posits that to live as subject in this world is to exist in a generalized system of  
18 permanent gestural/corporeal/behavioral domination. I would call this domination "choreo-  
19 graphic" invoking once again William Forsythe's insight of choreography as art of command. It is  
20 this condition of choreographic domination that was clearly identified by Bel's works mentioned  
21 above. Thus, experimental choreography became a critical cartography tracing the conditions  
22 under which *dispositifs* precondition dance, through choreography, to be an art of conformity—  
23 where dancers perform not only according to disciplinary forces, but where the whole logic of  
24 composing is under the spell of a tight distribution of the sensible that demands no fissures or  
25 divergences in what dance is supposed to represent – in other words, choreography is posited as a  
26 form of policing dissensus, of choreopolicing (Lepecki 2013).

27 And yet, Bel's works also reveal the (political and critical) paradoxical status of choreography.  
28 By having choreography critiquing choreography as *dispositif*, it follows that choreography  
29 contains in itself the critical capacities and principles of performing its own disobedience. Bel's  
30 work reveals how choreography already offers in itself and through itself the potential for own  
31 undoing its own sovereignty—as long as theoretically and compositionally bound to a com-  
32 mitment to the choreopolitical dissensual. This commitment is already the emergence of agency  
33 from within the most constricted or tight spaces for movement, it is the insurrection of auton-  
34 omy, finding ways for choreography to re-elaborate itself as a movement away from sovereign  
35 "care" or choreographic curating. Again, as Manning writes, what matters is how "in the dan-  
36 cing of the form's outdoing of itself" one "literally make[s] a place for the political" (Manning  
37 2013: 147).

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40 7.

41 The paradoxical (yet constitutive) possibility for choreopolitical critiques of choreography through  
42 choreography complexifies the field of the political in dance—since now the question of agency in  
43 choreography can no longer be understood as simply affirming or enacting the ever-present  
44 potential for the dancer to deviate from, or disobey, the choreographic imperative. It is then the  
45 question of understanding (and redefining) *what is the status of the imperative in choreography*. The  
46 imperative is double sided. It is, on one hand, obviously demanding, commanding, authoritarian,  
47 and disciplinary. As Cleo Condoravdi and Sven Lauer explain: "A directive utterance of an  
48 imperative (I) expresses a certain content related to the addressee's future actions; (II) conveys that

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1 the speaker wants the content to become reality; and (III) acts as an inducement for the addressee  
2 to bring about the content” (Condoravdi and Lauer 2013: 38). The imperative demands: “Jump!,”  
3 or “Jetée, followed by fouetée six,” or “Stand and urinate in place, then walk upstage,” or “Stand  
4 still center stage as other dancers throw tomatoes at you.” This is the transcendent, godly,  
5 sovereign-magic or choreographic-sovereign function of the imperative: “imperatives can be used  
6 by magicians, gods, and other agents of supernatural powers to bring about the thing they  
7 ‘command’: [ ... ] Stand up and walk!” (49). But on the other hand, the imperative can also be  
8 *ethical*. It reminds one of what truly matters in the act and passion of committing oneself to  
9 bringing into the world a difficult, collective task. For instance, the commitment to dancing so that  
10 a work-event may come into the world through shared labor. All it takes to get to that other side  
11 of the imperative is to treat the same illocution (“Jump” or “Stand up and walk”) no longer as a  
12 command but as a verb in the *infinitive*. This small difference (from imperative to infinitive) enacts a  
13 radical, indeed political alteration of the verb function. Deleuze aligns the infinitive to the power  
14 of the event, since “it is not true that the verb represents an action; it expresses an event, which is  
15 totally different” (Deleuze 1990: 184). “Jump” then becomes not the imperative command of  
16 sovereignty but the impersonal occasioning for an event to be expressed, actualized, brought into  
17 the corporeal. Politically speaking, the question then is to deviate from blind obedience to a  
18 personal commanding voice (total discipline to authorial authority) towards a commitment to an  
19 impersonal force called the work-event. Would there be no commitment there would never be  
20 the possibility of affirming a work, as each dancer could simply not show up for the evening’s  
21 performance, or dance another choreographer’s piece instead of that evening’s assigned work, or  
22 come up with infinite varieties of gestures and non-gestures that had nothing to do with the  
23 choreographed story. Would there be infinite obedience, infinite conformity, there would be no  
24 dancing. Certainly there would be no political dimension. As Hannah Arendt writes in *Introduction*  
25 *into Politics*: “To speak in the form of commanding and to hear in the form of obeying” cannot be  
26 “considered actual speech and hearing” (Arendt 2005:118) since both happen through a com-  
27 mitment to action that defines the political dimension as an exercise in shared freedom.  
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## 8.

31 In an interview with Toni Negri titled “Control and Becoming,” Gilles Deleuze tells us that,  
32 “there is a whole order of movement in ‘institutions’ that’s independent of both law and  
33 contracts” (Deleuze 1995: 169). This movement, both autonomous in relation to (explicit) law  
34 enforcement and to (implicit) social contracts, is both ethical *and* political—even when it takes  
35 place within authoritarian institutional spaces and disciplined institutionalized forms of mobility.  
36 This is why, countering Agamben’s notion of *dispositif* as gestural command, Deleuze shows that  
37 in our current control societies it is within movement itself (be it macro-institutional movement,  
38 or micro-political movement) that resistance takes place: “our ability to resist control, or our  
39 submission to it, has to be assessed at the level of our every move” (176).

40 Deleuze reminds us how after World War II the disciplinary model of power is replaced by a  
41 control model: “the most perfect form of domination, extending even to speech and imagina-  
42 tion” (174). But it is important to note that Foucault, in his essay “Governmentality,” also tells  
43 us that “discipline,” despite being a distinctive characteristic of the era of governance, replacing  
44 the “sovereign power” of the prince, does not totally disappear in the late 20th century—just as  
45 sovereign power also does not totally dissipate with the advent of disciplinary power: “we need  
46 to see things not in terms of replacement of a society of sovereignty by a disciplinary society of  
47 government and the subsequent replacement of a disciplinary society by a society of govern-  
48 ment; in reality one has a triangle, sovereignty-discipline-government, which has as its primary

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1 target the population and as its essential mechanism the apparatuses of security” (Foucault 1991:  
2 102). More than thirty years after Foucault wrote those lines, and twenty years after Deleuze  
3 wrote his notes on control societies, the overlapping of the three forms of power (sovereignty,  
4 discipline, control) is the norm in western democracies: sovereign power is exemplified by the  
5 extent to which executive orders and commands are essential to punish, kill, maim, and torture  
6 those deemed enemies of the State; disciplinary power appears in the increasingly more incar-  
7 cated populations of the West (concentration camps, migrant camps, as well as prisons); and  
8 control power is enacted by all sorts of governmental security agencies as they permanently  
9 track citizens and non-citizens in their daily activities, just as these populations introject (self)  
10 tracking to the very core of their subjectivity, each individual becoming his or her most astute  
11 (self)controller.

12 It is telling then that after the decade of works concerned in exploring and dismantling the  
13 very tools through which choreography sets itself up as *dispositif*, we start seeing works over the  
14 last five to six years, where what matters is to affirm dance reclaiming its force and autonomy  
15 within choreography. In Jérôme Bel’s *Disabled Theater* (2013), also presented at Documenta  
16 XIII, what takes the actors’ bodies away from all perceptions and assigned identities as “mentally  
17 impaired” bodies is the sheer force of dancing. Here, something bigger than control takes over  
18 and reshuffles the whole perceptive/representative fields, dancing spilling over fixed notions of  
19 what is a dancer, what is choreography, and what is to live. In Turkish-German visual artist  
20 Nevin Aladag’s *Dance Occupations*, that she started to create circa 2008, large groups of all sorts  
21 of people (sometimes a hundred people) occupy without warning quiet public spaces to start  
22 dancing wildly to no music—from ordinary cafes in Berlin to the most formal occasions like  
23 openings of biennials and opening speeches during international festivals. In both these recent  
24 cases, the main question is not the choreographic critique of choreography but to experimentat  
25 with the force and limits of *the dancer’s agency* within choreography. Can we say that these  
26 choreopolitical dancing practices intervene directly on the political sphere? I believe they can  
27 and already do—at least at two levels. First, by performing before our eyes the possibility of  
28 enacting a commitment to a different kind of activism, fully political, because engaged in a  
29 movement that works for the actualization of an event. This activism stays away from the stif-  
30 fling apparatuses and micro-fascisms of activist politics. Second, choreopolitical practices offer an  
31 altogether different experiencing of the very constitution of the political – away from its con-  
32 finement to electoral cycles and policy-making decisions, to a much broader quest for a political  
33 life as a collective experimental exercise that brings into the world that impersonal force called  
34 “a work,” or event.

35 It is also telling that several of these recent works have been taking place in the dark, where  
36 one may dance away from the panoptical-disciplinary model, but also from the (self)control  
37 constant (self)surveillance entails. In Tino Seghal’s *This Variation* (2013) for Documenta XIII, a  
38 large room in pitch darkness was the inviting, welcoming space of optical relief and corporeal  
39 freedom to experiment dancing away from the assemblage that control power creates in its  
40 enforcement of full visibility. Mette Ingvartsen’s *Artificial Nature* also choreographs impersonal  
41 motions in the dark. While in Brazilian choreographer Marcelo Evelyn’s *Suddenly Everywhere is*  
42 *Black with People* (2012), the dark field extends itself onto the bodies of the dancers, covered in  
43 pitch black paint, all rubbing against each other in a massive mesh, creating an amalgamated  
44 collective where nothing seems to exist except a shared persistence to enact an emergent,  
45 chaotic, meta-stable, co-existence of which we are invited to partake.

46 Whether critiquing the choreographic dispositive through choreography’s critical potential,  
47 or affirming the event through the agential capacities of the dancer, choreopolitical works  
48 express—speculatively and compositionally—another conception of the “political sphere.”

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1 In this sense, they echo Brian Massumi’s insight that “practices we call doing politics, and  
2 practices we call doing art are integrally aesthetico-political, and every aesthetico-political  
3 activity is integrally speculative-pragmatic” (Massumi 2011: 12&-13). Dancing wildly, dan-  
4 cing in the dark: enactments of alternative sociabilities, materializing choreopolitical imagin-  
5 ings away from control.  
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## Notes

- 36 1 “If there exists a connection between art and politics, it should be cast in terms of dissensus, the very  
37 kernel of the aesthetic regime” (Rancière 2010: 140). This is why Rancie?re can define the political in  
38 aesthetic terms, to claim the political literally as “an intervention in the visible and the sayable” (37).  
39 2 “curator, n.” OED Online. December 2013. Oxford University Press. [http://www.oed.com/view/](http://www.oed.com/view/Entry/45960)  
40 [Entry/45960](http://www.oed.com/view/Entry/45960) (accessed February 5, 2014).  
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# THINKING CONTRADICTIONARY THOUGHTS

## On the Convergence of Aesthetic and Social Factors in Recent Sociologies of Art

*Eduardo de la Fuente*

The novelist F. Scott Fitzgerald is said to have remarked that the test of a ‘first-rate intelligence’ is the ‘ability to hold two opposed ideas in the mind and still retain the ability to function’ (cited in Sullivan, 2010: backcover). It is striking how often discussions of ‘art’ and ‘society’ have produced the opposite effect: namely, an inability to think about the aesthetic and the social simultaneously. But – as I argued in a recent article (de la Fuente, 2007a)<sup>1</sup> – the sociology of art has finally started to move from consolidation (which, in some respects heightened the tension between aesthetic and social approaches) to a period of self-questioning and, then, innovative attempts to map the aesthetics-sociality nexus. The label I gave to this new style of social science writing about the arts is the *new sociology of art*. Its emergence suggested that debates about aesthetic and social factors were starting to mature and were finally approaching the mode of thinking, which Eviatar Zerubavel (1991) terms the ‘flexible mind’. Indeed, I will draw upon Zerubavel’s (1991: 3) account of different styles of cognition, or the ‘process by which we cut up the world’, to explain some of the reasons why the convergence of aesthetic and social factors has taken so long to achieve in sociological writing about art.

Arguably, until the 1970s and 1980s, many mainstream sociologists had regarded social scientists studying the arts – to quote a major authority in the field – ‘as intellectuals and radicals, but not really *proper* sociologists’ (Zolberg, 1990: 51). Then during the 1970s and 1980s, we saw the emergence of several professional associations including the Social Theory, Politics and the Arts conferences (1974), the International Sociological Association Research Committee for the Sociology of the Arts (1979) and the Culture Section of the American Sociological Association (1987) which provided a home for many American sociologists of the arts. This period of institution-building also saw the publication of texts that were to quickly become ‘canonic’: Howard Becker’s (1982) *Art Worlds* and Pierre Bourdieu’s (1984, 1996) *Distinction* and *Rules of Art*. If there was something like a dominant paradigm during the period of disciplinary consolidation it would have been the ‘production of culture’ perspective (Peterson, 1976). Within this framework, even apparently isolated or experimental artists could be shown to be embedded in systems of social relationships or the logic of the ‘art world’ or ‘field of cultural production’. According to the perspective in question, sociology ought to study the conditions

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1 that 'shape the success of artists, the critical esteem they enjoy and the material rewards they  
2 receive for their work' (Tanner, 2003: 69). The approach was emulated by researchers studying  
3 circuits of cultural production as different as New York visual art avant-gardes (Crane, 1987)  
4 and the development of country music as a distinct genre (Peterson, 1997). The wide applic-  
5 ability of the theory contributed to the sense that the sociology of art was, during this period,  
6 operating under conditions approaching the kind of consensus that Thomas Kuhn (1962) asso-  
7 ciated with so-called 'normal' science.

8 Needless to say this 'coming-of-age' narrative constructs the pre-history of the sociology of  
9 art in a very specific way; one that differs markedly from other social sciences, such as anthro-  
10 pology. As Mary Douglas (1982: 105) has remarked, 'One of the major differences between  
11 anthropology and sociology is that ... there has never been a period when anthropologists have  
12 not had a fashionable approach to the materials and art forms of the civilizations they study'.  
13 One could extend the argument by suggesting that sociologists have also been much more  
14 anxious than their anthropological cousins regarding the commensurability or otherwise of  
15 humanistic and social scientific, Enlightenment and Romanticist worldviews (see Gouldner,  
16 1973; Stocking, 1998). Writers who are not easy to pigeon-hole in terms of humanistic and  
17 social scientific approaches have often not fared well within either sociology or the sociology of  
18 art – especially as the latter sought to cement itself.

19 Thus, sociologists writing about the arts tended to write as if their field had no pre-history  
20 to speak of. In her *Constructing a Sociology of the Arts*, Vera Zolberg (1990: 29–52) tends to  
21 reinforce this view and one of her chapters is titled: 'Why Sociologists Have Neglected the  
22 Arts and Why this is Changing'. While there is some truth in the claim that social scientists  
23 have perhaps been not too interested in aesthetic topics, to suggest an absence of art-minded  
24 sociologists necessarily involves ignoring: (a) European social theorists and sociologists of the  
25 'classical period' who wrote about art and/or aesthetics (Weber, 1958; Simmel, 1968, 1994,  
26 1997, 2005; Tarde, 1962; Lukacs, 1994, 2009); (b) the pragmatists and other North American  
27 social theorists who also penned significant texts on art and the aesthetic experience (Dewey,  
28 1958; Mead, 1964); and (c) disciplinary 'misfits' who – despite attempts to professionalize and  
29 specialize sociological reflection – sought to maintain strong ties between social science and  
30 aesthetic/literary forms of analysis (e.g., Graña, 1989, 1994; Martindale, 1963; Duncan, 1962;  
31 Nisbet, 2006; Brown, 1977). It would require a sociology-of-knowledge approach to the  
32 history of the field to account for why many of these offerings did not achieve 'canonic'  
33 status amongst sociologists. But, if one wanted a simple hypothesis as to why a Simmel or a  
34 Dewey were not seen as part of the pre-history of the field it might be that such authors  
35 didn't make a strong argument for a sociology of 'art-as-such' (Abrams, 1989). An aesthetic  
36 sociology is not quite the same thing as the sociology of aesthetics, a distinction that sociol-  
37 ogists have been far too keen on preserving (see Gronow, 1998: ix–xii).

38 The situation, therefore, by the 1980s was one involving disciplinary consolidation but one  
39 attained at a cost: namely, a more trenchant separation between aesthetic and sociological forms  
40 of thinking; and a tendency to exclude aesthetically minded sociologists from the pre-history of  
41 the field. The apparent animus towards aesthetics amongst sociologists of the arts (at least during  
42 the period of consolidation) is exemplified by the following claim in the 'Preface' to Becker's  
43 agenda-setting *Art Worlds*:

44  
45 I remind readers who find them offensive that the principle of analysis is social organiza-  
46 tional, not aesthetic ... This approach seems to stand in direct contradiction to the  
47 dominant tradition in the sociology of art, which defines art as something more spe-  
48 cial, in which ... the essential character of society expresses itself ... The dominant

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1 tradition takes the artist and art work, rather than the network of cooperation, as  
2 central to the analysis of art as a social phenomenon ... In light of this difference, it  
3 might be reasonable to say that what I have done here is not the sociology of art at all,  
4 but rather the sociology of occupations applied to artistic work.  
5 (Becker, 1982: x–xi)

6  
7 The formulation ‘social organizational’ rather than ‘aesthetic’ could be questioned in Becker’s  
8 case given that it is a leading figure in the field of ‘visual sociology’; and also given that the  
9 writings of humanists such as Charles Seeger, William Ivins, Arthur Danto, Michael Baxandall  
10 and Barbara Herrnstein-Smith are central to the framework advanced by *Art Worlds*. But,  
11 whether intended or not, the sum result was that ‘[d]uring the 1970s and 1980s both dominant  
12 theoretical orientations and positivistic methodological scruples discouraged sociologists from  
13 paying serious attention to the aesthetic form and cultural patterning of works of art’ (Tanner,  
14 2003: 208). The same author notes that the dominant paradigm during this period was that the  
15 ‘success of particular artists and art movements was attributed not to the aesthetic properties and  
16 resonances of the works of art but to the economic and political power of prominent gatekeepers’  
17 (Tanner, 2003: 208). Looking back on the production of culture perspective one might surmise  
18 that the *raison d’être* of the sociology of art was – in a manner reminiscent of Emile Durkheim’s  
19 (1982) formulation of sociology as the study of ‘social facts’ – that sociologists ought to explain  
20 phenomena in a fundamental manner to psychologists, art historians and philosophers. In an  
21 article critical of this type of disciplinary specialization-cum-imperialism, David Inglis (2005)  
22 describes the ‘tacit assumptions’ of the sociology of art thus:

23  
24 Despite the variations between different positions within the sociology of art, there is  
25 nonetheless an identifiable ‘meta-discourse’ that unites all these strands ... I would  
26 argue that the idea that there is really no ‘art’ per se, but that the very word ‘art’ is a  
27 label put on certain things by certain interested parties (intentionally and unin-  
28 tentionally), has become the default position in sociology.  
29 (Inglis, 2005: 99)

30  
31 These ‘tacit assumptions’, paradoxically, lead to a reification of the object of study. The socio-  
32 logical study of art became, on the whole, the empirical or applied counterpart to what in  
33 philosophical aesthetics had come to be known as the ‘institutional theory of art’ (Danto, 1964;  
34 Dickie, 1974). Thus, Paul Willis (2005: 74), correctly in my view, criticized this version of  
35 the sociology of art for ‘fail[ing] to acknowledge that far from being explicable only as a bounded  
36 and delimited entity synonymous with “art worlds”, “aesthetics” is actually contiguous and  
37 continuous with the overall flow of everyday life’. The same author went on to suggest that by  
38 equating art with the specialized activity of people called ‘artists’, and the institutions of the ‘art  
39 world’, the sociology of art was, paradoxically, ‘help[ing] to reproduce the fallacy that “aes-  
40 thetics” is synonymous with ... so-called “high culture”’ (Willis, 2005: 74). I argued along similar  
41 lines in another article suggesting that the sociology of art needed to deal with the messy social  
42 practices that weren’t confined to the institutional ‘shell’ of established art worlds:

43  
44 [A]rt is now embedded in a range of ‘socialities’. We might undertake a tour of  
45 regional galleries or artists’ studios while on a ‘Sunday drive’; or, when visiting a for-  
46 eign metropolis, spend much of our leisure time looking at art and bring home a  
47 poster or designer object from the museum shop. During either art experience we are  
48 also likely to consume food, wine, coffee, or simply absorb the ‘ambience’ provided

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1 by the cultural spaces. We may well ask: where does the art experience start and stop  
2 or stop and start? If the sociology of art does not want to leave such topics to  
3 economists, cultural geographers or experts in ... branding/marketing ... it needs to  
4 show that the sociology of art is much more than the study of things that are socially  
5 valued as art.

(*de la Fuente, 2010: 224–25*)

6  
7  
8 By the mid-2000s, there were significant cracks starting to appear in the apparent disciplinary  
9 consensus that Inglis had highlighted. Indeed, in the very same volume as Inglis' article criticizing  
10 the 'tacit assumptions' of the sociology of art, Robert Witkin (1995, 2005), who had for some  
11 time been seeking a rapprochement between sociology and art history (1995), proposed to place  
12 aesthetic perception at the heart of what he termed 'A "New" Paradigm for the Sociology of  
13 Aesthetics'. Witkin suggests the sociology of art should study the perceptual values that shape the  
14 'ideational work' carried out by artworks. He argues that as the 'work of art is an organization of  
15 *perceptua*', and perception is achieved through 'the body of the *subject* in and through sensuous  
16 means', perceptual relations and perceptual 'truths' need to be at the centre of a sociology of  
17 aesthetic life (Witkin, 2005: 64). Witkin makes the point that the 'haptic', 'optic' and 'somatic'  
18 modes of picturing reality entail very different semiotic requirements and distinct forms of social  
19 value. His central message is sociologists of art 'need to consider the *process of ideation*, the mode of  
20 constructing reality, and the way in which important values are thought under given social  
21 conditions' (Witkin, 2005: 58–59).

22 Witkin was not alone. Tanner (2003: 208), who has practised his sociology of art from the  
23 vantage point of an academic position in an archaeology programme, gladly announced that  
24 various recent 'surveys and position-papers in the sociology of art' had started calling for the  
25 'integration of art-historical methods in the sociology of art'. For him, this also signalled that  
26 'sociological methodology has started to explore ways in which the "soft" qualitative forms of  
27 style and visual analysis in art history' could be operationalized alongside "'harder" sociological  
28 methods of measurement and data-collection' (Tanner, 2003: 208).

29 But, it wasn't only authors interested in philosophical aesthetics and art history that, by the  
30 2000s, were starting to take the relationship of 'soft' aesthetic and 'hard' socio-economic factors  
31 seriously. There were microsociologists like Tia DeNora (2000; 2003) who were using ground-  
32 ed ethnographies to show that music is intimately connected with all sorts of everyday actions  
33 in very tangible and affective ways (e.g., the use of music in aerobic classes, the popularity of  
34 karaoke evenings or the use of music in retail settings). And, then, there were the writings  
35 of material culture scholars such as Harvey Molotch (2004: 372) whose methodological princi-  
36 ple was that the 'specific "feeling" an object gives off helps to constitute what indeed it is in  
37 social terms'.

38 This is a long way from Bourdieu's (1993: 139) famous quip that '[a]rt and sociology are not  
39 good bedfellows'; as well as his scathing attitude that the concept of aesthetics can be used as a  
40 proxy for class-based taste. In Bourdieu's schema, and for the production of culture perspective  
41 more generally, art and aesthetics are things to be explained sociologically – 'dependent' vari-  
42 ables which require a positing of 'independent' variables such as class, inequality and power. By  
43 contrast, Molotch's (2003) *Where Stuff Comes From* advances the argument that we need to  
44 suspend a 'chicken and egg' approach: 'We are with form and function, with art and econ-  
45 omy ... There are no independent variables in this analytic henhouse' (Molotch, 2003: 88).

46 So what happens to aesthetics in a conceptual world where there is no chicken and egg  
47 dilemma? One could surmise that a very important implication is that aesthetic factors do some  
48 of the socio-cultural work that sociologists often attribute to other variables. It is worth quoting



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1 from Molotch's *Where Stuff Comes From* at length to gauge just how much the sociology of art  
2 landscape had changed in such a short period of time:

3  
4 For me, there is no limit to the excitement that even ordinary experience can generate  
5 when artfully invoked. stormy nights, sexual thrill, a flowerpot, eating Rice Crispies,  
6 coming home from school, and all art one has ever seen. Something becomes art  
7 through achieving in the viewer an intense lash-up of connotations, a congealing that  
8 gives emotional force even to details like a certain physical curve, minor indentation,  
9 or nipplelike bump ... To at least a degree, this is also how a good toaster works.

(Molotch, 2003: 56)

10  
11  
12 In what I have called the 'new sociology of art', then, aesthetic and social factors came to be seen  
13 as co-constitutive or as two sides of the one sociological coin. Even authors such as Becker were  
14 by the mid-2000s leading the charge against sociological reductionism, arguing that analyses that  
15 'simply invoke class, race, organization, or any other commonly summoned "social variables" ...  
16 sets the artwork apart from, places outside of, the social process' (Becker, Faulkner and Kir-  
17 shenblatt-Gimblett, 2006: 3). This comes from the 'Editors' Introduction' to a collection entitled  
18 *Art from Start to Finish* – another milestone in the new sociology of art. What this volume makes  
19 clear is that the key issue for sociologists is not just what sociologists do with the aesthetic but also  
20 how they conceptualize the social. To conceptualize the social as a pre-given set of structural  
21 'variables' is to render it 'mysterious' and unexplainable when all 'social process refers to'–  
22 contend Becker, Faulkner and Kirshenblatt-Gimblett, 2006: 3 – is 'people doing things together'.  
23 These same authors added: 'Art is social not because social variables affect it but because it is the  
24 product of collective work, the work that all these different people do' (Becker, Faulkner and  
25 Kirshenblatt-Gimblett, 2006: 3). Obviously, in an era where we have started to rethink what  
26 agency means we might want to extend this formulation to include human and non-human  
27 actors doing things together (see Latour, 2007); and also give equal weight to things that are  
28 experienced in virtual domains (Knorr Certina, 1997). But, the point, that the social is a process  
29 rather than a reified category, still stands.

30 To summarize: by the time I had penned my 2007 article on the 'new sociology of art', it  
31 was apparent to me and to others that the sociology of art had gone from being marginal to  
32 possessing disciplinary credibility; and that, after an initial outburst of sociological determinism,  
33 if not disciplinary imperialism, a new sensibility was emerging where 'art' and 'social life' were  
34 seen as co-dependent and co-produced. Most importantly, the sociology of art – in my opi-  
35 nion – had started to move beyond seeing itself as much more than the study of things which  
36 hang in art galleries or which have come to be socially valued as art.

37 But something happened that forced me to think more conceptually about this process of  
38 separating and linking the aesthetic and the social. I was asked to reply to a programmatic  
39 article that had had reached a very different set of conclusions regarding the state of play of  
40 the field and where it ought to go next. The programmatic article was penned by Georgina  
41 Born (1995, 2005), a noted ethnographer of cultural institutions such as the IRCAM music  
42 centre in Paris and the BBC. Born's (2010: 174) article asserted that little progress had been  
43 achieved with respect to a 'reprochement between sociology and the humanities' or in  
44 navigating 'between the extremes of decontextualized microanalytical studies and macro-  
45 structural theories'. The exceptions were 'Janet Wolff who from the early 1980s ... [had] laid  
46 the groundwork for a sociological aesthetics' and anthropologists such as Michaels, Feld,  
47 Myers and Pinney who, according to Born, were seen as providing analyses where 'the  
48 exegesis of the object is so roundly elaborated, including aesthetic qualities and their historical

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1 conditions, that it envisages or elicits cultural criticism' and questions of value 'are not  
2 foreclosed' (Born, 2010: 175, 188). The article concluded by suggesting that what the  
3 sociology of art needed was an 'interdisciplinary dialogue with the arts and humanities by  
4 providing a richer repertoire of methodological and conceptual resources to inform critical  
5 discourses and processes of judgment-making than before, generating a thicker discursive field'  
6 (Born, 2010: 198).

7 Let me state from the outset that I consider any argument in favour of thinking the aesthetic  
8 and the social in tandem, and which asks sociologists to consider how anthropologists have often  
9 done a better job of doing a social science of aesthetic forms, to be right on the money. How-  
10 ever, I found myself differing from Born in three important respects: firstly, I thought some of  
11 the exemplars she pointed to had not quite reached the kind of synthesis between aesthetic and  
12 sociological analysis that I and many others were hoping for; secondly, I felt she was too critical  
13 of the field in that what I was calling the 'new sociology of art' was doing some very innovative  
14 work that breached the aesthetic-social divide; and, thirdly, I wasn't sure that it was necessarily  
15 the job of sociologists to contribute to an 'interdisciplinary dialogue' that helped to produce a  
16 'thicker discursive field' in which to better make judgements about aesthetic value. The history  
17 of the social sciences is littered with examples of well-meaning attempts at interdisciplinary dia-  
18 logue; and, in any case, I fear that I don't have either the training or the hermeneutic ability to  
19 engage in serious artistic or cultural criticism.<sup>2</sup> As a disgruntled, but very well-known, perfor-  
20 mance theorist bellowed at a conference I was presenting at: 'When you sociologists start talking  
21 about artworks you always sound like second-rate art historians'. Ouch!

22 I have now come to believe that the question of bringing aesthetics and sociology into  
23 meaningful dialogue with each other has very little to do with the capacity of sociologists to  
24 emulate philosophers or art historians. Rather, it requires an act of intellectual bridging; one that  
25 is cognizant of conceptual boundaries and how they work. Boundaries are, up to a point,  
26 meaningful and productive. It's what we do with them that matters. We might hypothesize that  
27 the reason why aesthetic and social factors have proven difficult to think in tandem has some-  
28 thing to do with how we 'cut up' the world. There are conceptual reasons as to why the  
29 sociology of art has found it difficult to 'have its cake and eat it too'.

30 As one of the finest writers theorizing boundaries in intellectual and everyday life, Zerubavel  
31 (1991: 2-3, 203) claims, these constructs 'usually manage to escape our attention' and the best  
32 way to make them visible is to 'suspend our usual concern with what they separate and focus  
33 instead on the process by which we cut up the world'. His analysis starts from the premise that 'to  
34 discern any "thing", we must distinguish that which we attend from that which we ignore'; and  
35 that the opposite is also true in that 'color-blindness' and 'camouflage' involve 'entities that are  
36 not clearly differentiated from their surroundings' and are therefore rendered more or less 'prac-  
37 tically invisible' (Zerubavel, 1991: 1). Zerubavel (1991: 2) refers to the meaningful entities that are  
38 created by boundaries as 'islands of meaning' and adds that boundary-making necessarily cuts the  
39 thing being perceived 'out of the flux of human existence'. The author borrows from the field of  
40 visual perception to explain how framing something is also an act of decontextualization:

41  
42 Such discontinuous experiences of reality presuppose a fundamental distinction  
43 between 'figures' and 'ground' within which they are perceptually embedded ... The  
44 images of figure and ground, of course, are visual, and vision 'is our intellectual sense  
45 par excellence ... Sight gives us a world of discrete objects' ... Like their visual pro-  
46 totype, all mental entities are experienced as insular 'figures' that are sharply differ-  
47 entiated from the ocean surrounding them.

(Zerubavel, 1991: 6)

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1 The will to analyse, or felt necessity to slice up reality into manageable chunks, is deeply  
2 embedded within the scientific outlook – an outlook that fields such as sociology pro-  
3 blematically share. The analytic outlook is not without advantages. Zerubavel (1991: 116)  
4 comments that by ‘killing context’ and ‘searching for laws that are independent of context’,  
5 modes of intellectual inquiry such as ‘laboratory research’, ‘statistics’, ‘algebra’, ‘geometry’ and  
6 ‘formal logic’ have produced ‘great intellectual achievement’. But he adds that ‘[b]eing able to  
7 focus ... inevitably presupposes wearing mental blinders’ (Zerubavel, 1991: 116). The result is  
8 ‘tunnel vision’, ‘intolerance for ambiguity’ and an inability to recognize that the entities we  
9 have separated are constructs of our own making, ‘figments of our own mind’ (Zerubavel,  
10 1991: 116)

11 Now, sociologists will protest that they are masters of relating things to context so these  
12 criticisms will not apply to them. But sociological analysis also routinely removes from things  
13 from the flux of life; and the ecological continuum in which entities are embedded. This aspect  
14 of sociological thinking was remarked upon by Georg Simmel (2005: 87) in his book on  
15 *Rembrandt* where he compares a way of doing portraiture that is ‘a *sociological* one, consisting of  
16 being different from others’ (which Simmel associated with Italian Renaissance portraiture) to  
17 the style of representing the individual as an ‘organic totality’ (which Simmel associated with  
18 Rembrandt). For Simmel (2005: 89), depicting the subject of a painting as a sociological type  
19 removes the person or object being depicted from the ‘total stream of life leading toward it’. He  
20 labels this mode of painting sociological because it reminds him of that ‘habit of thought’  
21 whereby social categories are given a ‘mysterious quality’ outside, and above, actual social pro-  
22 cesses (Simmel, 2005: 92).

23 The anthropologist Tim Ingold (2000: 15) follows a parallel critique of sociological  
24 reductionism when he compares cultural relativism to perspective in painting. He suggests a  
25 ‘perspectival’ method ignores the ‘ecological continuum’ that binds form and perception,  
26 knowing and feeling:

27  
28 The anthropological claim of perceptual relativism – that people from different cul-  
29 tural backgrounds perceive reality in different ways since they process the same data of  
30 experience in terms of alternative frameworks of belief or representational schemata ...  
31 is not unlike ... perspective painting, in which the scene is depicted from a point of  
32 view which itself is given independently of that of the spectator who contemplates the  
33 finished work ... The anthropologist, surveying the tapestry of human cultural varia-  
34 tion, is like the visitor to the art gallery – a ‘viewer of views’. Perhaps it is no accident  
35 that both perspective painting and anthropology are products of the same trajectory of  
36 Western thought.

(Ingold, 2000: 15)

37  
38  
39 If Simmel thought that Rembrandt was the best example of a painter who had managed to escape  
40 the logic of analytic differentiation and reductionist explanation, for Ingold and Zerubavel it is  
41 the Dutch graphic artist M. C. Escher who appears to have made the ‘conceptual leap’ into seeing  
42 similarities and connectedness where things appear separated. Zerubavel (1991: 98–99) claims that  
43 in Escher’s images the analytic differentiation between figure and ground, thing and non-thing  
44 disappears, and new insights are obtained with respect to the boundaries between things and how  
45 things ‘flow’ into one another. Ingold (2000: 17) says of woodcuts such as *Day and Night*, which  
46 was finished by Escher in 1938, that they show how ‘recognizable and familiar features of the  
47 environment, such as houses, fields, a river, flying swans’ are more alike than we realize. It is  
48 through things like symmetry and contrast that we make sense of forms. By showing that things

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1 that are unlike, at some point, morph into one another, Escher outlined how all things are  
2 actually interconnected.

3 Escher's art could be said to accord with the model of social science advanced by Gregory  
4 Bateson (1972) in *Steps to an Ecology of Mind*, which asks: 'What sort of thing is this ... which  
5 we call *organism plus environment*?' (cited in Ingold, 2000: 18). The differences between figure  
6 and ground, part and whole dissipate in such a schema. Bateson, coincidentally, held that art  
7 was a way of overcoming the shortcomings of the analytic method. In *Steps to an Ecology of*  
8 *Mind*, he outlines the following approach to art: 'I am concerned with what important psychic  
9 information is in the art object quite apart from what it may *represent* ... What is implicit in  
10 style, materials, composition, rhythm, skill and so on' (Bateson, 1972: 103). Rather than seeing  
11 art as communication of a message that needs decoding, Bateson (1972: 103) quipped that what  
12 interested him about art were 'the rules of transformation' that a style, materials or skills con-  
13 noted. He added that what a consciousness 'unaided by art' is usually unable to 'appreciate is the  
14 *systematic nature of mind*' (Bateson, 1972: 118).

15 The worst consequence of thinking about the world in compartmentalized ways is an aver-  
16 sion to change and innovation. Zerubavel (1991: 117) claims, whether in art, humour, cooking  
17 or intellectual work, '[c]reativity usually flourishes on verges ... [and] entails defying existing  
18 divisions and connecting the separate'. Interestingly, he cites the writings of Bateson as a case in  
19 point suggesting that his ability to leap between (or perform all at once!) anthropology, psy-  
20 chiatry and communication attests to the fact that '[c]reative scholars ... defy the parochialism of  
21 insular academic disciplines and fill the intellectual gaps among them' (Zerubavel, 1991: 117).  
22 Intellectual innovators are, if you like, the cosmopolitans amongst their peers; they engage in  
23 frequent intellectual travel and make intellectual homes for themselves in locations that don't fit  
24 neatly within disciplinary territories. Citing Salman Rushdie, Zerubavel (1991: 11) suggests  
25 intellectual creatives 'rejoice in mongrelization' and appreciate that 'melange' and 'hotch-potch'  
26 is how innovation 'enters the world'.

27 However, Zerubavel urges us to consider boundaries as things that we don't have to accept  
28 or deny, uphold or dissolve. *The Fine Line* is ultimately a celebration of something called the  
29 'flexible mind'. Zerubavel (1991: 120) writes: 'Flexible people notice structures yet feel com-  
30 comfortable destroying them from time to time. Analytically focused at some times, they are quite  
31 sensitive to context at others'. He notes that allowing 'both analytic and synthetic thinking' to  
32 thrive simultaneously means we don't have to 'choose between structure and flow'; and that  
33 creative people often employ 'both mind-sets' and can 'likewise reverse conventional figure-  
34 ground configurations and attend precisely [to] what we normally ignore' (Zerubavel, 1991:  
35 121). But being able to balance between the rigid and fuzzy mind-sets doesn't have to be an act  
36 of good-will. Rather than reducing creative leaps to subjective or agent-driven impulses,  
37 Zerubavel remarks on material and psychic forms of organization that actively help us to engage  
38 with the world in a more flexible manner:

39

40 Striking a happy medium through balance and moderation ... is not the only way to  
41 integrate structure and flow. A somewhat different option is presented by the Japanese  
42 portable ... and sliding ... screens that allow users to combine several rooms into one  
43 by simply removing or opening them or to carve out a single undifferentiated space  
44 several separate rooms by closing them. It is the provisional nature of these partitions  
45 (as well as of the accordion wall, the door, the convertible car top, and the Venetian  
46 blind) that allow such a blend of boundedness and boundlessness. In marked contrast  
47 to walls, they are all products of a highly flexible mind.

48

(Zerubavel, 1991: 120)

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1 Arguably, the ability to employ a flexible mind-set, and the ability to combine the ‘analytic’ with  
2 the ‘synthetic’, is what is most needed today in social science writing about the arts. In a sense, the  
3 analytic differentiation at the heart of separating the sociology of art from other concerns was  
4 considered a necessary move on the part of people trying to give the field some credibility and  
5 coherence. But keeping the sociology of art separate to other fields has arguably come at too high  
6 a cost; and has seen sociologists interested in art insufficiently engage with the latest developments  
7 in art and aesthetic theory. Zeruvabel (1991: 121) claims that one characteristic of intellectual and  
8 conceptual flexibility is the ability to ‘recogniz[e] the inherently open *potential* of essence’ and to  
9 ‘avoid freezing entities in any one mental context by assigning them fixed meanings, treating  
10 them instead like algebraic symbols that can assume practically any value’. While the term ‘art’  
11 and ‘aesthetics’ are not exactly algebraic symbols – there are linguistic, conceptual and historical  
12 limits to what these terms can or ought to connote (see Harris, 2003)– there is nonetheless plenty  
13 of room for seeing such phenomena as ‘*potentially* open essences’. One could argue this is precisely  
14 where the most innovative work in the social science of art is heading.

15 In what follows I try to outline, in a very brief and schematic manner, how a flexible outlook  
16 might further enhance the sociology of art; or better still, an art-sociology.<sup>3</sup> The emphasis is on  
17 the need to move beyond conceptualizing the aesthetics–social divide in a rigid analytical  
18 manner. Here are some of the ways in which I think this can be achieved:

19  
20 *An art-sociology needs a robust but necessarily broad definition of ‘art’:* As I have suggested  
21 throughout this paper, the best move that social science writing about art can undertake is to  
22 relinquish the fetishistic attachment to the ‘institutional definition of art’. Etymologically, the  
23 word art is derived from the Latin term *ars* and the Ancient Greek concept of *techné*, and, in  
24 this more fundamental sense, art consists, not of a type of object, but rather of ‘acts that  
25 transform material through intelligence and ability’ (Barilli, 1993: 4). The evolutionary  
26 anthropologist Ellen Dissayanake (2011: 74) has proposed that ‘artifiers’ (i.e., the kinds of  
27 things that have art-like effects within the world) tend to do things like ‘formalize ... repeat,  
28 exaggerate, elaborate ... and manipulate expectation’ so as to ‘sustain interest, and evoke,  
29 and mould emotions’. In *Art and Agency*, Alfred Gell (1998) argues art ought to be stripped  
30 of both its ‘institutional’ (i.e., it refers to much more than things hanging in galleries) as well  
31 as ‘intentional’ (i.e., it refers to much more things created with an artistic purpose) con-  
32 notation. He proposes art-like situations arise whenever there is a ‘cognitive operation’  
33 involving the ‘*abduction of agency*’ (Gell, 1999: 13). The ‘affordances’ or causal properties of  
34 art are therefore fundamental to understanding the sociological properties of art and other  
35 aesthetic forms (see Acord and DeNora, 2008). Indeed, the clearest sign that someone is  
36 prepared to break out of the ‘*sociology*’ of analytical mentality is that they recognize, as  
37 Molotch (2003: 56) puts it, that ‘[s]omething becomes art through achieving an intense lash-  
38 up of connotations, a congealing ... [of] emotional force’.

39 *An art-sociology should also explore everyday analogies or metaphors involving the concept of art:*  
40 Contextualized approaches to art have tended to focus on the history of the term art in  
41 order to show how it was inevitable that art came to be equated with high culture and the  
42 bourgeois fine arts. Thus, we have Raymond Williams (1976: 41) in *Keywords* suggesting  
43 that art ‘has been in use, in the English language, since the 13th century’ and that part of the  
44 history of the term is how it became differentiated from terms such as the ‘artisanal’ and  
45 ‘applied arts’. He adds that the ‘now dominant use of art and artist’ did not fully emerge  
46 until the 19th century’ (Williams, 1976: 41). But histories of the term art can also overstate  
47 their case and, on the whole, tend to ignore the rather inconvenient fact that people who  
48 ‘live in non-Western and pre-modern societies or ... [whom] live next door but don’t have

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1 universities degrees in art history or the philosophy of art' create and engage with all sorts of  
2 aesthetic forms without necessarily succumbing to the illusions associated with 'capital "A"  
3 Art' (Dissanayake, 2011: 71). Indeed, an art-sociology ought perhaps to be more interested  
4 in the fact that common folks (if they use the concept of 'art' at all) are very promiscuous in  
5 their usage. Thus, in everyday discussions we have references to the 'art of leadership', the  
6 'art of trout fishing', the 'art of gardening' and the 'art of home-making'. Social science has  
7 joined the fray and there is Eric Fromm's (1956) *Art of Loving*, Zygmunt Bauman's (2008)  
8 *Art of Life* and Charles Landry's (2006) *Art of City-Making*. The use of the term art varies  
9 greatly of course in terms of the degree to which the usage connotes the aesthetic properties  
10 of a thing or activity. But these varied usages all have some focus on style, process and the  
11 magic of transformation. They also – as with Fromm's application of the term to the love  
12 relationship – have some kind of normative attachment to the process of cultivating the  
13 activity in question with skill and passion/grace. As Bateson (1964: 101) puts it in *Steps to an*  
14 *Ecology of Mind*: 'art is part of man's quest for grace; sometimes his ecstasy in partial success,  
15 sometimes his rage and agony at failure'. Arguably, there is interesting research to be done  
16 on the social, economic and psychological conditions that allow this kind of grace to flourish  
17 and what types of social arrangements snuff it out.

18 *An art-sociology has much in common with the 'new aesthetic thinking'*: What is ironic about the  
19 lingering sociological attachment to the institutional definition of art is that philosophical  
20 aesthetics and aesthetic theory more generally has, during the last two decades, been moving  
21 away from the philosophy of 'fine art' at a great pace. Today, writers interested in aesthetics  
22 are keen to return to the original understanding of aesthetics – derived from the Greek word  
23 *aesthesis* – as heightened sensory perception (Welsch, 1997) As a result, aesthetics is now  
24 being applied to phenomena as varied as the 'environment' (Berleant, 1992), 'wine' (Crane,  
25 2007), sport (Gumbrecht, 2006) and 'work' (Carr and Hancock, 2009). Linking these varied  
26 perspectives is the 'field of everyday aesthetics' which, as the editors of a recent collection  
27 puts it, is both an 'extension beyond the traditional domain of the philosophical study of  
28 everyday aesthetics and a new arena of aesthetic inquiry – the broader world itself' (Light  
29 and Smith, 2005: ix). Put simply: the new aesthetic thinking is interested in both the par-  
30 allels between art and non-art things and on using the study of everyday things to enlarge  
31 the concept of aesthetics. It could be argued that social situations (i.e., the situations that  
32 sociologists normally study) tend to possess aesthetic features such as: 'heightened percep-  
33 tion'; the 'freshness and excitement of discovery'; 'recognition of the uniqueness of the  
34 situation and of each person participating'; and possibility for an occasion to be 'experienced  
35 as connected and integrated' (Haapala, 2005: 31).

36 *An art-sociology needs to focus on different types of 'embodied thinking' present within aesthetic media*: As  
37 Finnish architect and cultural theorist Juhani Pallasmaa (2009: 19) notes: 'All art forms ... are  
38 specific modes of thinking. They represent ways of sensory and embodied thought character-  
39 istic to the particular medium'. This way of posing the problem of art and aesthetic form more  
40 generally echoes (amongst others) Gardener's (1983) notion of 'multiple intelligences' which  
41 include the 'musical', the 'bodily-kinesthetic' and the 'spatial' as specific ways of embodying  
42 thought. Pallasmaa (2009: 19) says of architecture that it is much more than 'visual aesthetici-  
43 zation' and, in order to be done well, requires the architect/designer/engineer/builder to see  
44 the built-form as a 'mode of existential and metaphysical philosophizing through the means of  
45 space, structure, matter, gravity and light'. Building on this suggestion then we might say that  
46 what an art-sociology needs to do, in addition to studying the 'art of society', is to explore a  
47 range of embodied modes of thought via say a design-sociology, a drawing-sociology, a  
48 painting-sociology, a dance-sociology, a cooking-sociology, etc. While the sociology of the

*Thinking Contradictory Thoughts*

1 senses is heading in the right direction in linking sensorial experience to society (Vannini,  
2 Waskul and Gottschalk, 2011), it also needs to be said that weaving, painting, making music  
3 or ‘drawing’ are not simply the product of something called the socialization of the senses but  
4 the product of active perception and the struggle with materials (Ingold, 2000, 2007; Witkin,  
5 1974). In addition, aesthetic forms such as gardening, theatre and architecture are conducive to  
6 the creation of distinct ‘atmospheres’ – that is moods and vibes that are neither subjective nor  
7 objective but somewhere in between (see Böhme, 1995). ‘Feeling’ and ‘form’ are at play in all  
8 of social life (Sandelands, 1998); but sensitivity to these dynamics is, arguably, even more  
9 important in the case of an art-sociology.

10 *An art-sociology should be in deep and constant dialogue with fields such as urban studies, leisure and*  
11 *tourism studies, event management, economics and organizational studies, etc:* One major con-  
12 sequence of the ‘sociology of art’ or specialist way of doing things is that social scientists  
13 interested in the arts have insufficiently engaged with cutting-edge developments in cognate  
14 fields, including fields that have experienced something of an ‘aesthetic turn’. Arguably, the  
15 most exciting debates about art and society, and the aesthetic qualities of social processes,  
16 have come from people asking questions such as: how does one design a successful organi-  
17 zation, including quite literally what kind of buildings and furniture and spatial configura-  
18 tions help to produce a successful, well-functioning or even healthy organization? Or, which  
19 poses questions such as: what role should city X or region Y assign to art and culture in its  
20 planning and economic strategies and how are art and culture intertwined within the  
21 broader aesthetic and symbolic ecologies that define this place and how it imagines itself?  
22 Asking these kinds of questions presupposes a very broad understanding of art and aesthetics;  
23 and requires professionals and researchers from various disciplines to speak to each other and  
24 work on problems together. We might say that what is needed right now is the study of the  
25 ‘art-nexus’ rather than the study of ‘art worlds’ or ‘fields of artistic production’ (Albertsen  
26 and Diken, 2004). The art-nexus is a loose ensemble of aesthetic, economic, emotional and  
27 technological connections that demand different and innovative ways of perceiving the same  
28 conceptual problem from the vantage point of different conceptual frames. The ‘art genie’  
29 has well and truly departed from the ‘art institutional bottle’; and – now that we are  
30 ‘experiencing an aesthetics boom’ that extends from ‘individual styling, urban planning and  
31 the economy through to theory’ (Welsch, 1997: 1) – there is exciting research to be done  
32 on the complex agencies and causalities that the art-nexus entails.

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## Notes

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12 1 For the last two years, this article (de la Fuente, 2007a) has consistently been the second most cited  
13 article in the journal *Cultural Sociology*: <http://cus.sagepub.com/reports/most-cited>. The first most cited  
14 article in *Cultural Sociology* also reinforces my sense that the field has reached a new degree of maturity  
15 and people are keen to move way from determinist conceptions of the interplay of aesthetic and social  
16 factors. It is Antoine Hennion's (2007) 'Those Things That Hold us Together: Taste and Sociology'.  
17 2 While I have not conducted systematic research on sociologists of arts or how they view the world, I  
18 have the intuition that many of the peculiarities of the field stem from unacknowledged prejudices as  
19 to the status of the objects under study. One thing seems to unite both sociologists who overinvest in  
20 the institutional definition of the arts and the sensitive souls who want the sociology of art to be her-  
21 meneutically rich: namely, the notion that art and creativity are somehow special and that some of the  
22 magic, if not glamour, associated with art necessarily rubs off on those studying the arts. In this respect,  
23 I am quite drawn to what Becker (1982: xi) in *Art Worlds* refers to as the 'hearty tradition of relativistic,  
24 sceptical, "democratic" writing about the arts'. The sociology of art is not simply for gifted or aesthet-  
25 ically minded people. And, in many respects, I am much more interested in attempts to merge art  
26 studies with what sensitive souls would probably regard as philistine approaches such as: event man-  
27 agement theory (Bowdin, Getz and Wunsch, 2010); organizational theory (Strati, 1999; DeMonthoux,  
28 2004); studies of entrepreneurship or the art of leadership (Barry and Meisiek, 2010; Ladkin, 2008);  
29 material culture studies and the study of material 'affordances' (Csikszentmihalyi and Rochberg-  
30 Halton, 1981; Norman, 2002, 2004; the study of cities and regions (Landry, 2006); evolutionary  
31 anthropology (Dissanayake, 1992, 2000); cognitive science and neuropsychology (Gardner, 1983;  
32 Turner, 2006); economics and economic sociology (Caves, 2000; Stark, 2009)). Perhaps the future of  
33 an art–sociology might be best thought of as branch of what has come to be called an 'applied aes-  
34 thetics': namely, the application of aesthetic concepts and methods to everyday social practices, as well  
35 as the grounded study of how aesthetic forms perform their everyday social functions?  
36 3 DeNora's (2003) *After Adorno: Rethinking Music Sociology* explains the distinction between an 'art–sociol-  
37 ogy' and a 'sociology of art' very well. DeNora (2003: 151) argues – with respect to socio-cultural studies  
38 of music – that '[t]o speak of the sociology of music is to perpetuate a notion of music and society as  
39 separate entities'. It also means that 'the medium of music [i]s implicitly downgraded; its status shifted,  
40 from active ingredient or animating force to inanimate product (an object to be explained)' (DeNora, 2003:  
41 3). Thus, central to the distinction is whether art/aesthetic factors are an object to be studied or whether  
42 art/aesthetic factors are doing some of the causal work that sociologists usually attribute to other factors.  
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## 6

# BECOMING REVOLUTIONARY

## On Russian Suprematism

*Boris Groys*

The central question that unavoidably dominates today's thinking and speaking about the Russian avant-garde is the question addressing the relationship between artistic revolution and political revolution. Was the Russian avant-garde a collaborator, a co-producer of the October revolution? And if the answer is yes, can the Russian avant-garde function as inspiration and model for the contemporary art practices that try to transgress the borders of the art world, to become political, to change the dominating political and economical conditions of human existence, to put themselves in the service of the political or social revolution or, at least, of the political and social change?

Today, the political role of art is mostly seen as being twofold: (1) critique of the dominating political, economical, and art system, and (2) mobilization of the audience toward the change of this system through a Utopian promise. Now, if we look at the first, pre-revolutionary wave of the Russian avant-garde we do not find any of these aspects in its artistic practice. To criticize something one must somehow reproduce it—to present this criticized something together with the critique of it. But the Russian avant-garde wanted to be non-mimetic. One can say that Malevich's Suprematist art was revolutionary but one would hardly be able to say that it was critical. The sound poetry of Alexei Kruchenykh was also non-mimetic and non-critical. These both most radical artistic practices of the Russian avant-garde were also non-participatory because to write sound poetry and to paint squares and triangles are obviously not the activities that would be especially attractive for the wider audiences. These activities also could not mobilize masses for the coming political revolution. In fact, such a mobilization can be reached only through the use of the modern and contemporary mass media like press, radio, cinema—or, today, through pop music and revolutionary design such as posters, slogans, twitter messages, etc. During the pre-revolutionary time the artists of the Russian avant-garde had, obviously, no access to these media—even if the scandals that their artistic activities have provoked were from time to time covered by the press.

One often speaks about the Russian revolutionary avant-garde meaning Russian avant-garde artistic practices of the 1920s. But, in fact, it is incorrect because in the 1920s Russian avant-garde was—artistically and politically—already in its post-revolutionary phase. Firstly, it developed further the artistic practices that have already emerged before the October revolution. And, secondly, it was practiced in the framework of the post-revolutionary Soviet state – as it was formed after the October revolution and the end of the Civil War—and was being

*Boris Groys*

1 supported and controlled by this state. Thus, one cannot speak of the Russian avant-garde at  
2 the Soviet time as being revolutionary in the usual sense of this word because the Russian avant-  
3 garde art was not directed against the status quo, against the dominating political and economical  
4 power structures. The Russian avant-garde of the Soviet period was not critical but affirmative in  
5 its attitude toward the post-revolutionary Soviet state, toward the post-revolutionary status quo. It  
6 was basically a conformist art. Thus, only the Russian pre-revolutionary avant-garde can be  
7 regarded today as being relevant for the contemporary situation—because the contemporary  
8 situation is obviously not the situation after the Socialist revolution. So speaking about the  
9 revolutionary character of the Russian avant-garde and relation between its pre-revolutionary  
10 and post-revolutionary phases let us concentrate our attention on two main figures of Russian  
11 Surpematism—arguably, the most radical movement within Russian avant-garde. I mean here  
12 Kazimir Malevich and El Lissitsky.  
13

### 14 **1. Kazimir Malevich: Struggle against Nostalgia**

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16 As previously mentioned, one does not find in the art of the pre-revolutionary Russian avant-  
17 garde, including the art of Malevich, the characteristics that we tend to look for when we are  
18 speaking today about critical, politically engaged art that is able to mobilize the masses for the  
19 revolution—and help to change the world. Thus, the suspicion arises that Malevich’s famous  
20 Black Square is unrelated to any political and social revolution—that we have to do here with an  
21 artistic gesture that ultimately has its relevance only inside the artistic space. However, I would  
22 argue that if Malevich’s Black Square was not an active revolutionary gesture in a sense that it  
23 criticized the political status quo, or advertised a coming revolution, it was revolutionary in a  
24 much deeper sense. Then what is the revolution? It is not the process of building a new society—  
25 this is the goal of the post-revolutionary period—but, rather, a radical destruction of the existing  
26 society. However, to accept this revolutionary destruction is not an easy psychological operation.  
27 We tend to resist the radical forces of destruction, we tend to be compassionate and nostalgic  
28 toward our past—and maybe even more so toward our endangered present. Now the Russian  
29 avant-garde—as the early European avant-garde in general—was the strongest possible medicine  
30 against any kind of compassion and nostalgia. It accepted the total destruction of all the traditions  
31 of the European and Russian culture – traditions that were dear not only to the educated classes  
32 but also to the general population.

33 The Black Square of Malevich was the most radical gesture of this acceptance. It announced  
34 the death of any cultural nostalgia, of any sentimental attachment to the culture of the past. The  
35 Black Square was like an open window through which the revolutionary spirits of radical  
36 destruction could enter the space of culture and reduce it to the ashes. Indeed, a good example  
37 of Malevich’s own anti-nostalgic attitude can be found in his short but important text “On the  
38 Museum,” from 1919. At that time the new Soviet government feared that the old Russian  
39 museums and art collections would be destroyed by civil war and the general collapse of state  
40 institutions and the economy. The Communist Party responded by trying to secure and save  
41 these collections. In his text, Malevich protested against this pro-museum policy of Soviet  
42 power by calling on the state to not intervene on behalf of the old art collections because their  
43 destruction could open the path to true, living art. In particular, he wrote:

44  
45 Life knows what it is doing, and if it is striving to destroy one must not interfere, since  
46 by hindering we are blocking the path to a new conception of life that is born within  
47 us. In burning a corpse we obtain one gram of powder: accordingly thousands of  
48 graveyards could be accommodated on a single chemist’s shelf. We can make a



*Boris Groys*

1 image by the material forces, by the power of time. Thus, for Malevich any destruction of art –  
2 be it past, present, or future—was welcomed because this act of destruction would necessarily  
3 produce an image of destruction. The destruction cannot destroy its own image. Of course,  
4 God can destroy the world without leaving a trace because God created the world out of  
5 nothingness. But if God is dead then an act of destruction without a visible trace, and without  
6 the image of destruction, is impossible. And through the act of radical artistic reduction this  
7 image of coming destruction can be anticipated here and now—an (anti)messianic image  
8 because it demonstrates that the end of the time will never come, that the material forces will  
9 be never stopped by any divine, transcendental, metaphysical power. Death of God means that  
10 no image can be infinitely stabilized—but it also means that no image can be totally destroyed.

11 But what has happened to the reductionist images of the early avant-garde after the victory of  
12 the October revolution, under the condition of the post-revolutionary state? Actually, any post-  
13 revolutionary situation is a deeply paradoxical one—because any attempt to continue the  
14 revolutionary impulse, to remain committed and faithful to the revolutionary event leads us  
15 necessarily to a danger to betray the revolution. The continuation of the revolution could be  
16 understood as its permanent radicalization, as its repetition—as the permanent revolution. But  
17 repetition of the revolution under the conditions of the post-revolutionary state could at  
18 the same time be easily understood as the counter-revolution—as an act of weakening and  
19 destabilizing the revolutionary achievements. On the other hand, the stabilization of the post-  
20 revolutionary order can be also easily interpreted as a betrayal of the revolution because the  
21 post-revolutionary stabilization unavoidably revives the tradition of the pre-revolutionary norms  
22 of stability and order. To live in this paradox becomes, as we know, a true adventure that his-  
23 torically only few revolutionary politicians survived.

24 The project of continuation of the artistic revolution is no less paradoxical. What does it  
25 mean to continue the avant-garde? To further repeat the forms of the avant-garde art? Such a  
26 strategy can be easily accused to value the letter of the revolutionary art over its spirit, to turn a  
27 revolutionary form into a pure decoration of power—or into a commodity. On the other hand,  
28 the rejection of the avant-garde artistic forms in the name of a new artistic revolution imme-  
29 diately leads to an artistic counter-revolution—as we saw in the example of the so-called post-  
30 modern art. Now the second wave of the Russian avant-garde tried to avoid this paradox by  
31 redefining the operation of reduction.

32 For the first wave of the avant-garde and, especially for Malevich, the operation of reduction  
33 served, which was made evident in the indestructibility of art. Or, in other words: The  
34 demonstration of the indestructibility of the material world: every destruction is a material  
35 destruction and leaves traces. There is no fire without ashes—in other words, there is no divine  
36 fire of total annihilation. The Black Square remains non-transparent—because the material is  
37 non-transparent. The early avant-garde art—being radically materialistic—never believed in a  
38 possibility of a fully transparent, immaterial medium (like soul, or faith, or reason) that would  
39 allow us to see the “other world” when everything material that allegedly obscures this other  
40 world would be removed by the apocalyptic event. According to the avant-garde the only  
41 thing that we will be able to see in this case will be the apocalyptic event itself—that would  
42 look like a reductionist avant-garde artwork.

43 Thus, for Malevich the reduction of the past did not mean the promise of a Utopian future.  
44 Rather, such a promise was considered by Malevich as a new return to the past – to the old  
45 Christian promise of the Kingdom of God at the end of history. In his treatise “God is Not Cast  
46 Down” (2) Malevich draws a comparison between traditional Christianity and post-Christian  
47 secular Utopianism. This treatise was written in the same year, 1919, when the article on the  
48 Museum was written, which I have previously mentioned, but in this case the polemics was

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1 directed not against the conservative lovers of the past but against the Constructivist builders of  
2 the future. In this treatise Malevich states that the belief in the continuous perfecting of the  
3 human condition through the industrial progress is of the same order as the Christian belief in  
4 the continuous perfecting of the human soul. Both Christianity and Communism believe in  
5 a possibility of reaching the ultimate perfection, be it Kingdom of God or Communist Utopia.  
6 In this text Malevich begins to develop a certain line of argumentation that, as it seems to me,  
7 perfectly describes the situation of modern and contemporary art vis-à-vis the modern revolu-  
8 tionary project and contemporary attempts of politicization of art. In his later writings Malevich  
9 returns time and again to this line of argumentation—and I will keep these later writings also in  
10 mind by presenting here this main line of Malevich’s argumentation that I cannot describe here  
11 in full but can only summarize it.

12 Namely, in this 1999 article, Malevich develops dialectics that can be characterized as dia-  
13 lectics of imperfection. As I have already said, Malevich defines both religion and modern  
14 technique (factory, as he says) as striving for perfection: perfection of the individual soul in the  
15 case of religion and perfection of the material world in the case of factory. According to Mal-  
16 evich both projects cannot be realized because their realization would require from an indivi-  
17 dual human being and the mankind as a whole an investment of infinite time, energy, and  
18 effort. But humans are mortal. Their time and energy are finite. And this finitude of the human  
19 existence prevents humanity from achieving any kind of perfection—be it spiritual or technical.  
20 As a mortal being man is doomed to remain forever imperfect. But why is this imperfection also  
21 a dialectical one? Because it is precisely this lack of time—the lack of time to achieve the per-  
22 fection—that opens to humanity an infinite time perspective. Less than perfect means here  
23 more than perfect—because if we could have enough time to become perfect then the moment  
24 of achievement of the perfection would be the last moment of our existence; we would have  
25 no goal any more to exist further. Thus, it is our failure to achieve perfection that opens an  
26 infinite horizon of human and transhuman material existence. Priests and engineers, according  
27 to Malevich, are not capable of opening this horizon because they cannot abandon their pursuit  
28 of perfection—cannot relax, cannot accept imperfection and failure as their true fate. However,  
29 the artists can do that. They know that their bodies, their vision, and their art are not and  
30 cannot be truly perfect and healthy. Rather, they know themselves as being infected by the  
31 bacilli of change, illness, and death, as Malevich describes it in his later text on the additional  
32 element in painting and it is precisely these bacilli that at the same time are bacilli of art. (3) The  
33 artists, according to Malevich, should not immunize themselves against these bacilli but on the  
34 contrary to accept them, to let them to destroy the old, traditional art patterns. In a different  
35 form Malevich repeats here the metaphor of the ashes: The body of the artist dies but the bacilli  
36 of art survive the death of his body—and begin to infect the bodies of other artists. That is why  
37 Malevich actually believes in the transhistorical character of art. Art is material and materialist.  
38 And that means that art can always survive the end of all the purely idealist, metaphysical pro-  
39 jects—be it Kingdom of God or Communism. The movement of material forces is non-tele-  
40 ological. As such it cannot reach its telos and come to an end.

41 In a certain sense these texts of Malevich remind one of the theory of violence that Walter  
42 Benjamin developed in his famous “Essay on the Violence” (1921) (4). In this essay, Benjamin  
43 distinguishes between mythical violence and divine violence. According to Benjamin the  
44 mythical violence is the violence of change—it is the violence that destroys one social order  
45 only to substitute it by a new and different social order. The divine violence is understood by  
46 Benjamin, on the contrary, as one that only destroys, undermines, brings any order to fall—  
47 beyond any possibility of the subsequent return to order. This divine violence is rather a  
48 materialist violence. Benjamin saw that himself. In his later “Notes on the Notion of History”

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1 (1940) (5) in which he tried to develop his own version of Historical Materialism, Benjamin  
2 famously evokes Klee's image of the Angelus Novus who is carried by wind of history but has  
3 turned his back to the future and looks only toward the past. Benjamin describes Angelus  
4 Novus as seized by terror—as he sees that all the promises of the future become destroyed by  
5 the forces of history and turned to ruins. But why is Angelus Novus surprised and terrorized by  
6 this view to such an extent? Probably, because before he turned his back to the future he  
7 believed in the possibility of future realization of all the social, technical, and artistic projects.

8 However, Malevich is not an Angelus Novus—he is not shocked by what he sees in the rear  
9 window of his car. He does expect from the future only destruction—and so he is not surprised  
10 to see only ruins as this future comes. For Malevich there is no difference between future and  
11 past—it sees ruins in every direction. Thus, he remains relaxed and self-assured—never shocked,  
12 seized by terror, or even surprised. One can say that Malevich's theory of art—as it was for-  
13 mulated in his polemics against the constructivists—is precisely an answer to the divine violence  
14 as it is described by Benjamin. The artist accepts this infinite violence and appropriates it, lets  
15 himself be infected by it. And lets this violence to infect, to destroy, to make ill his own art.  
16 Malevich presents history of art as a history of illness—of being infected by bacilli of divine  
17 violence that infiltrate and permanently destroy all human orders. In our time Malevich is often  
18 accused of allowing his art to be infected by the bacilli of figuration and even Socialist Realism  
19 during the Soviet period of his artistic practice. The writings of the same time explain the  
20 ambiguous attitude of Malevich toward the social, political, and artistic developments of his  
21 time: he has not invested any hope, any expectation of progress (that is also characteristic of his  
22 reaction to film etc.) in them but at the same time he accepted them as a necessary illness of  
23 time—and was ready to become infected, imperfect, and transitory. In fact, already his Supre-  
24 matist images are imperfect, flowing, non-constructive—especially, if we compare them to, say,  
25 Mondrian's paintings.

26 Thus, Malevich shows us what it does mean to be a revolutionary artist. It means to join the  
27 universal material flow that destroys all the temporary political and aesthetic orders. Here the  
28 goal is not the change—understood as a change from the existing, “bad” order to a new “good”  
29 order. Rather, the revolutionary art abandons all the goals, and enters the non-teleological,  
30 potentially infinite process that the artist cannot and does not want to bring to an end.

## 31 32 **2. El Lissitzky: From Non-organized to Organizational Work**

33  
34 El Lissitzky occupies a unique position in the artistic avant-garde scene after the October  
35 revolution because he still understands himself and his method as Suprematist and not Con-  
36 structivist or Productivist. In other words, he still believes not merely in the autonomy but in the  
37 supremacy of art and does not let himself be involved as a simple worker in the construction of  
38 the new Soviet reality. However, it does not mean that he ignores this work of construction.  
39 Rather, he raises the claim that the work can be organized in such a way as to shape reality itself  
40 by artistic means. Lissitzky sees the Suprematism as having crossed the point zero of the old world  
41 toward a free creation of the new world—in accordance with the title of the exhibition in which  
42 Malevich has shown for the first time his Black Square and other Suprematist works. This title  
43 was “0.10” (1915) which indicated that 10 participating artists went through the point zero—  
44 through nothingness and death. Lissitzky sees himself also as one of the artists that went through  
45 the point zero—and he believes that on the other side of zero (or, one can say, other side of the  
46 mirror) one can create a new, completely artificial space and world of forms. (6) This belief is an  
47 effect of the October revolution. It seemed to many artists and theoreticians of that time that the  
48 Russian reality itself—including all its explicit and implicit contexts—was completely nullified by



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1 the revolution. The Russian reality went the same way that Suprematism did before it. There was  
2 no context for life and for art any longer. There was nothing to see through the Black Square,  
3 through the gap that was created by the break with nature and historical past. Art had to create its  
4 own context—the social and economic presuppositions for its own further functioning. In one of  
5 his texts Lissitzky compares Communism, understood by him as domination of organized,  
6 regulated labor with Suprematism understood as domination of creative, non-regulated, non-  
7 organized labor—and he expresses his conviction that in the future Communism will be left  
8 behind by Suprematism because creativity moves faster and functions more efficiently than  
9 regular work. (7) However, for Lissitzky, the non-organized labor is not a-social, purely indi-  
10 vidualistic art practice, but precisely the organizational work. The artist is not organized because  
11 he is an organizer. Specifically, the artist creates the space in which the organized, productive  
12 labor takes place.

13 In a certain sense, the Soviet artists had no other choice at the time other than to put forward  
14 such a total claim. The market, including the art market, was eliminated by the Communists.  
15 Artists were no longer confronted by private consumers and their aesthetic preferences, but by  
16 the state as a whole. Thus, for artists it was all or nothing. This situation is clearly reflected in  
17 the manifestos of Russian Constructivism. For example, in his programmatic text entitled  
18 “Constructivism,” Alexei Gan wrote:

19

20 Not to reflect, not to represent and not to interpret reality, but to really build and  
21 express the systematic tasks of the new class, the proletariat. Especially now, when the  
22 proletarian revolution has been victorious, and its destructive, creative movement is  
23 progressing along the iron rails into culture, which is organized according to a grand  
24 plan of social production, everyone—the master of color and line, the builder of  
25 space-volume forms and the organizer of mass productions—must all become con-  
26 structors in the general work of the arming and moving of the many-millioned human  
27 masses. (8)

28

29 However, later Nikolai Tarabukin asserted in his then famous article “From the Easel to the  
30 Machine” that the Constructivist artist could not play a formative role in the process of actual  
31 social production. His role was rather that of a propagandist who defends and praises the beauty  
32 of industrial production and opens the public’s eyes to this beauty. (9) The artist, as described by  
33 Tarabukin, is someone who looks at the entirety of socialist production as a readymade—a kind  
34 of socialist Duchamp who exhibits socialist industry as a whole as something good and beautiful.

35

36 One can argue that it is precisely the strategy of Lissitzky in the late period of his artistic  
37 activity. In that period Lissitzky had concentrated his efforts more and more on the production  
38 of various kinds of exhibitions. In these exhibitions he tried to visualize the socio-political space  
39 in which the organized Soviet production took place. Or, in other words, he tried to make  
40 visible the organizational work that otherwise would remain hidden, invisible for the external  
41 spectator. To visualize the invisible is traditionally the main goal of art. Obviously, Lissitzky  
42 understood his exhibitions as spaces constructed by the curator-author—spaces in which the  
43 attention of the spectator was shifted from the exhibited objects to the organization of the  
44 exhibition space as such. In this respect, Lissitzky draws a difference between “passive” and  
45 “active” exhibitions—or, as we would say today, between traditional exhibitions and installa-  
46 tions. (10) For Lissitzky passive exhibitions only demonstrate what was already done before. On  
47 the contrary, active exhibitions create completely new spaces in which the general idea of the  
48 exhibition is embodied—and in which the individual items function in a subsidiary role. Thus,  
Lissitzky argues that an exhibition of the Soviet architecture must be itself an embodiment of

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1 the Sovietness in architecture and all the elements of the exhibition, including its space, light  
2 etc., should be submitted to this goal. In other words, Lissitzky sees himself as a creator of the  
3 exhibition space that functions here as an extension and realization of his earlier PROUNS  
4 (proyekty utverzhdeniya novogo—projects for establishing of the new). Here the exhibition  
5 space becomes a heterotopian space, a term introduced by Michel Foucault. The “active  
6 exhibition” has not to merely illustrate and reproduce the development of reality and the  
7 socialist labor that creates a new society but, rather, to offer a project for designing the Soviet  
8 reality in its totality. On the one hand, here the organisational work by the Communist party is  
9 reconstructed and praised. But, on the other hand, the representation of the organized  
10 Communist work is aesthetically subjected by Lissitzky to the Suprematist interpretation of the  
11 installational space.

12 Thus, the road that was taken by Lissitzky was not the road of construction—but the road of  
13 organization. The Suprematist artist becomes a curator. Lissitzky does not want to produce  
14 things but wants to organize, connect, and exhibit them. Lissitzky operated inside the Soviet  
15 culture that saw the Soviet country as a huge installation space in which Communism should be  
16 installed and exhibited to the outside world. As an artist-curator Lissitzky collaborated with this  
17 Communist project but at the same time did not want to be merely a passive illustrator of this  
18 project. Rather, in his installations he tried to propose the organizational forms that could be  
19 used by the Soviet leadership in its own countrywide organizational practice. Thus, crossing the  
20 point zero the Russian Suprematism moved from the artwork to the art installation. This move  
21 is maybe the most lasting achievement of the Suprematist art.

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# FAILURE OVER UTOPIA

*Lisa Le Feuvre*

What does it mean to fail? The answer must always be tuned to the key of context. Failure is personal and political, local, global, present, past and future. ‘You have failed’ is a judgement that cuts to the quick, makes the heart sink. Yet, if failure is released from success, its tired and familiar travelling companion, it can become productive, oppositional and capable of contesting and rupturing expectations.

Uncertainty and instability characterise contemporary times. Nonetheless, success and progress endure as a condition to strive for, even though there is little faith in either. All individuals and systems know failure better than they might care to admit – failed romance, failed careers, failed politics, failed society, failed targets, failed humanity, failed failures. Failure is too often tied to its twin of achievement. This co-dependent relationship is fed by distinction, fear and opportunity. A more accurate pairing might be utopias, an abused and misused term, certainly in the realm of art. This trope haunts discussion of art on the first decade of the twenty-first century. To speak of utopia is to, in the very same breath, invoke failure. Whether located in rhetoric or enacted in heterotopias, utopias are subjective ideals. Reality fails the idealisms of utopian desires, which are always built on particularity and subjectivity. Utopias are useful in their very failure.

Josiah McElheny is an example of an artist who usefully turns to utopic thinking. For him it could be a conversation between Isamu Noguchi and Buckminster Fuller debating the feasibility reflective sculpture in a reflective space, or attempts to model the Big Bang, or the novelist Paul Scheerbart’s discussions of ‘ironic utopia’.<sup>1</sup> McElheny creates highly crafted sculptural environments and makeshift staging to create screens on to which idealised visions of the future can be projected. These are drawn from the past, and chosen for their contemporary currency. McElheny’s sculptures are formed from detours and collisions in the history of ideas. His works claim skill, beauty and wonder: coloured glass vessels curvaceously hold their ground, mirrors infinitely repeat design objects, reflections distort to make the abstract more abstract, chandeliers glisten at ground level. In 2003 the sculpture ‘Buckminster Fuller’s Proposal to Isamu Noguchi for New Abstraction of Total Reflection’ made material an idea developed between the architect and sculptor in a conversation reported to have taken place in 1929 in a Greenwich Village pub, named Romany Marie’s. As is often the case, McElheny took a little known event in the history of ideas, grabbing something from the past and throwing it into the present to make understanding awkward. The visionary architect and artist, an assistant to

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1 Brancusi who worked on the sculptor's high-shine surfaces, discussed the possibilities of an  
2 invisible sculpture where reflective forms would be presented in a totally reflective environ-  
3 ment. McElheny's sculpture is a realisation of this notion, some 74 years after the conversation.  
4 A machine-made mirrored glass plinth supports a range of mirrored hand-blown glass objects,  
5 reflecting both themselves and their echo through light, not shadow. The sculpture represents  
6 'live and direct': it is a tautological object that holds and produces time, repeating what exists  
7 like a real-time camera feed, filling the visual field with distortions.

8 Ian Kiaer is another artist who turns to Scheerbarth, as well as writings on architecture by  
9 Frederick Kiesler, Aldo Rossi and Bruno Taut, and the 1850 novel *The Black Tulip* by the  
10 French writer Alexandre Dumas. This book recounts the careful competitive cultivation of the  
11 titular flower, a screen on to which power, jealousy, political might and desires are projected in  
12 a tale of value and naming. Set in Holland in 1672, *The Black Tulip* invokes the time of  
13 'tulipmania', a period some four decades earlier when a bulb could be worth more than a house  
14 and was deemed as close as one could get to divinity on earth. Speculation and belief in future  
15 value inflated a market that spectacularly crashed. Kiaer mines such experiments in literature,  
16 architecture and philosophy to create fragile and fragmentary models that call on gravity,  
17 material, scale and encounter, repurposing debris to create props and proposals for perceiving  
18 objects in space. He uses discarded and humble materials such as packing foam, chocolate  
19 wrappers, Perspex sheets abandoned in the street and standard-sized paper. The resulting  
20 weightless, materially worthless objects are models addressing idealistic proposals for alternative  
21 ways of observing, structuring and improving the world. They slip between description, oper-  
22 ating as objects, models, sculptures, works, projects and environments, each a part of a con-  
23 tinuous study of value and form.

24 These two artists' work create models that explore how projections for the future are acti-  
25 vated through outcomes and activity that inevitably leads one off the expected path to new  
26 realms of the production of knowledge. Describing their work as utopian is to lose the incisive  
27 charge of failure, inviting in its place nostalgia, a wish for what might have been. Like utopia,  
28 paradoxes are at the heart of all dealings with failure – it is a position to take, yet one that  
29 cannot be strived for; it can be investigated, yet is too vague to be defined. Even if one sets out  
30 to fail, the possibility of success is never eradicated, and failure immediately is ushered in.  
31 Through failure, one can potentially stumble on the unexpected – mobilising failure is a strat-  
32 egy utilised in the practices of business, politics and entrepreneurship. Failure can be commo-  
33 dified, valued for its distinctness. At the same time failure can resist market forces. Failure is  
34 easily romanticised and used as an excuse, simply because failure is easier to recognise than  
35 success. Yet when harnessed, failure can bring radical changes. To embrace failure is to perform  
36 an act of bravery. We live in a failed world – failure of the left, failure of sustainability, failure of  
37 humanity. Eric Hobsbawm the Marxist historian writing just before the turn of this century  
38 admonished that

39

40 If humanity is to have a recognisable future, it cannot be by prolonging the past or the  
41 present. If we try to build the third millennium on that basis, we shall fail, and the  
42 price of failure, that is to say, the alternative to a changed society, is darkness.<sup>2</sup>

43

44 In a world where it seems that there is nothing that can be done, sometimes a secular, non-  
45 dogmatic glimmer of hope informed by failure rather than success can offer a position for  
46 possibility. In the realm of art failure has currency and potential for criticality that embraces  
47 possibility. Without the doubt that failure ushers in, any situation can become closed and in  
48 danger of becoming dogmatic. Art-making can be characterised as an activity where doubt lies in

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1 wait at every turn and where failure is not always unacceptable conduct. In actively engaging  
2 with failure, artistic practices have the ability to propose a resistant view of the world where  
3 doubt is embraced, experimentation encouraged and risk considered a viable position. To  
4 celebrate failure is to identify moments of thought that eschew consensus. One of the most  
5 crucial places where we can identify the endemic presence of failure in the art-making is in the  
6 inevitable gap between intention and realisation. This condition of art-making places failure  
7 central to engagements with the complexities of artistic practice and to the ways in which art  
8 resonates with the surrounding world.

9 If failure is endemic in the creative act, it opens the question not *if* something is a failure,  
10 rather *how* that failure is harnessed. Failure can open a wormhole through which one can travel  
11 to the past. If a recollection is represented as a perfect point-by-point double of the past, it is  
12 time-travel without knowledge of the present. A memory of the past that has been tainted by  
13 the imagination is a process predicated on engagement: the past becomes filtered through the  
14 knowledge of the present. The danger of bringing the past into the present is to mine failure,  
15 potentially inducing nostalgia. Failure all too easily can become a wistful memory of what  
16 might have been – see for example Eugene Ionesco’s play *The Chairs* (1952)<sup>3</sup> where a couple,  
17 now in their later years, are depicted constantly talking about their failed plans. This absurdist  
18 play is a warning to the nostalgic comfort that failure can bring.

19 Bringing the past into the present through the power of nostalgia, however, can be produc-  
20 tive. Carol Bove’s accumulation of references and objects, for example, present lifestyle com-  
21 modities and gestures that embody past promises for the future in order to consider productively  
22 the ways that our present desires will potentially fail in the future. Using references that range  
23 from *Playboy* to Marshall McLuhan, Twiggy and Jane Fonda via design classics, the exhibition  
24 designs of Carlo Scarpa and the sculpture garden of New York’s MoMA, Bove’s compositions  
25 turn these symbols of utopian desire into props for outmoded ideological positions. Transported  
26 to the present, these symbols of change act as reminders that if, somehow, things had played out  
27 as planned in the past, a very different future might have been delivered. Bove’s assemblages,  
28 though, are not melancholic; rather they propose possibilities. As Gertrude Stein noted: ‘A real  
29 failure does not need an excuse. It is an end in itself.’<sup>4</sup>

30 To strive to fail is to go against socially accepted drives towards ever better success. Failure,  
31 when divorced from a defeatist, disappointed or unsuccessful position, can be shifted from being  
32 simply judgemental. Consider, for example, Fischli and Weiss’ photographic series ‘Equilibres/  
33 Quiet Afternoon’ (1984) or their 30-minute 16mm film *The Way Things Go* (1985). In the  
34 photographs, objects hover in configurations just at the moment of collapse. In the film, systems  
35 of objects tumble like dominoes, appearing as trained objects using wheels, fire and ramps to  
36 perform their roles. Close inspection, though, suggests that there may be one cut, one moment  
37 when the circus fails. Fischli notes: ‘for us, while we were making the piece, it was funnier  
38 when it failed, when it didn’t work. When it worked, that was more about satisfaction’.<sup>5</sup> Per-  
39 fection equals completion; failure maintains openness.

40 Rather than being a space of mediocrity, failure is required in order to keep a system open  
41 and to raise questions rather than simply provide answers. Just like failure, the ‘mediocre’ can be  
42 put to use. The French artist Robert Filliou celebrated mediocrity – indeed, he reacted to the  
43 dismissal in mainstream culture of artworks that radically changed definitions of art as indicating  
44 that ‘modern art is “La Revolte des Mediocres”’.<sup>6</sup> In 1965 he founded, with George Brecht, a  
45 shop named ‘Le cédille qui sourit’ in Villefranche-sur-Mer on the French Riviera. It was the  
46 international headquarters of the Centre of Permanent Creation. Activities were guided by the  
47 maxim ‘whatever you do, do something else’ and were realised by encouraging friends to visit  
48 and misunderstand each other. Filliou’s ‘principle of equivalence’ was applied in full force. This

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1 classification measures all products of human labour by the categories ‘well made’, ‘badly made’  
2 or ‘not made’, each distinction being an equally important and legitimate outcome of the  
3 creative act, embracing the potential of failure and error by removing value judgements of  
4 ‘good’ and ‘bad’.<sup>7</sup> The definition of good verses bad and failure verses success are slippery and  
5 contingent on the critical apparatus used to define value. These measures are inextricably bound  
6 with assumptions used to understand our place in the world. These socialised subjectivities are  
7 often unconscious and applied without thinking, reflecting the habitus of time and place.

8 Filliou’s concept of Permanent Creation stipulates that everyone is a genius, and that  
9 everything a person does is of equal value. He took ideas of pleasure, exchange, cooperation  
10 and conviviality over expertise, authority or talent. For Filliou, talent is merely the ability to  
11 acquire skills to execute a task efficiently. He asked what might happen when failure is taken  
12 as a productive activity in ‘Le cédille qui sourit’, a retail outlet that only opened if the two  
13 proprietors were called on in their homes. However, they could rarely be found there, as  
14 usually Brecht and Filliou were sitting in a café nearby, busily adopting the artistic cliché of  
15 the ‘café genius’. Filliou noted: ‘No one admires [the café genius]. They influence no one.  
16 This is great. This is success, for we must get rid of the idea of admiration and the dead-  
17 weight of leadership’.<sup>8</sup>

18 Persisting with an activity in spite of its inherent failure is a task suffused with optimism. In  
19 1953 Samuel Beckett completed a trilogy of novels with the monologue *The Unnameable*.  
20 Narrated by a disembodied voice, the text wrestles with the limits of language and the impos-  
21 sibility of reconciling thought and its expression. The closing lines announce: ‘you must go on/I  
22 can’t go on/I’ll go on’. Beckett embraced failure: in 1949 the journal *Transition* published  
23 ‘Three Dialogues’,<sup>9</sup> a text where Beckett ostensibly discusses with the art critic and historian,  
24 Georges Duthuit, the painterly practices of Pierre Tal Coat, one of the founders of Tachisme,  
25 Andre Masson, whose engagement with surrealism and automatic painting have rippled through  
26 art history, and Bram van Velde, an abstract painter Beckett’s engaged with persistently.  
27 Although published as a conversation, with notes on the participants variously exiting in tears  
28 and reminiscing warmly, the text was primarily written by Beckett – many Beckett scholars  
29 regard *Three Dialogues* as the closest the writer came to a statement of his own position.  
30 Emphatically stating that failure is the inevitable outcome of artistic behaviour, Beckett argues  
31 that engaging *with* failure offers a possibility for art to refuse expression: a quality he proposes is  
32 a misperception at the core of reception of artwork. To counter this erroneous assumption, he  
33 asserts that the artist should announce that

34  
35 There is nothing to express, nothing with which to express, nothing from which to  
36 express, no power to express, no desire to express, together with the obligation to  
37 express.<sup>10</sup>

38  
39 And that

40  
41 To be an artist is to fail as no other dare fail [ ... ] this submission, this admission, this  
42 fidelity to failure, [is] a new occasion, a new term of relation.<sup>11</sup>

43  
44 For Beckett, failure is to fail to represent. By engaging with and exposing the myths, impossi-  
45 bilities and resistances of representation, an attitude mindful of the failures inherent in the very  
46 operations of attempting to show experience can be constructed by using observation and  
47 experiment to demand an engaged participation in thought and, at times, action. Amplification of  
48 failure can lead to something – as the artist, Dieter Roth, describes:

*Failure Over Utopia*

1 Smearing and destroying are the result to achieve what I want. That's why it became  
2 a method in my work. [...] I realised that even Malevich's black square resulted from a  
3 feeling of failure. One always arrives at something one can no longer depict.<sup>12</sup>  
4

5 Alberto Giacometti describes that he believed himself only capable of producing the ability to see  
6 a 'pale' image of what he could see through his own eyes, leaving him believing that his own  
7 success would 'always be less than my failure or perhaps equal to the failure'.<sup>13</sup>

8 Setting out to succeed-to-fail and to fail-to-fail steps aside from the orthodox order to enter  
9 instead a realm of doubt and not knowing in a refusal to give or take authority. Rather like  
10 Filliou's café genius, to embrace failure is to turn away from ambition and seek no place in  
11 history, making instead an indifferent and critical claim on the present. Rather than being a  
12 lazy, default position, indifference can offer a position of resistance, as exemplified by Herman  
13 Melville's scribe in his short story of 1853 *Bartleby, the Scrivener: A Story of Wall Street*.<sup>14</sup> The  
14 narrator, an elderly lawyer, describes his encounter with Bartleby, a man who he chose to  
15 employ in his chambers on the basis of his apparent constancy to even out the inconsistencies of  
16 his existing employees – one of whom was irascible in the morning, the other in the afternoon.  
17 Fast and committed at his chores at the start of his employment, the scrivener very quickly  
18 adopted a pointed conduct of indifference, responding to questions and requests with the simple  
19 phrase 'I would prefer not to' in an incessant passive resistance to required and prescribed  
20 behaviours. To take such a position is to be beyond redemption.

21 The thinkers, Leo Bersani and Ullyse Dutoit, state in their introduction to *Arts of Impover-*  
22 *ishment*, a book that discusses the work of Beckett, the painter Mark Rothko and the filmmaker  
23 Alain Resnais:

24  
25 Surely nothing can be more dangerous for an artist or for a critic to be obsessed with  
26 failure. "Dangerous" because the obsession we are speaking of is not the coming  
27 anxiety about failing, but rather an anxiety about not failing. [...] ]  
28

29 to then ask, what happens when an artist  
30

31 discourage[s] an audience from coming to their work [and saying] I have very little  
32 (perhaps nothing) to say to you, I have very little (perhaps nothing) to show you. To  
33 put it this way: My work is without authority. You will learn nothing from it; it will  
34 not even engage your life with that delight or superior pleasure which, you have been  
35 led to believe artists have the obligation to provide you.<sup>15</sup>  
36

37 Take, for example Resnais' film *Providence*. Released in 1977, Resnais' only English language film  
38 is highly self-conscious. Focusing on human relationships, miscommunication and the impact of  
39 memory and imagination on experience, this carefully constructed film turns away from accurate  
40 representation in favour of depicting logical and illogical details that define and reflect perception.  
41 The film's narrative is built around a night of physical suffering by its main protagonist, an elderly  
42 alcoholic writer. It soon becomes apparent that the events being played out on the screen are the  
43 inventions of a troubled mind rather than a cinematic reality that its audience should believe in.  
44 The staging is emphasised by the use of painted backdrops, and there are inconsistencies  
45 everywhere—doors open out to illogical spaces, characters never quite look properly at each  
46 other, at various times a footballer runs through the scene, and at one point speech from one  
47 character comes out of another's mouth. The failure of continuity shifts the film from an  
48 immersive fiction to a commentary on the acts of perception that structure our daily lives.

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1           The very final scenes of *Providence* see the writer inviting his family to lunch to celebrate his  
2 seventy-eighth birthday. The film shifts to a continuous, familiar cinematic narrative structure,  
3 proposing that the film is shifting from an account of the imagination to one of a corresponding  
4 reality, promising an explanation to the writer's confused inventions. Working with every  
5 cliché of happiness imaginable – sunshine, flowers, gambolling dogs, chic outfits, loving rela-  
6 tionships – Resnais underlines the artificiality of cinematic fiction, a process that perversely  
7 makes the speculations of the writer seem more 'real' in their reflection of the complexities of  
8 perception and the failures of memory.<sup>16</sup> Truth and fact fall into each other within the reams of  
9 a fiction: the film refuses to be possessed by its viewers. The writer, who narrates the film  
10 throughout to reveal his unspoken thoughts, closes the film with the statement: 'Nothing is  
11 written. We all know that. Don't we'. What is written poses as truth, and always fails to deliver  
12 its promises; in this statement an assertion is made and doubted simultaneously.

13           What does happen when art is divorced from a redemptive position, when it really cannot  
14 save, entertain or educate? What is left? Art released from the assumption of edifying value  
15 offers a subversive possibility to resist cultural authority and open productive forms of engage-  
16 ment. Bersani and Dutoit propose that if a work does not demand to be understood, it has the  
17 potential to avoid dogma and remain open and mobile in the face of contingencies. The  
18 authors suggest that such a break can occur when an artwork refuses truth, defies description  
19 and becomes paradoxically concerned with failing and not failing. To try something out with  
20 the potential of failure hovering above demands a set of observations and close attentions in  
21 order to assess whether or not failure has been arrived at – such an effort raises awareness of  
22 hierarchies and structures that otherwise might go unnoticed – see the case of *Bartleby*. Testing  
23 is a different register when considered as a process rather than a search for progress. When  
24 testing is an end in itself non-completion, and there non-perfection, becomes an option. There  
25 is a pleasure in testing through failure – for example the artists Chris Burden, Matthew Cal-  
26 derwood, Dominique Gonzales-Foerster, Roman Signer and Anika Strom all set about these  
27 terms. To speak of failure is to direct a relationship with the modernist project where the idea  
28 of the inventor (be it the artist, scientist, philosopher or explorer) is embedded in the search for  
29 a radical break in the world that would be ushered in by narratives of progress within the sphere  
30 of knowledge.

31           When one's expectations are dashed there can be an opportunity for a new register of  
32 thinking, one can 'investigate one's incapacibilities, as well as ones capabilities'<sup>17</sup> in order to open  
33 questions of how structures and limits shape the world. The philosopher of science Karl Pop-  
34 per's experimental process 'falsifiability' takes the stance that 'truth' or 'rightness' can only be  
35 found when there is no possibility of refuting a statement. Popper's is a process based on sus-  
36 tained speculation, which start with a repeatedly tested hypothesis. He describes characterised  
37 creative thinking as capable of 'break[ing] through the limits of the range'.<sup>18</sup> To apply critical  
38 thinking requires more than working with assumptions at hand, one must engage with failure  
39 and embrace the unanticipated. When we learn any skill, subject or action we must try things  
40 out to see if we can establish a way that things might work. This enables discrepancies between  
41 what is and what might be found; with this comes the ability to push understanding beyond the  
42 limits of the horizon. To test is to seek to refute – just think of Filliou's revolution of medi-  
43 ocricity, or of the Salon des Refuses where the artworks judged 'failures' were the very ones that  
44 built the future of art history.

45           Tied up with such judgements in art is the idea of the masterpiece. Honoré De Balzac's  
46 novel *The Unknown Masterpiece*,<sup>19</sup> first published in 1831 in the Parisian newspaper *L'Artiste*,  
47 narrates a failure of belief, reputation and, that very crux of artistic practice, failure for the artist's  
48 realisation to meet the intention. Balzac's allegorical story, set in seventeenth-century Paris,



*Failure Over Utopia*

1 describes an ageing painter, Frenhofer, working tirelessly on a painting, hidden until complete  
2 and perfect. In the tale, two painters – one just establishing himself and another impatiently  
3 awaiting his first moment of validation – seek out the master and persuade him to let them be  
4 the first to see the elusive painting. The ostensible subject of the painting is the artist’s past  
5 mistress. He has been working on this painting for many years, meticulously correcting his work  
6 so it would be indistinguishable from a living body. Before revealing the artwork, the elderly  
7 painter desperately needed to check the painting against the ‘real thing’. However, it had taken  
8 so long that the former lover has significantly changed from his, probably inaccurate, memory,  
9 and he needs a new model. The youngest visiting artist somewhat unacceptably, elects his  
10 girlfriend for the purpose. The master sets about his task with renewed vigour and finally, with  
11 the younger painters anticipating the pinnacle of artistic labour, the masterpiece is revealed.  
12 What is seen is not at all what was expected. The pursuit of perfection has undone the repre-  
13 sentation: all that is left is a ‘wall of paint’, with a single perfect foot just visible amongst the  
14 mass of colour, shining from the canvas. In an age predating abstraction, Frenhofer tries to  
15 justify the painting as an atmosphere rather than a depiction, but ultimately, in this era of  
16 representational painting, he believes it a failure, as evidence of his own lost mastery.

17 Balzac’s account is of the gap between intention, expectation and realisation. The painter is  
18 working from a memory of his former mistress, chasing the past in pursuit of perfection. The  
19 story has been picked up by many artists, including Richard Hamilton who in 2011 depicted  
20 Courbet, Poussin and Titan surrounding a computer-enhanced nude in a painting titled ‘Le  
21 Chef-d’oeuvre inconnu, a painting in three parts’. Unfinished when the artist died in Septem-  
22 ber 2011, and perhaps not the strongest of Hamilton’s works, it does its work through its own  
23 failure – not skilfully painted it still holds the eye and demands judgement. Is perfection, after  
24 all, the most accurate route to the past or, indeed, to perfection itself? Is there a method more  
25 pertinent to the ways in which we understand our place in the world, and to the ways in which  
26 art can complicate what we think we know? Think of Felix Gonzales Torres’ ‘Perfect Lovers’, a  
27 pair of cheap battery-operated clocks that inevitably will fail to keep the same time. The ‘per-  
28 fection’ lies in the failure of accuracy; anything else would be romantic fiction. Perfection is  
29 satisfying, but failure is engaging, driving into the unknown. After all, if an artist was to make  
30 the perfect work there would be no need to make another. To cite Beckett: ‘Ever tried. Ever  
31 failed. No matter. Try again. Fail again. Fail better’.<sup>20</sup> To try again is to repeat, to enter into a  
32 series of rehearsals with no end point or conclusions. To achieve resolution is to achieve a  
33 masterpiece; a masterpiece is a work where nothing can be improved, nothing added. Beckett’s  
34 advice is to keep on trying, even if the hope of success is dashed again and again by failure. John  
35 Baldessari’s celebration of ‘wrong’ imagery asks, for example, what does it matter if a tree does  
36 sprout out of a head? To do so is to turn away from the authority of what is deemed to be  
37 right. Baldessari states, recalling Balzac’s tale: ‘Art comes out of failure. You have to try things  
38 out. You can’t sit around, terrified of being incorrect, saying “I won’t do anything until I do a  
39 masterpiece”’.<sup>21</sup>

40 Between the two subjective poles of success and failure lies a space of potentially productive  
41 operations where paradox rules and where transgressive activities can refuse dogma and surety.  
42 It is here that failure can be celebrated. Failure operates in the production, reception and dis-  
43 tribution of artworks, which inscribe certain practices into the history of art. The history of art is  
44 constantly tested and challenged and that very history itself is involved with the artist operating  
45 as an active agent seeking ruptures and spaces within contemporary experience in order to place  
46 something at stake within the realm of art. The purpose of art is not to represent or to illustrate  
47 what already exists: there is an urgency to it. There must be something at stake with art; for  
48 there to be something at stake there must be a possibility of failure.

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Notes

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# 8

## WHAT DID YOU HEAR?

### Another Ten Theses on Militant Sound Investigation<sup>1</sup>

*Ultra-red*

Mise-en-scene: An auditorium. There is seating for participants and a podium for the presenters. A laptop computer connected to reference monitors is placed on the podium. A flipchart pad on an easel is positioned so that it is clearly visible from all seats in the auditorium. A wall is cleared so that the flipchart sheets filled after each section of the presentation may be hung on display. These flipchart sheets should also be easily viewed by everyone in the auditorium.

This is how we want to organize our time together. We have prepared ten sound recordings, or “sound objects,” of around one-minute each. After playing each recording we will ask the question, what did you hear? Then we will allow for a minute during which time we invite you to call out your responses and we will write them on the flipchart. This will be followed by the reading of the next section of the text we have prepared, the playing of another sound recording, and a further minute of responses to the question, what did you hear? This portion of the presentation will take approximately forty-five minutes, leaving time for reflections and dialogue. One final note: there is no intended relation between the sound recordings and the portions of text, other than the fact that both the sound recordings and the text are derived from twenty years of Ultra-red’s practice of militant sound investigation.

1. Louis Althusser (2006) begins his text, *The Philosophy of the Encounter*, with a reference to Epicurus’s vision of the origin of matter. In the beginning of time the universe was a rain of atoms cascading through space. At one moment, one atom swerved and came into contact with another atom. For materiality to come from that encounter, one of those atoms would have had to then come into contact with a second atom. For Althusser, the question of politics and revolutionary organizing is the question of organizing the conditions for this second encounter. We take this question to have a direct relation to political practices as well as cultural practices. What is the relationship between activism and organizing? Activism, we would argue, is concerned with contributing to the conditions of the first encounter. Organizing, conversely, is concerned with the conditions of the *second encounter*—the encounter that occurs subsequently to a prior moment of contact whose effect is realized in its repetition and accumulation.

Sound object 1: Ultra-red, “Airport Metrolink Station, Burbank, California (June 15, 1999),” running time 1:00, from *Articles of Incorporation*. Public Record, 2004. MP3.

*Ultra-red*

1 What did you hear?

2 2. Most of the twelve members of Ultra-red have long engagements with specific social  
3 movements; from the struggles of migration in Germany, anti-racism in Britain, HIV/  
4 AIDS activism and gender and sexual rights in New York City, to housing justice in  
5 Los Angeles. A long-term accountability to those collective struggles defines what we  
6 mean by militancy. Formed in 1994, Ultra-red grew out of the AIDS activist move-  
7 ment, ACT UP: the AIDS Coalition to Unleash Power, a self-described “non-partisan  
8 group of diverse individuals united in anger to end the AIDS crisis through direct  
9 action.” Like all social movements, ACT UP had an analysis and a practice of culture.  
10 A central claim of that analysis was that the AIDS epidemic was not “natural.” Rather,  
11 for a virus to become an epidemic, the AIDS crisis was the result of structural  
12 inequality and the ideologies of heteronormativity, racism, and poverty. Those ideol-  
13 ogies existed in the very representations of the AIDS crisis each time the State, the  
14 bio-medical establishment, institutions of religion, the media, and so forth asked  
15 the question, “Is the general public at risk of AIDS?” Such a question presumes that  
16 the term *public* excludes always already those who are affected by HIV. Thus, the  
17 public is defined in exclusion of queers, people of color, migrants, and the poor. This  
18 exclusion had and continues to have very real consequences on who has access to  
19 education, prevention tools, research, and life-saving treatment. Thus, it was the very  
20 representation of *the public* that was producing the AIDS crisis. For AIDS activists, the  
21 public is always ideological. The public is always problematic.

22  
23 Sound object 2: Ultra-red, “4 minutes 33 seconds, Bienestar, East Los Angeles, March 15,  
24 2005 (Edit),” running time 1:00, from *An Archive Of Silence*. Public Record, 2006. MP3.

25  
26 What did you hear?

27 3. In his earliest writings, the radical Brazilian educator Paulo Freire (1968) analyzed the  
28 culture of silence as both the theft of the voice of the poor as well as the poor’s  
29 complicity in their oppression; the interpellation of the poor into the subjectivity of  
30 domination. Silence, therefore, and its culture was the thing that had to be broken for  
31 liberation to be realized. Much later in his life, Freire introduced a different concep-  
32 tion of silence into his writings. Thinking about the role of the teacher as one who  
33 facilitates the articulation and transformation of the desires of others, Freire referred to  
34 teaching as adopting a discipline of silence. Silence, therefore, is not just the culture  
35 that must be broken in order for liberation to occur. Silence is also the very condition  
36 for listening. This analysis demands that we ask: Who’s silence must be broken, who’s  
37 silence must be disciplined, and what is made of the listening that silence conditions?  
38 This notion of the teacher as one who listens informed the organizing work of the  
39 early civil rights movement. For example, in accounts of the SNCC campaigns in the  
40 south we are told repeatedly that Ella Baker taught the organizers how to listen. In his  
41 recounting of this process, John Lewis (1998) writes: “We were meeting people on  
42 their own terms, not ours ... Before we ever got around to saying what we had to say,  
43 we listened. And in the process we built up both their trust in us, and their confidence  
44 in themselves.”

45  
46 Sound object 3: Ultra-red, “Entrada, Union de Vecinos office, East Los Angeles,”  
47 running time 0:42, from *Structural Adjustments: Ajustes Estructurales*. Mille Plateaux,  
48 2000. CD.

*What Did You Hear?*

1 What did you hear?

2 4. Listening is never “natural.” It requires and generates literacy. Since it puts subjects into  
3 relation with each other and with the world, listening has the potential to contribute sig-  
4 nificantly to the constitution of collectivity. Yet the constitutive process far exceeds any  
5 listening procedure in and of itself. Organized listening procedures and their protocols can,  
6 however, affect transitional moments in political organizing. Over the years Ultra-red have  
7 found four moments where listening procedures can make such a contribution:

8  
9 First, a listening procedure can assist a group of people in the early stages of organizing  
10 themselves, helping them to identify themes or contradictions that will be the focus of  
11 collective inquiry.

12 Second, after completing an initial collective action, a group of people can use a listening  
13 procedure to assess what they have learned and to identify the next phases of inquiry.

14 Third, after being active for many years, a group can use an organized listening process to  
15 reflect on the historical terms of the struggle and test those terms against the current reality  
16 of lived experience.

17 Fourth, a listening procedure can help facilitate an encounter between two or more  
18 groups of people exploring the potential for collaboration.

19  
20 Sound object 4: Ultra-red, “Mayor of Maywood, California (November 17, 2011),”  
21 running time 1:30, unreleased.

22  
23 What did you hear?

24 5. To better understand the shift from the priority of organizing sounds to organizing lis-  
25 tening, we return to the research of the modernist sound theorist, Pierre Schaeffer. Central  
26 to his listening experiments is the “sound object,” which Schaeffer defines as the result of  
27 an encounter between an “acoustic action” (i.e. a sounding) and a specific practice of lis-  
28 tening. He delineates four such practices of listening:

29  
30 a. Identifying the real-world acoustic event(s) that cause a sound. (We can take an exam-  
31 ple from the unpublished memoirs of the artist Faith Wilding wherein she recalls lis-  
32 tening to the sound of an evening steam-whistle in the Bruderhof commune in  
33 Paraguay where she spent her childhood.)

34 b. Attending to the concrete-subjective qualities of a sound as it “strikes the ear.” (In our  
35 example, Wilding describes the sound as having a particular pitch and a single sustained  
36 call that echoed across the fields in which the commune members worked.)

37 c. The next mode involves analyzing specific sound qualities. This is a move into abstraction. For  
38 us, this is where listening pulls in recollections and associations, the resonances of lived experi-  
39 ence and memory. (Again, returning to our example, Wilding writes how the whistle reminded  
40 her pacifist father of the air raid whistles he heard as a young man during the War in Britain.)

41 d. In Schaeffer’s program for musical research, the fourth mode is a move into music theory  
42 and composition. Alternatively, Ultra-red reads the fourth listening practice as compre-  
43 hending a sound’s social meaning. (For Wilding and her father a single whistle signaled a  
44 call for the workers in the commune to return from the fields and gather for the evening  
45 meal, a social practice markedly different from gathering in a shelter during an air raid.)

46  
47 In his commitment to music theory, Schaeffer represses the intersubjective dimension of  
48 listening. Political philosopher Susan Bickford (1996) on the other hand insists that political

*Ultra-red*

1 listening involves active engagement, intersubjectivity as much as subjectivity, and silence as  
2 much as dialog. The object is less defined by medium than the event of its reception. Or, to  
3 put it in terms interrogative of Schaeffer's, the object is not merely caused by a sounding but  
4 cause of the desire to listen.  
5

6 Sound object 5: Ultra-red, "Romsås Lake, Oslo, Norway (June 21, 2010)," running time  
7 2:00, unreleased.  
8

9

10 What did you hear?

11 6. These four modes inform how Ultra-red attempt to organize listening within the context of  
12 militant sound research. How does the investigation begin? Having determined the terms of  
13 the invitation (see section 4 above), a group of people come together around a common  
14 experience. That experience may have been a demonstration, a community crisis, or  
15 something as casual as a sound walk through the neighborhood. After listening together in  
16 the wake of that common experience, the question is asked, what did you hear? All  
17 responses are written on paper. After exhausting the reflections, the facilitator asks the group  
18 to arrange and analyze what has been written. This analysis leads to a question. This question  
19 is not one Ultra-red author as facilitators of militant sound investigation sessions. The his-  
20 torical record is rife with such listening-based investigations. For example, listening across  
21 the archive of what he called, the "sorrow songs," more commonly referred to today as  
22 "spirituals," W.E.B. Du Bois (1903) heard harmonic and dissonant layers of recollection and  
23 experience that informed his inquiry into the sound of the color line.  
24

25 Sound object 6: Ultra-red with Prototypes Pomona, "Sound object 5 for Listening Ses-  
26 sion, Claremont, California (August 16, 2011): What is the sound of alternatives to  
27 prison?" running time 1:00, unreleased.  
28

29

30 What did you hear?

31 7. What kind of question guides the militant sound investigation? What makes for a gen-  
32 erative question? Who asks the question and by what procedure are its terms articulated?  
33 To whom is the question directed or does it have a different function? Over the years,  
34 Ultra-red and our collaborators have arrived at the question in multiple ways. Sometimes  
35 the question names a point of convergence for those participating in the investigation. But  
36 this is not always the case. Sometimes the question names a point of divergence, a con-  
37 tradiction—what Freire (2001) calls, a "limit-situation"; a limit beyond which awaits  
38 greater understanding to inform future collective action. Analyzing the responses to the  
39 sound recording, the group may find markedly different, even contradictory responses, or,  
40 as Grace Lee Boggs (1998) writes, "listening closely to the grass roots for new questions  
41 that require new paradigms." The drive to reach consensus may be so great that the group  
42 quickly begins arguing to bring the contradiction to resolution. The degree of passion  
43 generated in the argument demonstrates the amount of energy and the depth of invest-  
44 ment in the contradiction itself. This contradiction may become the question that serves as  
45 the object for the investigation. The militant sound investigation places the question  
46 within the formulation: What is the sound of ( ... )?  
47

48 Sound object 7: Ultra-red, "*Sheik Abdullah bin Jassim Al-Thani: A Leader's Legacy 1913–*  
*1949*, an exhibition at the Qatar Museum Authority Gallery, Katara Village, Doha, Qatar  
(January 21, 2014)," running time 1:56, unreleased.

*What Did You Hear?*

1 What did you hear?

2 8. Sometimes the procedure described thus far involves a small group of people, such as a  
3 group of activists who wish to reflect on the terms of analysis that have to this point  
4 determined the terms of their interventions. Sometimes the procedure involves a much  
5 larger group of people that can be arranged into smaller groups. This is the investigative  
6 team or teams of the sound investigation. Having arrived at a preliminary question, the  
7 team(s) ask: what is the sound of that problematic (e.g. what is the sound of anti-racism?  
8 or, for our investigations into gentrification, what is the sound of the city that you no  
9 longer hear?). With that question in hand, the team asks, where and when will they go to  
10 hear that sound? They then make recordings at that place at the appointed time. In the  
11 beginning, we invite the participants to use any recording device with which they are  
12 comfortable; e.g. a cell-phone, a small dictation recorder, or a high-end digital audio  
13 recorder. Depending on where the team(s) are in their collective practice, team members  
14 may begin by making individual recordings or they may go straight to recording collec-  
15 tively. Going out into the field, the team(s) record everything, which is to say they record  
16 beyond the boundary of any predetermined imagining of what they would hear and then  
17 chose to share with others. Later the team members listen to their individual audio files.  
18 They take diligent notes on what they hear.

19

20 Sound object 8: Ultra-red with Ann Snitow, "Sound object 7 for The New School  
21 Encuentro, New York (May 8, 2010)," running time 1:32, unreleased.

22

23 What did you hear?

24 9. After repeated practices of listening, the team members begin to hear resonance and dis-  
25 sonance in the raw audio recordings. The team begins to organize sound objects from the  
26 audio source material. They may even go so far as to combine sounds from the original  
27 recording keeping in mind the initial question that guides the investigation. Either way,  
28 the richness of a sound object depends upon a mix of sounds that listeners will find  
29 familiar and unfamiliar. This is where aesthetics play a role. Researchers may apply digital  
30 manipulation to the recordings, resulting in objects that generate a balance between con-  
31 crete and abstract modes of listening. From our experience, shorter objects of one to two-  
32 minutes in length engender robust feedback while allowing the group to remain focused  
33 on the collective work of listening in contrast to individual aesthetic immersion. Once  
34 individual team members have assembled an initial archive of sound objects, the first lis-  
35 tening session occurs with just the members of the team. The team begins by listening to  
36 the first sound object with no introduction from the person or persons who organized it.  
37 The group writes down all the responses to the question, what did you hear? After the  
38 team exhausts their reflections, the author of each sound object tells the story about the  
39 recording. Notes are taken from the story and are compared with those generated during  
40 the first round of listening. What new resonances and dissonances have emerged? Does  
41 this help clarify, obfuscate, or refine the initial question? Depending upon the outcomes  
42 from the preliminary listening session, the group revises their sound objects. They convene  
43 a new listening session involving a larger assembly of people invited from the scene of  
44 struggle. It should be noted that the methodology we have described has, in fact, never  
45 occurred precisely in this form in the twenty-years of Ultra-red investigations.<sup>2</sup> Rather,  
46 the process outlined in this text is a set of protocols that guide collective inquiry. Each  
47 investigation takes on its own character and tone. What remains a consistent trajectory, by  
48 intention and by improvisation, is the sequence of collective reflection leading to critical

*Ultra-red*

1 analyses that in turn inform actions. These actions and their effects are the focus of a new  
2 round of reflections.

3  
4 Sound object 9: Ultra-red, “Sin Cargo (Edit),” running time 1:46, from *Amnistía*. Antiopic  
5 Records, 2003. CD.

6  
7 What did you hear?

8 10. Listening events occupy just one moment in the militant sound investigation. They are  
9 tools within the long labor of solidarity. At the same time, organizers, activists, and base  
10 communities sometimes resist intentional protocols of listening on the grounds that such  
11 procedures feel artificial. In that resistance the researcher may hear a conflict between  
12 underlying ethical systems. For example, collectives organized around friendship can find  
13 intentional processes inauthentic precisely because they demand a reorganization of rela-  
14 tions. In such an instance, protocols can shift a group’s ethical foundation from one based  
15 on affinity to one that becomes available to the outsider. It could be said that listening, as a  
16 political practice, is always an encounter with the stranger.

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18 Sound object 10: Ultra-red, “4 minutes 33 seconds, Los Angeles County USC Medical  
19 Center, May 22, 2004 (Edit),” running time 1:00, from *An Archive of Silence*. Public  
20 Record, 2006. MP3.

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22 What did you hear?

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**Further reading**

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**Notes**

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44 1 This text is based on a series of lectures given by Ultra-red members Robert Sember and Dont Rhine;  
45 first at Frise Künstlerhaus in Hamburg on May 20, 2010, organized by Jens Röhm and Kathrin  
46 Wildner and then four years later at the School of the Museum of Fine Arts in Boston on 10 February  
47 2014, organized by Seth Kim-Cohen. The title refers to Ultra-red’s pamphlet, “Ten Preliminary  
48 Theses on Militant Sound Investigation” (Printed Matter, 2008), an earlier exposition of terms to guide



*What Did You Hear?*

1 collective listening rooted in struggle and accountable to constituency. This earlier text may be found  
2 at: [http://asounder.org/resources/ultrared\\_10theses.pdf](http://asounder.org/resources/ultrared_10theses.pdf)  
3 2 For example, Ultra-red members have employed a variety of objects around which to convene lis-  
4 tening sessions. Over the years we have used video, photographs, poems, sound walks, stories, plays,  
5 and tableaux, etc. Sound objects have a particular utility in foregrounding listening as the site and  
6 means of the inquiry. They also carry the trace of time and location, which produce estrangements and  
7 ambiguities we find particularly productive for collective inquiry. Sound objects nurture tendencies  
8 toward addressing concrete instances and locations of an issue as well as the work of interpretation and  
9 theoretical analysis. The responses to other media are valuable in that the question, what did you hear  
10 (or see, or feel) will always launch the group into an investigation at the center of which is the shared  
11 pedagogical space of listening to and with each other.  
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## PART II

# Institutional Materialities

### Introduction

This cluster of chapters take a range of approaches to the intricate institutional archipelago that spans from artists' engagement with them through institutional critique and social practice, to recent torques in approaches to curation and censorship, to the materiality of art as such to the politics of institutionalization among theaters and community-based arts organizations. Steve Kurtz, founding member of Critical Art Ensemble (CAE), looks at the new institutional turn in "Institutional Critique Redux." He looks at the conjuncture for its revival after it had flourished for decades seemingly mining every angle of the ways in which dominating social relations manifest in the art world. In the aftermath of the financial bailout and the efficacy of Occupy Wall Street, frames of proportion, globalization and legitimation crisis returned the attentions of the collective endeavors of CAE to an institutional ground. This chapter examines CAE's own participation and intervention into one manifestation of the intersection of these frames in the art world, the international festival Documenta, and their project for d13. The resulting analysis of their experience allows them to revisit an abiding commitment to reintegrating critical reflection with grounds for alternative sociability. The negotiations that were issued from the controversial reception of their work become part of the armature of their institutional (re)turn.

Another trajectory out of institutional critique in which the social world becomes available as a field of practice and the partitions of the art world are realigned is captured under the rubric of social practice. Shannon Jackson's "Social Turns: In Theory and Across the Arts" revisits the arguments of her seminal book *Social Works* to look at what frontiers and challenges have been opened. She provides both a synthetic sweep and specific cases for the ways in which social practice engages publics, social support, theory, and a re-affiliation of artistic disciplinary domains. She is clear that social practice even as it expands the fields of participation and location for artistic endeavor does not augur some grand synthesis of all of the social or the entirety of creative practice. Quite the contrary, what social practice makes available both conceptually and strategically the contradictions and relations of antagonism that constitute these fields and the means by which work proceeds within them. By opening up the means through which social partitions and affiliations are staged these dynamics are manifest in collaborative artistic projects wherein what appears as the deconstruction of one art form may be displaced into the reconstruction of another, and the specificities of cultural location and artistic formation persist even as their relations are restaged.

*Institutional Materialities*

1 As with the turns to institutions and social practice, the curatorial seems to be a once  
2 restricted role that is now everywhere and manifest in myriad ways. Joasia Krysa has long  
3 tracked the expansion of curatorial activity, especially propelled by digital applications and picks  
4 up this critical trial in “The Politics of Contemporary Curating: A Technological Perspective.”  
5 She situates the expansion of curatorial practice beyond professional and institutional positions  
6 in relation to the broadening of art worlds and practices that have in turn opened the terrain  
7 toward more pervasive mediations and framings of how art circulates and is valued globally. Yet  
8 these conditions for growth have not been uni-directional they have resulted in apparently  
9 contrary tendencies of more concentrated authority of the celebrity, market brokering uber-  
10 curator, and the independent, do-it-yourself, distributed curatorial activities supported by digital  
11 and networked platforms. The simultaneous concentration and decentralization of curatorial  
12 activities and operations is redolent of larger cultural and political shifts. This makes the layering  
13 of curatorial efforts among quotidian digital technologies an effective critical approach in its  
14 own right to moving beyond the reduction from on high or the facile assertion of democratiza-  
15 tion that can characterize discussions of new technology while grounding the conversation in  
16 the particular agency of disparate curatorial approaches.

17 Censorship is certainly among the favored bad objects of the art world. Too often, the fact of  
18 censorship seems to speak for itself, substituting the absence of art for the presence of an analytic  
19 perspective on the forces brought to bear and the implications of reflecting on the episode to  
20 begin with. Svetlana Mintcheva has long mined the complexities and contrary impulses of arts  
21 censorship, and provides an elaboration of some of these contradictions in “Perverse Joy: The  
22 Paradoxes of Censorship.” Without providing an apology or minimizing the baleful impact of  
23 censorship, she examines instances of repression as recognition where art retains the power to  
24 threaten and provoke the powers that be. She also shows how censorship can itself politicize art  
25 by disambiguating and exacerbating its critical message. So while art that already understands  
26 itself to bear a political message may not typically get censored, the act of censorship surfaces  
27 precisely such effects in work that may not be initially framed in these terms. That censorship is  
28 a condition for the circulation of political meaning has also created conditions for preempting  
29 that possibility in what she terms structural pre-censorship, which eliminates some kinds of  
30 work from consideration for display, both of which up the ante for those moments when these  
31 apparatuses of power are disclosed as a kind of perverse joy.

32 It’s worth exercising a bit of caution when considering the institutionalization of art if this  
33 comes at the omission of the materiality of which art is itself comprised. This is the invitation  
34 and provocation of Toby Miller’s “Art Is Garbage” which insists on considering art’s environ-  
35 mental impact and its materiality as part of the responsibility for deleteriously impacting the  
36 planet. His invocation is not, therefore, to dismiss art as is commonly done when it displeases,  
37 but to take garbage seriously and to see how it is entangled in the artificial detritus that is part  
38 and parcel of the esthetic enterprise. He provides an incisive genealogy of anthropocentric  
39 versus ecocentric world views and how these have formed the archaeology of the museum  
40 diaspora and what is deposited there. He considers what the greening of the art world might  
41 entail from both an artist’s and a corporate sponsorship perspective, and how costs and impacts  
42 might be disbursed otherwise. To break the complicity of artists and corporations in a garbage-  
43 inducing growth agenda, he considers what other lines of programming and affiliation might  
44 activate another ethos of participation in and direction for a politically rigorous environmental  
45 art agenda.

46 In his description of the opening scene of a performance of “Little Society” Mark Driscoll  
47 recounts the actor carrying a large bag of empty plastic bottles, a sign of ecocidal contemporary  
48 China. His chapter, “Grass Stage’s Theater of Precarity in China,” zeros in on the institutional

*Institutional Materialities*

1 transformation of the theater in post-revolutionary China by looking closely at the work of  
2 this recently formed group that stands as a counter-tendency to the shift in appeal from pro-  
3 letarian performance to an arena for the wealthy. The focus on precarity among characters  
4 such as the salvage worker, a sex worker, and beggar foreground a shift in the relation  
5 between art and state in East Asia since the 1950s and 1960s toward independent artists and  
6 institutions that broke with realist sensibilities and engaged experimentalist techniques that  
7 drew upon Western avant-gardes. Over the past twenty years, waves of a new people's  
8 theater have sought to negotiate political prospects in a post-Tiananmen space between  
9 commodified desire and nationalism with a turn to ordinary looking actors and themes that is  
10 at once anti-capitalist in outlook and independent in its approach to its institutional sustain-  
11 ability as a theater for a public seeking its stage.

12 The question of the formation of publics and counter-publics in relation to social movements  
13 and institutional formations of church and state is taken up explicitly by Singaporean theater  
14 director Keng Sen Ong in "Evangelism and the Gay Movement in Singapore: Witnessing and  
15 Confessions Through Masks." The Pentecostal and evangelical movement that has arisen  
16 recently in Singapore has resulted in sinecures of influence among the political elite and opulent  
17 mega-churches. Some of these churches have been instrumental in resisting the decriminaliza-  
18 tion of homosexuality in Singapore. In this sudden and potent moral panic he offers a proposal  
19 for how art might be mobilized to counter the link between radical evangelism and patriarchal  
20 government. He proposes art as a means to apprehend and retrieve what this totalizing alliance  
21 leaves out. He focuses on the example of a short film which uses the confessional that has been  
22 used to attack non-heteronormative expression with an exposure of an attack on gays at a local  
23 beach. The filmic confession takes place through a character in a mask in which the faceless  
24 victim is imbued with the powers of self-representation through the projection of counter-  
25 narrative through the mask. The fissures in the otherwise unified public face of this oppressive  
26 institutional alliance are thereby exposed and re-voiced.

27 The institutionalization of previously marginalized knowledges has legitimated many emer-  
28 gent fields but certainly not resolved the relation between the university and the various com-  
29 munities with their own cultural institutions. Marta Moreno Vega has been at the forefront of  
30 organizing and seeking to secure more just support for the institutional infrastructure of these  
31 communities. She provides an account of the fruits of these efforts that have emerged through  
32 decades of working with a range of nonprofit arts organizations; government agencies, and  
33 cultural activists and organizers in "A Transformative Initiative for Achieving Cultural Equity:  
34 Community Arts University Without Walls." At the root of this project is the question of how  
35 new leadership will be readied for the sustenance and leadership of the next generation of  
36 organizations to take forward the demands for social, political, and cultural justice unleashed by  
37 the civil rights movements. The emphasis on cultural equity is an assertion of the centrality of  
38 culture to these various communities and the external interests in them that frequently result in  
39 dislocating gentrification, but also to create the institutional means by which the knowledge  
40 produced by community artists and activists has a means to be valued, legitimated, and dis-  
41 seminated as are its cognate forms within academic institutions. The resulting proposal is to  
42 create a University Without Walls where this work could be nurtured and advanced.

43 Stefano Harney's "Hapitalcity in the Undercommons, Operations Management and Black  
44 Ops" treats the drive to globalization as generating and being generated by a rhythm that cuts  
45 through the institutional landscape like the noise of thruput on the assembly line in the world  
46 social factory. In opposition to this smooth circuit of the line, he posits the undercommons as  
47 the excess that disrupts this global assemblage and which deinstrumentalizes the indifferent  
48 statistical agglomerations in favor of a subversive attention to logistics that can trace how

*Institutional Materialities*

1 counter-rhythms become legible where spaces have been emptied but are not unoccupied.  
2 Operations management renders all labor a vessel and an instrument for the flow of knowledge  
3 the logic of which is countered when those abused bodies cry out, noise back, amplify dissident  
4 polyrhythms. Black ops, audible especially among black artists with nowhere to run but who  
5 take up their fugitive positions in the undercommons to take up other lines of rest and respite  
6 from which other institutional materialities can emerge.  
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## 9

# INSTITUTIONAL CRITIQUE REDUX

*Steve Kurtz*

Within contemporary cultural discourse, few argue with the statement that institutional critique (IC) is dead. It had its two decades of relevance in the 1970s and 1980s, and even bled a little into the 1990s. Artists such as Hans Haacke, Guerrilla Art Action Group, Group Material, the Guerrilla Girls, Andrea Frasier, and Fred Wilson exposed every classist, sexist, and racist element of cultural institutions that were allegedly serving the public good through the collection, conservation, and display of cultural treasures. By the mid-1990s, perpetuating institutional critique was just beating a dead horse, as no more insights were to be gleaned, so politicized artists and arts administrators moved on to relational aesthetics, tactical media, culture jamming, and other interventionist methods and means that appeared so full of life. Institutional critique remained in its grave while the political economy of neoliberalism continued to evolve. Financial institutions, in particular, were about to embark on an accelerated evolution as they plundered new global markets in a near regulation-free environment. Neoliberalism was in hyperdrive, delivering on its promise to redistribute wealth to those who had the most at the expense of those who had the least, combined with core wealth extraction from the coffers of the public sector.

In spite of massive changes in the structure and dynamics of capitalism, IC remained in its grave until Occupy Wall Street. The foundation for the Occupy critique was clear: Wealth has been consistently redistributed in favor of the rich for decades; wages have remained flat or lowered for the grand majority of working people; and work demands have intensified over the same time period. Moreover, the economic system has bifurcated into two camps: those living in conditions of permanent economic depression and those who could not have it any better. This is why nothing gets better for the disorganized poor and working populations. For the wealthy, near interest-free money is ubiquitous, not to mention the additional millions being added to the coffers of financial institutions through quantitative easing. Unemployment is doggedly high, so people are desperate for any job, and willing to work more for less. If fear of unemployment was not enough, most people must also cope with the tyranny of debt that tacks them to desperation employment practices. Corporate profits are at an all-time high. The stock market is at record highs. Regulation of finance and labor practices is absent. And arguably most important, inflation is flatlined. What could possibly motivate the powerful to alter this situation? Certainly not the plight of nearly 50 percent of the US population suffering disastrous economic conditions, nor the staggering conditions of global poverty. Occupy Wall Street revived IC (via performativity) as one means to expose corruption—not in cultural institutions

*Steve Kurtz*

1 this time, but the classist, racist, and sexist corruption in financial institutions that allowed this  
2 situation to occur and maintain itself. Concurrently, CAE believed it was time to take a fresh  
3 look at the institutions we at times found ourselves associated with. This appeared to be a dif-  
4 ficult project, as no cultural platform has a cultural interest in a method believed dead. Then  
5 our opportunity came—an invitation to dOCUMENTA 13 (d13)—the perfect microcosm for  
6 an experiment in twenty-first-century IC.

### Three Frames

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10 Before we go further, CAE must acknowledge some key concepts that helped frame our analysis:  
11 proportion, globalization, and legitimation (crisis). We have already touched on proportion in the  
12 introduction. We do not mean this in the traditional Platonic sense of a harmonious alignment of  
13 the strata of being (as above, so below), but rather a conflicted tendency toward alignment more  
14 indicative of a Marxist understanding of material organization. Subordinate forms of production  
15 within a given historical moment will be pressured to reflect, however imperfectly, the dominant  
16 form of production. For example, during the time of industrial domination, agricultural pro-  
17 duction transformed into industrial farming. Even domestic space (particularly the kitchen) was  
18 Taylorized to better reflect the machinic characteristics of the factory. This is not to say that the  
19 analogy was perfect. Far from it; each domain continued to have its own sphere of autonomy, as  
20 well as limits on the degree to which the factory model could be imposed upon it. For example, a  
21 family had a difficult time replicating the authority structure of the factory. In spite of the model  
22 of the patriarch being the executive, the matriarch middle management, and the children the  
23 material to be machined into good parents, workers, and citizens, it was difficult for members to  
24 hire, fire, or quit; nor was there a clear separation of interests between the strata, as economies of  
25 desire and affect could not be rationalized away.

26 The art world follows this imperfect scheme as well. To the degree it can, the art world  
27 reflects characteristics of financial capital, particularly in terms of its relationship to globalization.  
28 It has, on the other hand, had problems with the characteristic of virtualization, since within the  
29 limits of art markets the virtual product is difficult to monetize, and there remains the threat of  
30 easy, cheap, and fast digital replication (a true problem for those in the music industry insistent  
31 on traditional property rights and law). With globalization, the elongated pyramid of art pro-  
32 duction has shifted in composition. At the top is biennial culture, comprised of a class of elite  
33 curators, artists, administrators, and investors that live a nomadic life, constantly moving to the  
34 ever-shifting location of the next blockbuster show. As there is no geographic financial center,  
35 there is no cultural center. Investment opportunities are global, as are recruiting sites in this  
36 intercultural (perhaps even internatural) market. The Americas, Europe, Asia, North and South  
37 Africa, the Middle East, and Australia are all in play.

38 Deeply interrelated and interdependent with this strata is the former top of the pyramid: the  
39 museums and blue chip galleries rooted in the former meccas of culture. For example, a  
40 museum may now host a blockbuster show, or be a partner in hosting one, but it cannot  
41 continuously maintain that scale of production, which is why this type of presentation had to  
42 become nomadic, seeking large pools of capital wherever they may be (in this respect the top  
43 strata has achieved virtualization). After such participation, a museum must rebuild and survive  
44 off its permanent collection, in conjunction with retrospectives and themed shows that are at  
45 best of mesoscopic significance. The next, interrelated, strata are the art schools, not-for-profits,  
46 and indy galleries that function as research and development, and as a network that reproduces  
47 the necessary work force. We are very familiar with these latter two strata, as IC has completed  
48 its work in these domains. Interrelated with this strata are the dangerous classes—the lumpen



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1 kickstarter generation that is seeking a revolutionary independent alternative to the pyramid,  
2 but is still socialized by it, and often sucked back into it. These are the cultural producers who  
3 can no longer accept the legitimacy of the pyramid as a network of democratic institutions  
4 fostering the interests of the many and contributing to the public good.

5 Enter Habermas' notion of legitimation (crisis). The core of legitimation in neoliberal society  
6 rests in the maintenance of a public perception that capitalism and democracy are working in  
7 harmony together—that one reinforces the other—and what is created is a state of welfare for  
8 all. Unfortunately, the state works on behalf of capitalism first, and maintains programs of  
9 general and targeted welfare only to the extent it must to maintain its legitimacy as an arbiter of  
10 fair and just distribution of resources and wealth. Democracy and capitalism are at best frien-  
11emies—and at worst, in total opposition, as one tends toward distributed authority and the other  
12 toward centralized authority. In order to maintain the necessary perception of legitimacy, the  
13 state must offer programs that materially signify fair distribution. In the US, for example, there is  
14 food assistance, rent assistance, Obamacare, unemployment insurance, Social Security, etc.  
15 Unfortunately for those at the top of the extremely vertically elongated wealth pyramid, these  
16 are all public funds that could be in their pocket. The goal of capital is thus to gut these pro-  
17grams and privatize the money either through tax cuts, corporate welfare, or government con-  
18tracts for goods and services that corporations can provide. These redistribution programs, in the  
19 capitalist utopian scenario, would be replaced by a commons of transcendental signifiers such as  
20 “freedom” and “self-reliance.”

21 The art world also needs its programs and signifiers of legitimacy so that it can materially  
22 demonstrate that its top institutions and events are not solely in the service of an elite class.  
23 Consequently, we see a variety of education programs and community outreach programs that  
24 are supposed to demonstrate a commitment to the amelioration of the public sphere. From  
25 CAE's perspective, these programs are marginal to any institution that has them, but even more  
26 curious to us is how they continue. We will return to this question later in the essay, but will  
27 first address the schism in wealth through the lens of one of CAE's projects for d13.

**A Public Misery Message**

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31 CAE first envisioned *A Public Misery Message: A Temporary Monument to Economic Inequality* in  
32 1992, at the end of the Reagan/Thatcher era and the first wave of neoliberalism, when it had  
33 become clear that the great redistribution of wealth (all assets) in favor of the richest people was  
34 continuing at full intensity. Working somewhat against the grain at the height of identity  
35 politics in progressive discourse, we wanted to examine economic class relations in the US. Our  
36 original idea was to inscribe a skyscraper (appropriated or parasitic monumentality) with  
37 economic data that would allow viewers to visualize in concrete terms the vast economic  
38 separation of the wealthy from the grand majority of citizens. While the proportional wealth of  
39 the bottom 80 percent could be inscribed on the first floor, the building's rooftop observation  
40 deck could function as an inscription site for the top quintile, and would allow people to look  
41 down and visualize economic separation as an embodied, spatial separation. As time wore on  
42 and economic division grew wider, we came to realize that very few skyscrapers in the US were  
43 tall enough to serve as indices of class wealth. Eventually, we gave the idea to Hans Ulrich  
44 Obrist for his book *Unbuilt Roads: 107 Unrealized Projects* (1998), which documented a variety  
45 of compelling but seemingly impossible proposals by artists, and shelved any hopes of actually  
46 doing the monument.

47 In spring 2011, during our interview for d13, we pitched this idea to the exhibition's artistic  
48 director, Carolyn Christov-Bakargiev. We believed Carolyn would fully understand the

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1 concept, would have one foot far enough out of the mainstream to appreciate it, and would  
2 have enough money to fund it. These predictions turned out to be true, and as that year turned  
3 into the year of austerity in Europe and brought the emergence of Occupy Wall Street in the  
4 US, the timing seemed right, and the project went forward. However, when we obtained the  
5 figures from the *Credit Suisse Global Wealth Databook*, we noticed the data had changed con-  
6 siderably since 1992. While we continued to divide the data by quintiles, we could not help but  
7 notice that the top 1 percent was now a class unto itself. We no longer needed the entire top  
8 quintile to make a statement about how far that grouping was separated in wealth from the  
9 lower 80 percent. In fact, much of the wealth of the top 19 percent had moved to the top 1  
10 percent. Another sad, but not shocking, element is that the poorest quintile, mostly comprised  
11 of people living on approximately one dollar a day, had gone underwater. This seemed  
12 impossible, as this demographic has no credit, and thus theoretically cannot go into debt.  
13 Members of the bottom quintile traditionally plateau at economic absolute zero. However, due  
14 largely to Western student debt, the figure had gone into negative territory (–359 USD). This  
15 may not seem like much, until one realizes that the small subdemographic of students moved  
16 the ossified average of wealth for over a billion of the poorest people on earth.

17 In Kassel, no buildings were tall enough for the project, so we had to find a new means of  
18 spatially representing separation in regard to wealth. Only one thing came to mind that could  
19 produce the vertical line we wanted—a helicopter—and a powerful one at that, as small-engine  
20 helicopters are incapable of vertical take-offs. To quickly describe the set-up for this perfor-  
21 mance, the wealth of 99 percent of individuals in the global population could be proportio-  
22 nately represented within 15 meters, while the helicopter could lift people to the height of  
23 225 meters (740 feet) that represented the wealth of individuals who make up the 1 percent.  
24 The 99 percent were represented by a banner that hung in the staging area we had set up near  
25 the entrance to the athletic field behind the Orangerie. The proportional wealth of the bottom  
26 80 percent could be represented on the banner on a very human scale taking up just over a  
27 meter of its height. The remaining 13 meters was occupied by the top 19 percent, which was a  
28 massive enough separation, but nothing compared with the top 1 percent. While the view from  
29 the ground was stunning, the view looking down from the helicopter was far more vast and  
30 startling, in spite of the objective fact that the two directionalities were the same. By changing  
31 the perspective, proportionality and spatial familiarity were radically altered, and distance was  
32 understood in a more affective, embodied way. In this manner, we were convinced we could  
33 take the abstractions of large statistical numbers, and transform them into an embodied, visual,  
34 and spatial experience in the world that would aid in clarifying the content of the statistical  
35 abstractions.

36 The final problem to solve was deciding who could ride in the helicopter. For the solution,  
37 we decided to reflect the current social conditions in the same way we were reflecting the  
38 economic ones. In that spirit, we made limited-edition, printed invitations that guaranteed  
39 priority seating and sold for 200 euros to those who could afford them. The paper itself was  
40 partially made from paper currency. Everyone else could play a scratch-off lottery ticket with a  
41 one-in-fifty chance of winning (not bad odds for lotto). These tickets sold for one coin of any  
42 denomination from any currency. Ticket holders could proceed down a red carpet for priority  
43 seating, while lotto winners waited standby on a dirt path for their opportunity to get a view  
44 from the top.

45 Since the primary thrust of this project was to transform a nearly unfathomable statistical  
46 abstraction into a lived, concrete experience some may wonder, where is the IC in that? What  
47 CAE presented was more or less a concrete constellation representing a very unfortunate con-  
48 sequence of thirty years of neoliberalism. All true, but the IC was in the details. First, consider

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1 our use of the helicopter as the operative instrument: It was also the perfect representation of  
2 the waste and excess that fundamentally constitutes biennial culture, and that is rarely com-  
3 mented upon or treated as wasteful, opulent, or decadent. CAE received harsh criticism  
4 regarding our use of the helicopter, but we did not read anywhere criticisms of the use of  
5 helicopters to place massive sculptures for display. The patrons of preview day were quite  
6 content to take the magical appearance of the outdoor monuments as just that. How little has  
7 changed since the 1970s. Nor was there ever a mention of all the fuel wasted and pollution  
8 generated in decamping the art world and sending it to middle-of-nowhere Germany for a  
9 destination art festival. The waste generated for this worldwide massing of art was dwarfed by  
10 the worldwide massing of people. CAE feels very confident in saying that the overwhelming  
11 majority did not ride a bike or use some other green transportation to get to Kassel. Events like  
12 these represent the transparent privilege of biennial culture; its geographic, nomadic movement  
13 is so unquestionably considered to be such a common part of everyday life that this form of  
14 waste and excess can simply be ignored, especially when green-oriented projects are included in  
15 the exhibition as an alibi for environmental democracy.

16 The invitations were a second and very telling, experience that we haven't been able to  
17 represent until now. In spite of the 200 euro cost, the majority of the tickets bought were  
18 not used. Although the vast majority of people with time and funds to visit Documenta would  
19 not likely see their wealth turned upside down by a sum of 200 euro, CAE would guess that  
20 that same overwhelming majority are not inclined to simply throw that money away. The true  
21 patrons of biennial culture, however, have no problem disposing of cash in this way. "Better to  
22 have tickets and not use them than to need tickets and not have them" appears to have been  
23 the wisdom of these purchases. On the other hand, the lotto players were playing to win the  
24 "prize," and were sure to collect their winnings. The difference in the shaping of social relations  
25 pending access to wealth was clearly on display.

26 While presenting and watching the performance of economic difference was of great  
27 interest to CAE, we believed we would be remiss if we did not address the other end of the  
28 spectrum. We wanted to address the impoverished elements that always seem to ride on the  
29 coattails of elite production and function as its alibi for democratic structure. Now we can  
30 return to the question posed earlier: Why do people participate knowing this? This is a  
31 different question than that of politically motivated artists gambling that acting as temporary  
32 alibis for institutions or festivals may pay off, enabling them to obtain a platform to spread  
33 ideas and tactics that may raise consciousness or produce more effective action in regard to  
34 their issues of concern. This type of negotiation is fairly standard for anyone whose work  
35 does not reflect the values and tastes of biennial culture. What we wanted to examine was  
36 the institutionalization of education, public programming, and community outreach as a  
37 permanent, in-house alibi. How does this institutional mainstay perpetuate itself given its  
38 constant state of economic poverty?

39 One common explanation that we rejected at the outset is the notion that participants are  
40 somehow cashing in on the sign value of the venue. While there may be some value via this  
41 association, it's very little. If an artist or administrator is working outside of the main galleries of  
42 an elite institution, the sign value is completely degraded. People have not dined at a five-star  
43 restaurant just because they went in the back door and sampled a dish or two in the kitchen.  
44 Moreover, if we may stereotype for a moment, most of the people who participate in such  
45 programming are not doing what they do with a mind to becoming rich or famous; they are  
46 trying to contribute to social change through the production and distribution of new forms of  
47 resistant culture. CAE's other d13 experiment gave us an opportunity to explore new hypoth-  
48 eses concerning this matter.

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### Winning Hearts and Minds (WHaM)

War zones are as instructive as they are destructive. Since Vietnam, they have beautifully illustrated the contradiction between capitalism and democracy. They teach the lesson that (false) democracy is an alibi for the good intentions of capitalist intervention even in the face of wanton destruction and appropriation. Whether it is the Thieu government in Vietnam or the Karzai government in Afghanistan, this lesson never changes. The establishment of global democracy has never been a goal of global capital. Its preference is for an authoritarian plutocracy that can be labeled a democracy. This is why the psy-ops principle of “winning hearts and minds” can simultaneously exist with the military strategy of “search and destroy.” Now that winning hearts and minds is not just US policy, but NATO policy, we can see it at work in every conflict in which NATO members have a stake; in every case, the idea of winning the people through the alleged establishment of democratic institutions never has to be reconciled with unprovoked invasion, house-to-house searches, assassinations, torture, or drone attacks. Yet, even in these brutally conflicted environments, resistance is still possible, and positive new arrangements for living, activist networks, and even infrastructural changes can and have been built.

Cultural institutions in capitalist nations partially reflect this same disturbing set of contradictions and relationships. In the field of visual arts, museums tend toward a support of plutocracy through building and maintaining the value of collections and by functioning as a parallel track to the art market. Institutes, *Kunsthallen*, and major festivals function as corporate alibis for good cultural citizenship, and too often function within the frame of development of cultural products in the service of profit and enterprise. At the same time, these institutions have their democratic side, which usually appears in the form of community outreach, public programming, and education programs. These programs are generally the most impoverished, but are staffed by those who genuinely want to create events promoting social change, and are willing to accept poverty as a given condition to do it. This blend of having few resources, together with a strong sense of volunteerism, leads to the development of low-cost public events that are subsidized by the free labor of those who create them—elite institutions have found a way to leverage good citizenship. Or to put it another way, the poor subsidize the creation of a false signifier that signs the beneficence of plutocracy. And yet, on an immediate person-to-person level, the results of such performances, exhibitions, and events can be inspiring and culturally valuable.

This is the contradiction that CAE wanted to perform at d13 in *Winning Hearts and Minds*. As was to be expected, d13 had its education and community outreach programs that were not so well funded, but did better than most. Within this context and, more to the point, the general systemic one described above, CAE created a cultural space that was totally impoverished: a small space (3 \xD7 10 meters) with a minimum amount of furniture, no climate control, and located on the very margins of the festival at the end of the warehouse district near the railway station (a location we chose). We had zero budget for artist fees, travel, or installation support, although d13 provided free maintenance of the space itself. Two weeks before the festival started, we issued a call for proposals to use the space for one hour each day at noon; there would be one hundred lunchtime events over the one hundred days. Proposals poured in from around the world. Even though we told those who applied that there was no financial support and, even worse, that they would have to bring all their own equipment, the program filled in a matter of weeks (the amount of proposals became so unwieldy that we had to pull the call a week after the festival opened). Most of the events we chose were not curatorially viable (which is not to say we didn’t think they were good projects). As usual, the poor and the marginal were subsidizing the wealthy with free programming. At the same time, we lived the other half

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1 of the contradiction. We wanted these projects to succeed. We wanted to give these artists a  
2 real platform at d13, and so we did whatever we could within our frame of poverty to help  
3 make these events the best they could be.

4 This relational experiment left CAE in the unusual position of being participant observers at  
5 every level. We were performers, administrators, directors, and audience members. We had  
6 inside, participant knowledge of all the different interactions, from preparation to execution to  
7 post-event reflection. We could begin to entertain the question of why people participate in  
8 this activity from a point of direct experience.

9 This has been a curiosity to CAE for a long time. On a fairly regular basis, we get invita-  
10 tions from the “alternative” wing of prestigious institutions to do a performance, give a lec-  
11 ture, or speak on a panel. It’s usually for a good cause, or an important topic that deserves  
12 exploration, but there is never a budget that would allow us to participate without paying  
13 into the event ourselves—labor subsidizing the conditions of its own employment under the  
14 premise that this is a way to contribute to social change. As we stated earlier, this is the  
15 leveraging of good cultural citizenship in a bait-and-switch scheme. CAE generally does not  
16 accept these invitations (although there have been exceptions), but in no way are these  
17 declinations a problem for these institutions, as they can always recruit other participants as  
18 instantly as we could fill our space at d13.

19 CAE does not mean to suggest that most artists are fooled by the scheme; they are not, and  
20 our experiences and data from d13 seem to back it up. Rather, subjectivity is divided. On the  
21 one hand, there is a mode of critical reflection in which the conditions of production are  
22 obviously exploitive. No participant in CAE’s project could fail to comprehend that its condi-  
23 tions were absurd given its context in one of the wealthiest art world events on the planet, any  
24 more than recipients of invitations to work at any other institution at cost to themselves per-  
25 ceive them as sustainable or fair.

26 On the other hand, there is the mode of immediate experience. The existential territory that  
27 can be carved out in which new or radical or unusual conversations, behaviors, and activities can  
28 be mobilized is motivating, because it can produce copious amounts of pleasure, satisfaction, and  
29 empowerment. This overflow of affect seems to override reason, pushing producers on to new  
30 events. While CAE received endless questions as to why there was no financial support for the  
31 project, and as many requests for free passes to the festival or some other kind of secondary  
32 compensation (which was never given), indicating a frustration with the conditions of participa-  
33 tion, we only had one complaint following a contributing artist’s event. The other ninety-nine  
34 were completely enthusiastic about their presentations. Moreover, the amount of appreciation we  
35 received for sharing our little shed in the railyards was surprising even to CAE. This outpouring of  
36 good will toward WHaM by the participants answered our question in terms of what drives  
37 participation in this unfortunate cultural landscape. People are more interested in a less-alienated  
38 cultural connection than in their bank account. Once enveloped in the reward of the productive  
39 moment, putting reason aside for a moment was easy. From our point of view as administrators,  
40 CAE can say that it was the same for us. We could easily lose our observational distance once  
41 caught up in a successful event, and be happy about the project for immediate, rather than sec-  
42 ondary, reasons (such as understanding gained at the end of the project cycle).

43 While CAE has hopefully contributed to skepticism about the received hypothesis that  
44 explains participation in impoverished conditions as mere appropriations of sign value, we find  
45 ourselves back at an old problem that has concerned CAE since its inception: How can we  
46 reintegrate critical reflection and application with pleasure economies in emerging existential  
47 territories of alternative sociability? Our stock answer is always to make sure when engaging a  
48 public that we have a mechanism in the project that enables people to see their stake in what is

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1 being talking about or performed. We believe we have to qualitatively and personally connect  
2 them to the issue. If we fail to do that, they're not going to care, or will perceive it as boring  
3 didactic rubbish. With this method, affect is a desirable and productive consequence, reinforcing  
4 the dialogical critique of codes, and the planning and execution of new forms of organization.  
5 Be that as it may, this suggestion does not solve the problem of negotiation with sponsoring  
6 institutions to begin with, when the precondition for action is self-financing. This is a problem  
7 for which we have no answer at present.

8 CAE is loathe to suggest a boycott, because it would not produce a different set of relations.  
9 To the contrary, such action would only provide cultural institutions cover, signing that they  
10 would be more democratic if only the desire existed among the general population. This would  
11 actually create the desired conditions that these institutions want, reinforced with plausible  
12 deniability.

13 Cultural producers have to stay at the negotiation table, not only to gain access to platforms  
14 for ourselves (although it is often more productive to make our own), but to aid in pushing  
15 elite institutions away from their allegiance to capital and toward an allegiance with democracy.  
16 Such institutions cannot leave the table, either, as their legitimation rests upon "good faith"  
17 participation; however, those below or outside the second tier of the pyramid have no leverage  
18 to move beyond the social and economic minimum. This was abundantly clear to CAE in our  
19 interactions as administrators with those in our program. The "take it or leave it" construction  
20 appears to be immovable, and this may be a primary reason for a needed resurgence of IC. We  
21 can now see the work of women, people of color, and a variety of sexual orientations in  
22 museums and galleries. We can also see both public, and some private, cultural institutions  
23 forced to have some relationship to work beyond that dictated by the market and tastes of  
24 patrons. IC has contributed to these changes and perhaps, through its symbolic pressure, general  
25 financial and social relationships may be improved as well.

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# 10

## SOCIAL TURNS

### In Theory and Across the Arts

*Shannon Jackson*

As a scholar, critic, teacher, and enabler of cross-disciplinary, socially-engaged art, I am exploring a variety of questions that have emerged since the publication of *Social Works* in 2011. As artists, critics, and citizens work together to decide what social models we hope to be enabling under the rubric of social art practice, four intersections offer points of entry into these conversations: Social Practice and the Public; Social Practice and Social Support; Social Practice and Social Theory, and Social Practice Across the Arts. This chapter, divided into these four parts, offers a view of the debates, methods, and effects that influence and inform projects and histories included in the category Social Practice.

#### **Part I: Social Practice and the Public**

On a blustery late morning in Rotterdam in May of 2011, a group of people assembled on a stone sidewalk in front of a defunct city post office. In front of this “deaccessioned” civic space, an exquisite plinth and glass vitrine had been installed. Inside the vitrine, a perfectly smooth metal cone shone in the available light, reflecting and refracting the images of viewers who peered at it. Near the top of the cone, a metal handle was attached, evoking the shape of a designer tool or high-end household fixture, perhaps fabricated for the Alessi consumer. A large crowd of Rotterdam’s civic figures came forward to welcome assembled guests. As the clock approached noon, they formed an expectant circle around the plinth. A bespectacled, wiry gentleman dressed in everyday clothes adjusted his flat cap and stepped forward to unlock the vitrine; he pulled out the cone by the handle, transforming the sculpture into a megaphone by raising it to his mouth. As the noon bell began to toll, the gentleman called out in international English, “It’s never too late to say sorry.” He spaced his words evenly and enunciated clearly, as if he wanted to make sure that all citizens within earshot were appropriately reassured. He then carefully replaced the megaphone, re-locked the vitrine, and walked out of the crowd and down the block. His gait and costume blended into the moving landscape of the city street as the bell tolled behind him.

“It’s Never Too Late to Say Sorry” was conceived by the Scandinavian artists Michael Elmgreen and Ingar Dragset and commissioned by the city of Rotterdam’s public art council. Elmgreen and Dragset are artworld favorites who have made a career out of artworld critique. Despite or perhaps because of their higher art status, they often receive equivocal response from artists, critics, and citizens. My own intrigued and sometimes grumpy investigation of Elmgreen

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1 and Dragset's work came from my reaction (Jackson 2011: 190–209) to their own differently  
2 intrigued and differently grumpy investigation into the role of public welfare systems in our  
3 contemporary imagination. As embodied in the large, extended installation entitled “The  
4 Welfare Show” of 2005 and 2006, I found them turning an ironic and suspicious eye on the  
5 bureaucratic, normalizing, encumbering Institution of the public sector. While all-too familiar a  
6 critique in a post-Foucault world, I wondered about the ultimate political effects of such a  
7 position and how critiques of a normative and bureaucratic Liberal welfare institutions were,  
8 paradoxically, enabling covert and not fully conscious identification with neoliberal processes of  
9 market-based self-actualization. This structure has been a recurrent concern as a critique of the  
10 faults of so-called Liberal Democratic institutions has simultaneously (and insidiously) been  
11 facilitating neoliberal attachment.

12 I found Elmgreen and Dragset sometimes worrying about those neoliberal attachments as  
13 well. As “The Welfare Show” toured from Norway to the UK. to Toronto, their own artists  
14 statements began to change, oscillating between a critique of the controlling systems of the  
15 public sector as a State apparatus and an equally urgent critique of a privatized, neoliberal ima-  
16 ginary that would dismantle public sector systems altogether. In other words, Elmgreen and  
17 Dragset did not always seem sure whether to be targeting the normative backwardness of public  
18 sector, state, and civic institutions or to be targeting a neoliberal, privatizing move that wanted  
19 to dismantle public, i.e. “big government,” institutions.

20 Indeed, this has been a question for me, worrying as I do that a generalized critique of  
21 institutions as “the Man,” of Systems as Bureaucracy, and of “The State” as vertically structured  
22 Institution of oppression echoed, however oddly the same anti-institutional, anti-governmental  
23 rhetoric of the Tea Party in the United States as well as other ultra-conservative, anti-Institu-  
24 tional movements worldwide. At a time when public systems in the US, in the UK, and abroad  
25 are being steadily dismantled and/or privatized, a socially engaged rhetoric that is anti-statist and  
26 anti-institutional can paradoxically help the dismantling.

27 Legions of culture workers are justifiably exhausted by the public sector, feeling that its  
28 institutional models dispensing social care are too anachronistic and cumbersome to do much  
29 good, and I largely support efforts by many to develop grassroots, DIY, horizontal, transversal,  
30 rhizomatic, non-programmatic actions, and campaigns that replace such tired social structures.  
31 Occupy showed us the potency of these alternate forms of governance where activists self-  
32 consciously form, not as uniform activist blocs or consensus seekers, but as compositions of  
33 singularities. How does such an ethos coexist with another one that recognizes the role that  
34 public systems have played—in schools, health care, public transport, and post offices—and will  
35 no longer continue to play with their erosion? How does a rhizomatic politics of horizontal,  
36 singular actions, and compositions square with efforts to restore publicly subsidized education or  
37 publicly subsidized transport, a restoration that might need the operational character of an  
38 Institution to collect taxes and to run on time? If so many Occupy movements are justifiably  
39 concerned about the privatization of public space, to what degree are public sector systems for  
40 maintaining the Commons part of what we want to see restored? The wide and rangy field of  
41 social art practice has not decided where it lands on this question, nor am I sure that it needs to  
42 come to some kind of collective agreement. But how do these questions about the past and  
43 future of social Institutions find their way back into what we think about—and revise—in our  
44 imagining of social art practice?

45 The structure of “It's Never Too Late to Say Sorry” allows for the exploration of our  
46 uncertainty about the future of collective social models—and the uncertainty about how we are  
47 supposed to feel about their precarious dismantling. In creating the piece, Elmgreen and Dragset  
48 worked with Rotterdam's civic arts commission to hold extensive auditions, eventually selecting



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1 Wim Konings, who happens to have a dual career as an artist and a postal carrier, to play this  
2 role. Konings works at home each morning on repetitively geometric paintings and drawings,  
3 then leaves at mid-day to begin his repetitive route as a part-time postal carrier in the afternoon.  
4 As a piece installed before a de-accessioned post office, the casting could not have been more  
5 apt: “The city had to close down the building,” an assistant in Rotterdam’s sculpture project  
6 told me, “because all of the mail systems are becoming privatized. Some think it might be made  
7 into a mall for high end shops.”<sup>1</sup> As Konings finished his announcement and walked down the  
8 block, heading firmly in the direction of city hall, the piece begged the question: who needs to  
9 say sorry? And for what? Do civic leaders need absolution? Prospective retail owners? Dutch  
10 anti-immigration activists? Elmgreen and Dragset themselves? Or the citizens of Rotterdam  
11 who are reckoning with their own relationship to immigration, to the EU, to imperiled public  
12 systems, to postal workers who might soon be out of a job?

13 Interestingly, there was ample time to consider different answers to such questions. The city  
14 of Rotterdam has committed to constant public reminding, authorizing Elmgreen and Dragset’s  
15 piece to be repeated each day at noon for 365 days. The piece was thus an ongoing act of  
16 public penitence, one whose apparent content and addressee transformed throughout the year,  
17 subject to different kinds of interpretations by the Dutch citizens and tourists who choose to  
18 listen and those who choose to ignore. The city and its citizens contend with the force and  
19 reach of “saying sorry” as the conditions of performance change each day.

20 To come clean about my own embeddedness in the future of the public sector, and in the  
21 future of public institutions, I think about Konings’s performance of the public next to a saying  
22 imprinted on a Fortune Cookie that I received and put on my office door some years ago,  
23 “You are faithful in the execution of any public trust.” Often wondering why I put it there, I  
24 think it is a way of ensuring some kind of daily exposure to the question of what it could mean:  
25 what is public trust anyway? What does it mean to be faithful to its execution? What does it  
26 mean to be unfaithful? And what does it mean to say sorry if I am? As a public employee of the  
27 State of California and the United States, I—like other educators, social workers, or curators—  
28 find myself in an interdependent but also suspicious relationship to the public sector. A com-  
29 mitment to public values interacts with that suspicion to create a strangely confused affective  
30 sphere. How do we maintain suspicion of the public sector even as we call for its renewal? At  
31 U.C. Berkeley, the history of a 1960s’ era protest culture is often remembered as resistance  
32 against The Machine; now, however, at least to me, the anti-Machine discourse does not  
33 always help us to argue for the maintenance of our university as a public institution. If political  
34 activism means “getting the System off our backs,” how were we simultaneously going to argue  
35 that public systems had our backs? Within this kind of confused sphere, what is trust and who is  
36 sorry? When I think about the public sector—as a system, a hope, a punching bag, a repressed  
37 background—I feel that a primary ambivalence propels the sorrow, the hope, the guilt, the  
38 impatience, the commitment, the disdain, the condescension, and—in that strange space where  
39 the sensibilities of activist resistance actually feed the cocktail party conversation of artworld  
40 privilege—the occasional wish to be absolved from having to worry about something as old-  
41 school as public systems at all.

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**Part II Social Practice and Support**

One mode of debate around the role of Institutions in social practice is the reflection on the  
distributive social models of the public sector; another mode of debate is how art intervenes into  
this territory. Often both celebrators and detractors of artistic intervention imagine its effects as  
extra-aesthetic in character. In this formulation, art intervenes into the social in a way that

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1 presumes that art and the social were separate in the first place, and that social intervention  
2 requires art to move away from its own domain. I often try another tack, one that presumes  
3 first an aesthetic stance on the construction and maintenance of social systems, as my way of  
4 addressing some of the many distressed and distressing conversations that vex the field of social  
5 art practice, in particular conversations that pose binaries between aesthetic standards and  
6 social efficacy.

7 As boring as this binary is, it is one that still shadows our practices, framing and constraining  
8 the terms in which we are asked to defend our work. I began to think more about how sys-  
9 temic engagement could have a kind of formal rigor, to think about how engagement and  
10 intervention within the supporting systems of the social were part and parcel of an aesthetic  
11 practice. I began to excavate the term “support,” both for its aesthetic and social resonance.  
12 Once one picks up that corner of the rug, one realizes that the exposure of the supporting  
13 apparatus has been a central force in a variety of social and working class movements, and has  
14 also been a central feature of twentieth and twenty-first-century experimental performance and  
15 visual art. For Bertolt Brecht, theatre only became an arena of social reflection when the thea-  
16 trical apparatus was exposed; debate about the supporting apparatus of society occurred in a  
17 theatre that was explicit about its interdependence upon its own supporting apparatus. This  
18 theatre art history around the exposure of support is matched by a visual art history where we  
19 find it in Constructivism’s expanded practice, in Marcel Duchamp’s interest in calling attention  
20 to the supporting apparatus of the museum, as well as in Minimalism’s attempts to call attention  
21 to art’s object status as interdependent with its relation to a beholder.

22 *Relational Aesthetics* (Bourriaud 1998) pushed that interdependent relation even further, sub-  
23 stituting Minimalist geometries with structures that provoked artists and receivers to consider  
24 the interdependent, intersubjective relation itself as the central material of the artistic event. The  
25 question of the art object’s dependence upon a supporting network of bodily relations and  
26 material infrastructures has propelled some of the central innovations of dance practice, where  
27 choreographers challenged the gendered hierarchies and anti-gravitational conventions of ballet  
28 to re-orient the dancers’ relationship to the ground, the wall, and eventually the building itself.<sup>2</sup>

29 The concept of support offered some different possibilities for considering conjectures and  
30 joining socio-political preoccupations with aesthetic projects. First of all, it gave the domain of  
31 intervention an aesthetic rather than extra-aesthetic character, joining it to large artistic and  
32 formal histories that explored the degree to which the surround, the background, the apparatus,  
33 the support, are not clearly separate from the aesthetic object but part and parcel of it. Second,  
34 the language of support echoed some of my socio-political concerns about the language of  
35 Institutions, foregrounding intervention only as the act of an Individual who “Resists” the  
36 “System,” but also as an act that might expose how a “system” could actually support our  
37 experience of equality and expression. Such social art practices acknowledge the interdependent  
38 systems of support that sustain human beings, even if we often feel constrained by them. They  
39 provoke reflection on the autonomy as well as the heteronomy of human beings, imagining  
40 agency, not only as systemic disruption, but also as systemic relation.

41 Assembling artistic acts that induced a kind of “infrastructural avowal” prompted me to think  
42 about recent contemporary work where the notion of infrastructure derives from a materialist  
43 discourse and “avowal” from what we might call a psychoanalytic or affective discourse. For  
44 instance, Paul Chan’s “Waiting for Godot in New Orleans” received both artworld and civic  
45 attention for using site-specific theatre to prompt reflection on the loss and whereabouts of local  
46 and federal systems that could have sustained and might now rebuild New Orleans post-Katrina  
47 (Jackson 2011: 210–238). Chan deployed and redirected his privilege as an artist to launch a  
48 nine-month project that involved community collaboration and multi-sector buy-in to create a

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1 project that put those sectors on display, using an aesthetic imagination to prompt an  
2 infrastructural imagination on what it means to acknowledge shared trauma and commit to a  
3 new future.

4 In the 1970s, feminist artist Mierle Laderman Ukeles's projects disclosed an interest in  
5 uncovering the custodial systems that supported the presumably autonomous works displayed in  
6 a museum in her "Washing Pieces" and in "Transfer," a project that eventually expanded to  
7 those that prompted citizens to reflect about their own dependence upon the custodial systems  
8 of a public sanitation apparatus. In "Touch Sanitation" she shook the hands of all 6,000 mem-  
9 bers of New York's sanitation department to say, "Thank you for keeping New York City  
10 Alive." In her 1983 "Social Mirror" citizens were invited to see themselves reflected on the side  
11 of a garbage truck. In all of these projects, the possibilities and perils of public sector engage-  
12 ment were subjected to the challenge of a Conceptual artistic frame (Jackson 2011: 75–103).

13 In these histories and so many other contemporary projects, we find artists navigating some  
14 long and fraught debates between aesthetics and politics. Often these artists are asked whether  
15 they are trading aesthetic integrity for social efficacy, compromising the autonomy of art in  
16 order to embark upon heteronomous engagement, or earning their aesthetic chops by main-  
17 taining a radically autonomous and/or "negative" aesthetic position.

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**Part III: Social Practice and Social Theory**

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Having tried to loosen and redefine the language of Institution and the language of intervention, it seems important now to turn to the affects that surround these puzzles and practices and the social theory cited when we try to process them. In social practice discourse, the affects mobilized and produced are varied, but they are often framed in polarizing terms that propose a choice between the do-gooding, harmony-seeking emotions of some projects next to the disturbing, "antagonistic" emotions of others. To some scholars (Bishop 2004), socially engaged art only does the deep work of aesthetics when discomfort or tension is produced. In order to see if there is any way out of yet another polarity, it is worth exploring antagonism, and in particular, why this term has become so resonant in social practice circles.

The legacies of social theory are key to framing what it means to expand aesthetically within social structures. This means noting that even a phrase like "social practice" has been in circulation for a while and in many contexts well beyond the landscape of *Artforum* articles and Master of Arts (MFA) programs that have given the phrase currency in the twenty-first. In the history of social theory, the phrase "social practice" is associated with a particular Marxist and post-Marxist tangle of critical puzzles. Karl Marx's notoriously complex but notoriously generative *Introduction to the Grundrisse* exposes what he called the "relationality" of persons, worlds, and things that appear as given and discrete. Marx's stance on the commodity, on the laborer, and on all varieties of beings and objects was to expose their sociality, their spatio-temporal connection to other beings and objects on which their self-definition depended. The effort here was to show a thing to be a relation, a person to be a social practice. The trick of capitalism and of other constraining forces was that they prompted us to repress that relationality, repress the social practice that is a person, to sublimate the social practice that is a thing. That repression and sublimation, that alienation, worked its magic to create the sense of a world where individuals were discrete and objects autonomous, rather than bound by an interdependent relation of capital, labor, or a variety of other hierarchies and social systems. Marx wrote, "The reciprocal and all-sided dependence of individuals who are indifferent to one another forms their social connection" (Marx 1993: 156). This kind of alienation needed to be combated by thinking and making that foregrounded our repressed, connective relationality, that showed the object's



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1 antagonism cannot be a *real* opposition. There is nothing antagonistic in a crash  
2 between two vehicles: it is a material fact obeying positive physical laws. To apply the  
3 same principles to the social terrain would be tantamount to saying that what is  
4 antagonistic in class struggle is the physical act by which a policeman hits a worker  
5 militant, or the shouts of a group in Parliament which prevent a member of an  
6 opposing sector from speaking ... It is because a physical force *is* a physical force that a  
7 countervailing force leads it to rest; in contrast, it is because a peasant *cannot be* a pea-  
8 sant that an antagonism exists with the landowner expelling him ... Real opposition is  
9 an objective relation ... antagonism constitutes the limits of every objectivity.

(Laclau and Mouffe 1990: 122–125)

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In Mouffe and Laclau's frame, then, antagonism is the dimension and process that would question the givenness of a human being, the givenness of a peasant or landowner, rather than the social relation that constitutes both. To antagonize would be to expose the contingency of this supposed objectivity, to engage with humans and things as social practice, in social practice. So once again, antagonism has a degree of compatibility with Conceptual art; it finds ways to question the conventions that produce persons and objects as given and natural and discrete. The antagonistic concept is one that has made its way into a variety of debates in social practice recently, debates that seem to oppose edgy, ironic, and uncomfortably antagonistic social practices with those that are apparently community-based, do-gooding, feel-gooding non-antagonistic practices.

The Conceptual potential of the theory, indeed the social practice developed by this social theory, can be banalized if we decide that antagonism is equal to something like discomfort or discord. More specifically, I would suggest that binaries between uncomfortable and comfortable art do not offer rubrics complex enough to evaluate the antagonistic potential of a work. What if we remember that antagonism's potential in social practice is to expose "the limits of every objectivity" and to expose the primary relational construction of persons and things? It is possible for some uncomfortable practices to do this work of exposure, and apparently more "comfortable" practices might as well. Some edgy, divisive, and uncomfortable work might *not* antagonize, but actually reproduce the givenness of social beings and things as well, just as community-based or do-gooding work might reproduce that givenness as well.

To take this question of antagonism and affect to the work of a specific artist, let's consider Wafaa Bilal's 2007 "Domestic Tension" in which remote war game players shot paintballs onto his body, one that could not leave the gallery in which he was placed and continuously bombarded.<sup>3</sup> This is an uncomfortable artwork, but it does not antagonize *because* it is uncomfortable. Rather, it does the social work of antagonism because of the alienation and disconnection it exposes. By transposing and mixing the disconnected worlds of military war and military war games with the highly connective encounter of a body in a gallery, "Domestic Tension" antagonized the US norms of "indifference," exposing that indifference as the repressed condition of social connection between ourselves and those with whom we vaguely understand ourselves to be at war.

In other words, amongst the many discontented binaries that frame our contemporary discussion, the one that congealed around the antagonism terminology a few years ago risked banalizing the social theory it wanted to cite. Far more importantly, such binaries limit the imaginative potential of cultural work and risk celebrating "shock" and "distress" in social practice without deeper thought about whether given economic and political hierarchies are in fact antagonized in projects that produce such affects. We can imagine any number of art projects that can "shock" or create distress in their receivers, but is discomfort always smart discomfort? Is it a discomfort that antagonizes?

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1 Finally, the banalization of antagonism as equal to discomfort forestalls the possibility of  
2 generating other kinds of affects within a socially antagonistic project. Such questions applied to  
3 the work of WochenKlausur, and the community arts group Touchable Stories, and the Los  
4 Angeles-based Cornerstone suggest that discomfort is in the eye or heart of the beholder, and  
5 that many other affects can emerge in the midst of projects like theirs. The antagonism-as-  
6 discomfort equation forestalls the possibility of a compassionate antagonism, assuming that  
7 questions about the construction and reconstruction of the social somehow could not be posed  
8 in a landscape where citizens seek to understand or help each other.  
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#### 10 **Part IV: Social Practice Across the Arts**

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12 The fact that I come to The Art of the Social from performance, and the fact that I feel the need  
13 to include this, means that I do not assume that we all have a shared history for approaching  
14 questions of art and engagement. For visual art institutions such as Tate Modern, LA-MOCA, or  
15 MOMA in New York, the grouping of so-called performative work, and the grouping of so-  
16 called socially engaged art work, often happens under a similar rubric, or at least seems to occur in  
17 a similar space—under the galleries, in turbine halls, in tanks. I find myself moving betwixt and  
18 between different notions of what these art forms are—and different notions of from whence  
19 they come—and want to close with reflections of what it means to be working “across the arts”  
20 in social art practice.

21 First, disciplinary barometers influence our encounters with interdisciplinary art forms. There  
22 is utility in reminding ourselves of these different barometers, even in spaces where many of us  
23 feel committed to supporting hybrid, engaged art-making. I have described the resonance of the  
24 word support in visual art, in theatre, and in dance, and we might add other traditions of art  
25 practice to the mix, traditions, and skill sets from music, from video, from architecture. Our  
26 perception of innovation will differ depending upon whether we measure its distance from  
27 sculpture or public art, or choreography, or architecture. What would it mean to bring Cor-  
28 nerstone Theater and Suzanne Lacy into the same space? How would we have to understand  
29 them as rejecting or revising particular traditions in theatre or in visual art to understand their  
30 innovation and maybe their unexpected kinship? How do we use the practices of other art  
31 forms in our attempts to dismantle or redirect the aesthetic traditions from which we come? As  
32 a performance person, I have observed that practices that expand from the domain of visual art,  
33 including Ukeles or Chan, revised and supposedly “dematerialized” whole traditions of visual  
34 art practice by using the traditions of the performing arts. Whether in movements that might be  
35 choreographed, in installations that might be viewed as set designs, or in de-materialized actions  
36 that partook of the convention of acting, or in actors whose labor was transported to become  
37 site-specific material. It often seems that the deconstruction of one art form often involves the  
38 reconstruction of another.

39 Once we come clean about our latent formal preoccupations and the different goals and  
40 sensibilities we want to see affirmed, we can also get impatient with each other’s work. This is  
41 to say that innovation to some looks like a re-invented wheel to others. The innovative act that  
42 breaks convention in one form looks curious from the perspective of another discipline. Inno-  
43 vation to some looks amateur to others. Experimentation to some looks like a capitulation to a  
44 culture of Spectacle, to the Culture Industry, or to the cult that celebrates Virtuosoic skill to  
45 others. Indeed, what reads as Discomfort in one context may be easily assimilated in another.

46 It is worth reflecting on the inter-art politics of our judgments. Suzanne Lacy recently  
47 recalled to me her collaboration with Kathleen Chang on issues of racial privilege, California  
48 history, and social reform in “The Life and Times of Donaldina Cameron” in which Lacy

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1 dressed as and presented the story of a white female social reformer while Chang's persona  
2 spoke from the perspective of a Chinese relative who was smuggled on a boat that crossed the  
3 Atlantic. Lacy told me that Chang came to the collaboration with a theatrical background that  
4 was different from her own; that is, their experiences and training, one who had been "leaving  
5 art" as object-based performance, the other who had been leaving theatre as proscenium  
6 display, had produced different assumptions of what it meant to adopt a persona or to address a  
7 public in character.<sup>4</sup> Lacy said, "Our debates about character and acting ended up being more  
8 heated than any debates we had about ethnicity."<sup>5</sup> This is one of many examples where  
9 aesthetic habits or skills bubble up unexpectedly to structure our encounters in socially-  
10 engaged art.

11 Hybrid artwork still circulates in un-hybridized networks. Because artists and art contexts still  
12 measure their distance from traditional art disciplines, their conversations and support networks  
13 often remain circumscribed by them. Expanded theatre artists talk to other expanded theatre  
14 artists and are presented by an international festival circuit. Post-visual artists talk to other post-  
15 visual artists and are represented in the biennial circuit and by the gallery-collector system.  
16 Moreover, the attempt to break from the so-called Institutions of one form can mean incor-  
17 poration into the new Institutions of another form. Choreographers might break from the  
18 prescriptions of proscenium-stage theatre to enter the museum and gallery space, but when they  
19 decide to sell documentation of such work on the art market, some might argue that one anti-  
20 Institutional gesture is being happily reincorporated by another system.

21 The habits of criticism reinforce inter-art debate and inter-art blindness as do educational  
22 institutions. They affect who ends up on the Theatre syllabus and who ends up on the Art  
23 History syllabus, routinely structuring who is cast as post-Brechtian and who is cast as post-  
24 Minimalist. The fact that all of us are working to find our ways into different structures asso-  
25 ciated with the social and civic sphere means that such aesthetic questions will continue to  
26 emerge. Aesthetic barometers will coexist with social ones, producing possible expansions, but  
27 also possible reductions, in what qualifies as ART in socially engaged art.

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41 **Further Reading**

42  
43 S. Jackson *Social Works* (New York: Routledge, 2011) expands on the histories and projects that  
44 formed the author's theories on social practice. G. Kester's *Conversation Pieces* (University of  
45 California Press, 2004) and *The One and The Many* (Duke, 2013) analyze practices and traces the  
46 evolution of dialogical art projects. N. Thompson *Living as Form: Socially Engaged Art from 1991 to*  
47 *2011* (Cambridge: The MIT Press, 2012) developed from an exhibit presented by Creative Time  
48 in New York and gathers a collection of artists, projects, and essays by scholars on socially

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1 engaged art. C. Bishop *Artificial Hells: Participatory Art and the Politics of Spectatorship* (London:  
2 Verso, 2012) provides an overview of this scholar’s interpretation of social practice, its effec-  
3 tiveness, and its shortcomings. T. Purves *What We Want is Free: Generosity and Exchange in*  
4 *Postmodern Culture* (Albany: State University of New York, 2005) is a collection of essays by  
5 theorists and artists that examines the position and intentions of contemporary, socially engaged  
6 projects as well as the complex and complicated connotations of “generosity.”  
7

8 **Notes**  
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- 10 1 Author’s interview, June 2011.  
11 2 Artists who have re-oriented relations between dancers and gravity include Trisha Brown (“Walking  
12 on the Wall” 1971) and Joanna Haigood (“Picture Powderhorn” 2000).  
13 3 See [www.wafaabilal.com/html/domesticstension.html](http://www.wafaabilal.com/html/domesticstension.html)  
14 4 See Lacy, S. (2010) *Leaving Art: Writings on Performance, Politics, and Publics 1974-2007*, Durham: Duke  
15 University Press.  
16 5 Personal conversation with author.  
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# 11

## THE POLITICS OF CONTEMPORARY CURATING

### A Perspective

*Joasia Krysa*

There has been a growing attention to the curatorial field, in particular since the 1980s with the emergence of independent curating and what is described as the *curatorial turn*, and more currently with its focus on knowledge production. Linked to the wider transformation of contemporary art since the 1960s – the broadening of contemporary art praxis and a growing need for mediation of art practice in expanding art markets – this process has shaped new ways of understanding the curatorial field, beyond traditional institutional models of practice and beyond the practice itself. This is partly as a consequence of the diversification of curatorial methodologies and models of practice, and partly as a consequence of the expansion of international networks and globalized art markets through which the activity of curating circulates, attention turns to the increased visibility and agency of the individual curator.

At its extreme, the increased curatorial visibility and agency is articulated in the figure of the ‘uber-curator’ that we find in the contemporary artworld with the production of blockbuster exhibitions and biennial culture in particular. Curators often acquire rarefied status and exhibit influence beyond the art world itself (for instance in cultural regeneration schemes), casting the curator as a powerful figure with centralized and individualized forms of agency. Curating becomes political not only in its ability to shape art and the art world per se, but in ‘utilizing the newfound power for political purposes, aiming to change modes of organization and societal structures’ (Mørland and Amundsen, 2010).

At the same time, there is the development of the technological field and its influence on curatorial practices, in particular since the 1950s with the emergence of cybernetics, systems thinking, and the more recent effects of Internet communications technologies (ICT) and network culture. The pervasive use of ICT, such as the social media and online networking platforms, where users have assumed the role of *amateur* curators of their own experiences – selecting and organizing their materials for public dissemination – serves to highlight just one aspect of the technological impact on curatorial forms. Even technology developers now refer to the selection of ‘Apps’ for smart phones and tablets as ‘curating’ them, in addition to the use of wikis, listservs, tagging, blogging and existing social networking all serving as potential new platforms for curatorial expression. What this suggests is how the practice of curating has entered the realm of the everyday, and in so doing broken its (professional) specialization.

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1 Patrick Lichty states something similar to this when he refers to ‘curating everyday life’ (2008:  
2 176–177).

3 A number of questions arise when a technological perspective is introduced – one largely left  
4 unexplored in contemporary curatorial discourse – offering the possibility to reconsider curating  
5 and its political dimensions in new ways. This chapter aims to address this and explore how a  
6 technological perspective can contribute to thinking about the ways in which the curatorial  
7 practice is organized, and how curatorial agency is expressed – in other words, shifting discus-  
8 sions from *the curatorial turn* in contemporary art to *the technological turn* in curating.

9 Drawing on network theory and concepts such as self-organization, this resonates in what  
10 Ned Rossiter refers to as ‘organized networks’ (2006) and the tensions that thereby can be seen  
11 to unfold between centralized control over the curatorial process and its more decentralized or  
12 distributed forms. To add political complexity, many of the more distributed and socialized  
13 forms, such as social media, give the appearance of wider distribution and openness of organi-  
14 zational structures but operate under the paradoxical constraints of centralized and private  
15 ownership.

16 The chapter reflects on these dual transformations of curating – first in relation to the various  
17 shifts in the understanding of contemporary curating (the curatorial turn), and secondly by  
18 considering curating in terms of organized networked forms (the technological turn). It offers a  
19 speculative exercise in reimagining the infrastructures of curatorial agency and power.  
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## 21 Perspectives on Contemporary Curating

22 To discuss curating and its political dimensions, it is important to understand the recent trans-  
23 formation of the curatorial field in more detail, especially with the emergence of so-called  
24 independent curating, the development of a distinct curatorial discourse (by now largely insti-  
25 tutionalized), and new ways of conceptualizing curating as a set of practices that reveal some of  
26 the complexities of mediation. The developing discourse around curating allows for an expanded  
27 understanding of curating as a specific knowledge domain and as a creative and critical practice in  
28 its own right. This is what is commonly referred to as *the curatorial turn*.  
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31 During the sixties the primary discourse around art-in-exhibition began to turn away  
32 from forms of critique of the artwork as autonomous object of study/critique towards  
33 a form of curatorial criticism in which the space of exhibition was given critical pre-  
34 cedence over that of the objects of art. Curatorial criticism differed from that of tradi-  
35 tional Western art criticism (i.e., linked to modernity) in that its discourse and  
36 subject matter went beyond discussion about artists and the object of art to include the  
37 subject of curating and the role played by the curator of exhibitions. [ ... ] The  
38 ascendancy of this ‘curatorial gesture’ in the nineties (as well as the professionalization  
39 of contemporary curating) began to establish curatorial practice as a potential space for  
40 critique. Now the neocritical curator has usurped the evacuated place of the critic.

(O’Neill, 2007: 241)

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43 By focusing on contemporary art production through its mediation and the subject who medi-  
44 ates – *the mediator, the intermediary, the middleman* – the discussion focuses on how art is made and  
45 for whom (Andreasen and Larsen, 2007)? The implication is that cultural production attempts to  
46 cut out the middleman to make things faster and more efficient, in parallel to what Joseph Kosuth  
47 had previously recommended in getting rid of the critic. In contrast, Søren Andreasen and Lars  
48 Bang Larsen in their article “The Middleman: Beginning to Think about Mediation” (2007),

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1 propose “to focus on the grey areas where the middleman operates, to reclaim mediation’. Their  
2 claim is that the middleman, like the midwife, gives birth to knowledge and operates on the  
3 fringes of the market under the conditions of the capitalist market economy. Therefore rather  
4 than avoiding mediation, it is this subject, *the mediator, the middleman*, which requires closer  
5 examination, to focus on the mediating functions of the art world – *the curator*. In response to the  
6 question ‘what is a curator?’ they claim:

7  
8 It is a question that doesn’t make sense, because the curator is not something; the  
9 curator does something. There is no ontology of the middleman: she is a performative  
10 and exemplary agent, acquiring subjectivity in and by the act of mediation.

11 *(Andreassen and Larsen, 2007: 27)*

12  
13 This shift in understanding is necessary for a discussion around mediation in contemporary art  
14 and runs parallel to the discursive turn in contemporary arts practice in general. This further  
15 supports the claim that emphasis shifts from art and artist to curating per se (what O’Neill refers  
16 to as the ‘curator’s moment’) and the increased visibility and expansion of international net-  
17 works, in parallel to globalized markets.

18 This has led to a growing critical discussion of the terms. There is no longer simply the noun  
19 *curator*, but as Raqs Media Collective (2012) have proposed, there is also *curating* as the active verb,  
20 and *the curatorial* as the adjective used to describe the developmental and conceptual process that  
21 unfolds in the practice of curating (O’Neill, 2012: 5). This intensification of the critical discussion  
22 of curatorial practice in the use of specific language and the rise in popularity of the terms has  
23 wider significance beyond its specific confines. In its etymological sense, the verb *curating* (to  
24 curate) derives from the Latin ‘curare’ – to care (for something or someone) and the noun *curator*  
25 derives from the Latin ‘curatus’ (a curate) and literally refers to a person who is invested with the  
26 care, or cure (cura) of souls of a parish. In relation to cultural (heritage) institutions such as the  
27 museum, gallery, library, archive or garden, a curator is a person who ‘cares’ for the institution’s  
28 collections. Conventionally, the curatorial remit in such institutions includes selection, preserva-  
29 tion, conservation, documentation, and the public display of the collection. In their article ‘On  
30 Misanthropy’, Alexander Galloway and Eugene Thacker emphasize this etymological under-  
31 standing of curating as a starting point to signal its biopolitical dimension in the confluence of  
32 “curate, care, cure” (Galloway and Thacker, 2006: 160). When considered through the logic of  
33 distributed networks, the understanding of what constitutes curating can be expanded to *care* for  
34 the systems and networks through which it operates, and perhaps even to *cure* faulty forms  
35 through a critical reflection on institutional and infrastructural conditions.

36 Indicative of the wider shift in the primary role of the curator is the changing perception of  
37 the curator as merely a job description to someone who takes on a more creative and active part  
38 to play within cultural production at both institutional and infrastructural levels. This repositions  
39 the discussion of curatorial agency – from the notion of the curator as a functionary with  
40 limited powers to act in the world, to a far more powerful figure who actively mediates and  
41 performs in wider culture, shaping and effecting certain forms of organization and governance  
42 for better or worse.

43 Furthermore, the distinction between *curating* and *the curatorial* indicates the ways different  
44 kinds of knowledge are brought together, if only momentarily, to transcend what is generally  
45 understood to constitute knowledge: ‘The curatorial seems to be the ability to think everything  
46 that goes into the event of knowledge in relation to one another’ (Rogoff and Von Bismarck,  
47 2012: 23). Beatrice Von Bismarck describes this as a constellation of elements that produce the  
48 idea of the curatorial as a dynamic and contested field:

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1 It is constituted by the curating techniques that come together as well as by the par-  
2 ticipants – the actual people involved who potentially come from different back-  
3 grounds, have different agendas and draw on different experiences, knowledges,  
4 disciplines – and finally by the material and discursive framings, be they institutional,  
5 disciplinary, regional, racial, or gender specific.

6 *(Rogoff and Von Bismarck, 2012: 24–25)*

7  
8 In addition to stressing the intersections of power and knowledge, these positions raise some of  
9 the wider implications of the curatorial and its political potential beyond the domain of the arts as  
10 such. This shifts attention to the power relations at work in the act of curating and the pro-  
11 minence of the term in all aspects of culture, to ways of thinking about modes of organization  
12 more broadly and how relations of production might be understood as being able to be organized  
13 differently as distinctive modes of sociality. The currency for this line of thinking is already  
14 demonstrated in numerous publications in certain ways. For instance, the editors Gerd  
15 Elise Mørland and Heidi Bale Amundsen devoted an entire issue of the journal *On Curating* to  
16 explore the political potential of curating and to map ways in which it can be articulated, not  
17 simply through:

18  
19 motifs or through political exhibition themes, but also through the curatorial strategies  
20 themselves. These curators turn the curatorial strategies into meaningful form with  
21 intrinsic value, expressing political concerns by the use of processual and often parti-  
22 cipatory means such as education, organized discussions, interventions, collaborative  
23 working methods and text production.

24 *(Mørland and Amundsen, 04/2010)*

25  
26 These tendencies are clearly important to consider but it is not specific acts of individual  
27 curators that might have political dimension that I wish to draw attention too here, but rather  
28 the figure of the curator as an abstract centralized power node operating within a very particular  
29 organizational structure. Can a technological perspective point to alternative ways of thinking  
30 through the way that objects and people are organized as part of curatorial processes? Is there  
31 political potential in thinking about curating that draws upon technological logic to understand  
32 the procedures and protocols of the curatorial process, and the ways in which the various  
33 contributing agents are constituted?

### 34 35 **Curating from a Technological Perspective**

36  
37 In parallel to the above sketch of the historical development of curating lay a set of ideas that  
38 have developed more overtly in relation to technology. This has a precedent in Walter  
39 Benjamin's (1936) artwork article in which he considers the impact of technological repro-  
40 duction on aesthetics, and later in 1988 by Bill Nichols to further examine how cybernetics  
41 transformed cultural production and to emphasize the shift from mechanical reproducibility  
42 symbolized by the camera to dynamic systems symbolized by the computer (2003). This article  
43 extends this line of argument by proposing how networked technologies have transformed the  
44 curatorial domain in similar ways (Krysa, 2006, 2014). To take this further, what is required is a  
45 wider discussion of networks as a paradigm for how contemporary power is organized, and  
46 articulated through/as networks. Moreover, to paraphrase Benjamin, asking whether tech-  
47 nology can be considered to be curating is the wrong question to ask. Rather, we should ask  
48 how curating has been transformed by technology, and how technology is transformed by

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1 curating. It is in this developmental and conceptual constellation that the curatorial exists as an  
2 active network of agencies.

3 Reference to Paul Baran's three-network topology diagram (of 1964) provides a useful 'dia-  
4 gram' for this discussion. Baran's interest was in developing an optimal structure and a more  
5 robust communication network using digital computers. This resulted in his pioneering idea of  
6 the distributed network model, in contrast to what he refers to as centralized and decentralized  
7 network models, organized around the principle of dynamic routing based on a mesh-like  
8 architecture. This process of dynamic routing becomes the basis for the development of what by  
9 the 1980s was officially referred to as the Internet to describe a single global TCP/IP (Trans-  
10 mission Control Protocol/Internet Protocol) network and for the conception of the World  
11 Wide Web as developed by Tim Berners-Lee in 1989. Importantly, the socio-technical struc-  
12 ture of a distributed network provides a useful framework for rethinking contemporary curating  
13 and its political dimensions, not least given that curating, as a generally conservative form,  
14 predominantly follows a centralized model even today (as highlighted in the figure of the uber-  
15 curator). What are these protocols?

16 Control is organized in distributed mesh networks through the adoption of certain shared  
17 protocols (such as TCP/IP) that form an interesting contrast to curatorial decision-making that  
18 tends to be remain centralized in form even when purporting to be experimental or political.  
19 Yet despite the widely established misconception that the technology of the Internet is some-  
20 how anarchic, control very much still exists but is expressed in distributed forms.

21 The network paradigm represents a key organizational principle for understanding con-  
22 temporary politics, society and life in general – from the activities of peer-to-peer file-sharing  
23 to the viral operations of economic and financial markets – so why not curating too. Indeed  
24 distributed forms of organization appear to increasingly prescribe networked power relations  
25 and control structures.

26 The point is that new forms of network power can be identified in the ways work is  
27 reconstituted and, how as a consequence of more emphasis on socialized and communicative  
28 work, new management techniques tend to stress horizontal rather than hierarchical organiza-  
29 tional structures. Power remains generalized and opaque. Hence there is a need to identify these  
30 invisible architectures of the network and the ways in which certain protocols are locked down  
31 by proprietary interests. In his book *Organized Networks* (2006), Ned Rossiter considers this issue  
32 extensively, and the potential of organized networks to offer a positive opportunity to develop  
33 strategies and alternative techniques of organization. A pertinent example is commons-based  
34 peer production as a distinct form of organization of productive activity embedded in the  
35 structures of networks, and network cultures.

36 There are relatively few examples of experimentation in the curatorial field to substantiate  
37 the argument. Following the principle of an 'unconference', a model of a participant-driven  
38 meetings influenced by network culture, one example is the 'uncurated' curatorial project  
39 *unDEAF* (2007), and later *unCraftivism* (2009), both developed by INTK. In each case, an open  
40 and unmoderated online wiki was used as a platform to curate events in a distributed manner –  
41 satellite events of the Dutch Electronic Art Festival (DEAF) in Rotterdam, the Netherlands and  
42 the *Craftivism* exhibition for Arnolfini in Bristol, UK, respectively. The following description  
43 explains the curatorial conceit:

44  
45 unDEAF is uncurated. Your work will not be judged, or restricted by a theme, nei-  
46 ther it has to be finalized. unDEAF is self-organized. You organize and promote your  
47 own event, whether an art piece, a performance, a talk, a workshop, a meal, a song, a  
48 party or an undefinable event.

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1 In this sense the project serves to undermine the usual centralized and hierachical organizational  
2 model of curating an event, yet at the same time is paradoxical inasmuch as any claims to be  
3 unmoderated or uncurated is clearly an act of moderation and a curatorial decision in itself.  
4 Despite this qualification, the project offers a reconceptualization of curatorial organizational  
5 forms that challenge our understanding of power relations.

6 Common-based peer production poses problems for traditional understandings of orga-  
7 nizations as descriptions of the productive activities of workers or consumers in the market,  
8 as does academic peer production of ideas, in a more general understanding of the nature of  
9 information and networked informational exchange. It presents an efficient use of resources  
10 based on collaborative exchange and an ethics of sharing but of course is not outside  
11 capitalism as such. In relation to curating, this offers a useful framework for reconsidering  
12 curating in terms of alternative organizational modes, and it comes as a surprise that there  
13 are not more examples to draw upon that use this production framework as a model for  
14 experimentation in sharing resources such as peer-to-peer file sharing as a form of curatorial  
15 exchange. We might speculate that Pirate Bay offers the best example of experimental  
16 curating today.

17 Although not referring to curating but to wider social possibilities, Rossiter's claim is that  
18 organized networks offer the opportunity to develop strategies and techniques of better  
19 organization. He asserts that there is an urgent need for new institutional forms that reflect  
20 relational processes to challenge existing systems of governance and representational struc-  
21 tures (Rossiter, 2006). He identifies the inadequacy of modern institutions to respond to the  
22 impact of socio-technical networks, and museums and galleries would make a case in point  
23 as seemingly locked into a circa nineteenth-century model of production and display.  
24 Whereas emergent forms are radically dissimilar to the ways in which social relations are  
25 organized under the 'moribund technics' of modern institutions (his examples are the Uni-  
26 versity, and the State). These older forms, referred to as 'networked organizations', are  
27 hierarchical and centralizing despite the rhetoric of apparent inclusion. Again, most arts  
28 institutions resonate with this description.

29 On the other hand, emergent 'organized networks' are horizontal, collaborative and  
30 distributed in character offering a distinct social dynamic and transformational potential. The  
31 difference for Rossiter is centred on how institutions have responded to developments in net-  
32 worked technologies and the issue of intellectual property rights in particular: on the one hand,  
33 networked organizations using this as a regulatory mechanism to enforce or extend existing  
34 power structures, and on the other, organized networks advocating more open/free forms of  
35 culture. Moreover, it is the institutional nature of this, as a description of the organization of  
36 social relations that makes it thoroughly political. Indeed he reminds us that 'it is technically and  
37 socially incorrect to assume that hierarchical and centralizing architectures and practices are  
38 absent from network cultures' (2008: 36).

39 In socio-technical descriptions such as this, the potential exists to transform server-client  
40 relations (centralized structures) into peer-to-peer relations (decentralized and distributed). It  
41 should be remembered that the Web is founded on a server-client architecture, as distinct from  
42 the Internet, and this exhibits a particular power relation. With peer production, a challenge is  
43 mounted to definitions of social organization through relations based on a sharing ethic rather  
44 the logic of exchange perpetuated by the art market for instance. Organized networks offer the  
45 opportunity to curate in such ways.

46 Part of the difficulty is that these discussions are often locked into a straightforward descrip-  
47 tion of producing and releasing technologies rather than wider discussions of organization and  
48 management, if not curating, in the context of the restructuring of power over networks. This

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1 line of argument seems to encapsulate the challenge for curators and curatorial modes of orga-  
2 nization, and how to begin to rethink *the curatorial* reflexively, as able to modify wider institu-  
3 tional and organization structures of power and the platforms through which it is served. What  
4 are the protocols for this emergent and self-organized forms of curating?

5 In *Protocol* (2004), drawing closely on Deleuze's ideas of control societies, Galloway considers  
6 new forms of sovereignty, what he terms as network sovereignty. Describing the development of  
7 networked computing, and in turn TCP/IP, he defines protocol as a set of recommendations and  
8 rules that outline specific technical standards but also suggests correct or proper behaviour or  
9 social practices. Computers in a network agree technical standards of action such that the proto-  
10 cols "govern" usage at the level of code: 'protocol is a technique for achieving voluntary regula-  
11 tion within a contingent environment' as Galloway puts it (2004: 7). Protocols thus operate as a  
12 distributed management system coding packets of information, documents and communication.  
13 This is not to say that control is bad of course and certainly protocols have no vested interest in  
14 themselves. The problem lies in the fact that standards are set according to certain vested inter-  
15 ests – and this makes it a political issue. So what are the protocols through which curating works?

16 In a later article, *The Exploit*, Galloway and Eugene Thacker address the issue of curating  
17 explicitly and argue that more adequate topologies are required that allow a way to rethink  
18 power relations 'diagrammatically' in a manner appropriate to networks and contemporary  
19 political dynamics: 'an approach to understanding networks that takes into account their onto-  
20 logical, technological, and political dimensions' (2007: 58). Their position both draws on an  
21 understanding of biopolitics in the work of Foucault as well as control in Deleuze, and takes  
22 into account the human and unhuman relations that constitute the network such that action  
23 can no longer be attributed to individual agents but to distributed action throughout the net-  
24 work. They refer to this as the new 'network-network symmetry' of power that follows 'power  
25 laws' of variable, uneven and unequal distribution (the operations of scale-free networks in  
26 other words like the World Wide Web). Control can be seen to be distributed relatively  
27 autonomously in horizontal organizational locales and at the same time into rigid vertical  
28 hierarchies or directed commands. This is a structure that supports the claim that networks and  
29 sovereignty are not incompatible or oppositional but always related as 'sovereignty-in-networks'.

30 The consequences for curating are to question the sovereign role of the curator, to identify  
31 the biopolitical exercise of control in the curatorial process and the emergent forces that con-  
32 stitute curatorial knowledge. The curatorial, taken as a dynamic socio-technical field where the  
33 networked constellational condition comes into being, suggests new possibilities of power dis-  
34 tribution and its immanent better organization. Although curating is rarely of direct political  
35 significance, it can however contribute to a reflection on forms of organization that might be  
36 arranged differently.

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# 12

## PERVERSE JOY

### The Paradoxes of Censorship

*Svetlana Mintcheva*

In May 2004, the Joint Terrorism Task Force detained artist and SUNY Buffalo professor Steve Kurtz of the Critical Art Ensemble (CAE) on suspicion of bioterrorism and seized documents, computers, and bio lab equipment from his house. The equipment, including some harmless bacteria, would have been used in a forthcoming CAE art installation and performance at Mass MOCA. Even after the New York State Commissioner of Public Health determined that the materials posed no public safety risk, the District Attorney continued to press mail and wire fraud charges against Kurtz. A judge dismissed the case four years later, declaring that even if the actions alleged in the indictment were true, they would not constitute a crime.<sup>1</sup>

CAE has been producing work on politically and socially urgent issues since the early 1990s. The collective's well-researched and accessibly presented installations have addressed genetically modified food production and questioned the utopian promises of the biotech industry. Their site-specific interventions into public space have highlighted the social and economic disparities brought about by global capital. Throughout its work, which also includes extensive theoretical writing, CAE has not hesitated in breaching through boundaries of specialization to offer incisive critique of developments generally considered the province of privileged expert opinion.

The Kurtz case was universally treated in the art world as an unambiguous example of politically motivated government retaliation against critical work. A statement by CAE declared, "We always knew that cultural interventionist work could have serious consequences ... From the perspective of authority we were being subversive, deviant ... " The case was held as proof that the government, indeed, saw the work as subversive and was, therefore, set to suppress it. There was no doubt on the part of CAE that "The repressive forces of the state [were] directly targeting producers of cultural interventionist work."<sup>2</sup>

Could there be, however, a different explanation for the absurd four-year prosecution? The case of the Buffalo Six, the Yemeni-Americans from Lackawanna, who had pled guilty on charges of material support of terrorism so as to avoid enemy combatant charges for having spent time in an Al Qaeda camp, had recently shaken the area. The same law enforcement establishment led the Kurtz case. Their mission post 9/11 was less to solve terrorist crimes than to make sure they do not happen in the first place. Peter Ahearn, head of the Buffalo FBI office, explained the Lackawanna case by saying: "If we don't know for sure they're going to do something, or not, we need to make sure that we prevent anything they may be planning, whether or not we know or don't know about it."<sup>3</sup>

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1           Could Ahearn’s Kafkaesque statement explain some of the absurdity of the Kurtz prosecu-  
2           tion? It is not that hard to imagine that the pointless pursuit of ridiculous charges as a result of a  
3           post-Lackawanna overreaction aggravated by the reluctance to face the public embarrassment of  
4           having launched a bioterrorism investigation against an established artist. After all CAE had  
5           published and shown their incisive work internationally for many years without provoking  
6           retaliatory action.

7           Could the emphatic disregard of this other possibility—that the prosecution was a result of  
8           post 9/11 overreaction, bureaucratic intransigence, and unwillingness to admit error rather than  
9           a direct assault on political art—imply a certain art world desire to have the prosecution confirm  
10          that interventionist work is truly seen as dangerous by the powers that be?

11          Qualifying cultural production as subversive generally connotes approval in critical and aca-  
12          demic writing. It implies that contemporary art is doing its job precisely when it upsets existing  
13          paradigms, value systems or (congealed) beliefs. But qualifying contemporary work as subversive  
14          in effect (as opposed to intent) is a speculative enterprise: changes of consciousness are over-  
15          determined and only slowly translated into social transformation. Inevitably then, claims of  
16          subversiveness are shadowed by a lingering doubt as to the true effects of artistic intervention in  
17          political life. Thus, when law enforcement goes after an artist – even if it is because of the FBI’s  
18          own intransigence and unwillingness to admit error – the art world is eager to see this as proof  
19          of the real threat critical art presents. Which is not at all to devalue the work of the CAE or to  
20          minimize the toll the prosecution took on the artist, but to question whether attributing to law  
21          enforcement the explicit political agenda of suppressing cultural interventionist work is not  
22          somewhat wishful.

### **Censor Me, Show Me You Care: Repression as Recognition**

23          The repressive censorship of totalitarian regimes with its violence and brutality appears to be  
24          succeeded in so-called advanced democracies by the all absorbing void of neo liberal capitalism. It  
25          is one thing to be marginalized, another to be enthusiastically embraced when you see yourself as  
26          a challenge to the system. In a globally hegemonic late capitalist economy, transgressive, sub-  
27          versive, critical (whatever your descriptor of choice is) art is swiftly assimilated in the market.  
28          Censorship, in this context, appears to testify to the fact that art can still threaten and provoke a  
29          repressive response in the powers that be.

30          Controversies over artwork, whatever its subject matter, make it an actor in a field of con-  
31          tested values. Censorship incidents, literally and metaphorically, promote art from the culture  
32          section to the news section. And this includes not only art that critiques elected officials, war  
33          and corporate malfeasance, but also art that becomes the focal point of debates as to whether a  
34          nude should be exhibited in a town hall or whether a public museum should risk offending  
35          audiences with blasphemous work.

36          The scandal over the removal of David Wojnarowicz’s video from the *Hide/Seek: Difference*  
37          *and Desire in American Portraiture* exhibition at the National Portrait Gallery in 2010, for instance,  
38          turned what was a rather tame, even if much-needed show, of the gay and lesbian art canon  
39          into a timely and necessary political act. It also, by pitting aggressively right-wing Republicans  
40          in Congress against an art world unified in its outrage, harkened back to the 1990s’ culture  
41          wars, and an art scene that had a clearer sense of its political mission. There was a certain joy in  
42          the demonstrations and expressions of anger that accompanied the protests against art censor-  
43          ship – the joy of being recognized as a threat, the joy of finding clear lines of demarcation  
44          between repressed artists serving the oppressed and repressive right-wing fanatics and their  
45          congressional allies.

*Perverse joy*

1       Censorship is not a *necessary* stamp of recognition, but it is, nevertheless, a recognition of the  
2 power of art. Such recognition is both loathed (we all hate censorship) and perversely desired  
3 because censorship briefly suspends the nagging question of whether a critique of capitalism  
4 produced within the confines of the art world can act as an instrument of social change. The  
5 confrontations between state and artist provide an ethical and political clarity that subtle neo-  
6 liberal market absorption refuses to offer.

7  
8                   **Censorship as We Used to Know It and Its Paradoxical Effect**  
9

10       Besides serving as proof of art’s political potency, overt—or old-style—censorship also has the  
11 effect of politicizing art by disambiguating and exacerbating its critical message. Could it be that it  
12 is the act of censorship which (in spite of its intention to suppress) *constitutes* art as an agent in the  
13 battle over how to organize ourselves as a society, how to understand the relationship between  
14 the individual and the group, how to negotiate relationships of property, i.e. all that we variously  
15 understand as politics in the broad sense?

16       Art that is immediately seen as political, i.e. art that addresses topical issues of the day, is rarely  
17 overtly censored in the US today. As part of the political dialogue that we all agree (at least in  
18 the abstract) is needed in a democracy, art with a political message that not only enjoys con-  
19 stitutional protection, but also it has public support to an extent that other kinds of potentially  
20 controversial art—art that is sexually explicit or uses religious symbols—does not. However,  
21 in the instances when art *is* censored for political reasons, its political message is invariably  
22 amplified. As a result, if suppression of a particular message is the goal of the censor, censorship  
23 regularly misfires.

24       Witness the scandal around the premature dismantling of Carbon Sink, an environmental  
25 installation on the campus of the University of Wyoming. Carbon Sink consisted of a 36-foot  
26 diameter swirl of pine beetle-infested logs on a bed of coal. The logs become more charred as  
27 they reach the centre of the vortex. The message of the work was not transparent. However,  
28 press accounts interpreted it as linking the destruction of the West’s pine forests with the  
29 burning of fossil fuels, which drew the attention—and ire—of the local coal industry lobby.

30       Carbon Sink was removed in 2012, a year too early, under a variety of pretexts. However, a  
31 media investigation conducted by Wyoming Public Radio revealed the pressure legislators and  
32 local coal industry administrators had exercised upon the University.<sup>4</sup> The story hit the national  
33 and international press. While offending religious and moral sensibilities may often work as a  
34 public justification for the removal of artwork, protecting the sensitivities of the coal industry  
35 does not. No matter how much it denied the connection between industry pressure and the  
36 dismantling the work, the University had lost credibility.

37       If their public image was what they were protecting, coal industry officials failed by having  
38 the work removed. The incident only politicized the work and highlighted the critical impli-  
39 cations of a piece that some may have previously perceived as just a beautiful work of enviro-  
40 nmental art. It also revealed—in a way the work could not have done on its own—the power  
41 of commercial interests over both legislators and cultural institutions, as well as the lengths to  
42 which those representing such interests are willing to go to suppress criticism. In a way, the act  
43 of censorship completed the political message of the work.

44       Overt censorship of exhibited work begins to look desirable when we compare it to the  
45 opaque machinations of the selection process preceding any display of art. After the “Carbon  
46 Sink” scandal, for instance, Wyoming lawmakers mandated that “proposals for artwork [at a  
47 new recreation facility on campus] shall be submitted to the university’s energy resources  
48 council”<sup>5</sup> for approval. While overt censorship emphasizes the political force of a work, when

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1 the university energy resources council rejects a proposal it would be hard to know whether  
2 this is because of the character of the work's message or its other merits.

3  
4 **Taboo Content (or Where Censorship as we Used to Know it Likes to**  
5 **Dwell)**  
6

7 There are a few areas around which political censorship can be relatively overt, even today,  
8 because it receives broad public support: these are Israeli/Palestinian conflict, terrorism (especially  
9 after 9/11), and the use of the US flag. The high constitutional protection of such speech means  
10 that whatever censorship occurs, even around these topics, it is almost entirely limited to private  
11 spaces, where the First Amendment does not apply.

12  
13 ***The Middle East***  
14

15 In 2008, the Spertus institute for Jewish Studies in Chicago, a private Jewish museum, opened  
16 *Imaginary Coordinates*, a show combining historical Holy Land maps, some seeming to question  
17 the Jewish people's territorial claims in the Middle East, and contemporary artwork by both  
18 Israeli and Palestinian artists. The catalog proudly announced a "new civic agenda" in which the  
19 Museum promised not to be sectarian and to examine and question "broadly accepted Jewish  
20 assumptions".<sup>6</sup> Nevertheless, the Spertus cancelled the show soon after officers of the Jewish  
21 United Fund/Jewish Federation of Metropolitan Chicago Fund, which contributes 11 percent of  
22 the Museum's operating budget, immediately attacked *Imaginary Coordinates* as anti-Israel and  
23 insisted it was not appropriate for a Jewish institution.<sup>7</sup>

24 While the Spertus denied that the cancellation had anything to do with funding, it was hard  
25 for anyone to ignore the connection between the Museum's sudden "discovery" that the  
26 exhibition was, indeed, inappropriate and the pressure exercised by one of its largest donors.  
27 The effect of the controversy was to highlight the level of political sensitivity any exploration of  
28 Middle Eastern boundaries encounters in the US, as well as the power of interest groups who  
29 want to control the conversation and are vigilant about any divergent opinion.

30  
31 ***Terrorism***  
32

33 Nothing revealed the fragility of the nation's commitment to political free speech as the  
34 period after 9/11, a time when demands for sensitivity to the victims of the World Trade  
35 Center attacks threatened to stifle politically critical discourse. Any attempt to understand  
36 the motives of terrorists was interpreted as immoral and treasonous, perhaps even dangerous.  
37 In the years immediately following 9/11, there was widespread hostility toward art that  
38 refused the official triumvirate of anger at the monster-perpetrators, lamentation and her-  
39 oicization of the victims.

40 A full seven years after the attacks, in 2008, the president of the Rensselaer Polytechnic  
41 Institute (RPI), a private college in Troy, NY, suppressed an installation, *Virtual Jihadi*, which  
42 attempted to explore what goes into making a terrorist. The offending work was a video game  
43 in which Iraqi-American video artist Wafaa Bilal depicts himself as an Iraqi civilian radicalized  
44 by his brother's death and driven to join an Al-Qaeda cell in Iraq as a suicide bomber. RPI  
45 cited concerns that Bilal's work may make use of university resources to "provide a platform  
46 for what may be a product of a terrorist organization or which suggests violence directed  
47 toward the president of the United States and his family."<sup>8</sup> In a town hall meeting, the college  
48 president went so far as to repeatedly compare the installation to child pornography.

1           However, contrary to the stunned silence in the immediate wake of 9/11, the 2008 censor-  
2 ship was met with vocal protests by local artists, RPI students, and professors, as well as national  
3 groups. That did not stop the City of Troy from shutting down The Sanctuary, an independent  
4 art space that had exhibited *Virtual Jihadi* after it was kicked out of RPI, under the pretext of  
5 building code violations. Several years later The Sanctuary won in a First Amendment legal  
6 challenge to the City of Troy.<sup>9</sup>  
7

## 8   **The US Flag**

9  
10          In contrast to the more recent exacerbation of sensitivities around Israel or terrorism, conflicts  
11 over the use of the flag to express political dissent have a long history spanning war protests and  
12 legal battles as much as artistic use. Nevertheless, the emotional force of the Stars and Stripes does  
13 not appear to wane and its use in artwork is perennially controversial—even as the shock of flag  
14 abuse yields diminishing returns in terms of the force of its critique. Until a 2007 legal challenge  
15 by the American Civil Liberties Union, the State of Michigan, for instance, would not grant any  
16 public funds to work that “desecrates the flag”<sup>10</sup> and, in 2013, a school in Padukah, KY abjectly  
17 apologized for the “offense” of offering students in an art class the choice to reconstruct an 1989  
18 Dread Scott installation that questions the assumption of an automatic and unquestioning  
19 reverence for the flag.<sup>11</sup>  
20

## 21   **Matters of Space: Regulation and Structural Pre-censorship**

22  
23          While old fashioned censorship-as-suppression may well be a double-edged tool that gives  
24 publicity to the work it aims to suppress and drives its political message farther (aside from also  
25 making cultural institutions fearful and forcing artists to self-censor), it is not the main threat to  
26 artistic freedom today. Work made impossible through supposedly neutral regulations of public  
27 space, for instance, is not “censored” and rarely has the visibility of censored work, but it is much  
28 more efficiently silenced than were it intentionally suppressed. Suppression of political art today is  
29 not so much a direct act as collateral damage in the march of market forces or regulations of space.  
30

31          Notwithstanding the predictability of controversies around art tackling the Middle East, ter-  
32 rorism or making symbolic use of the flag, the boundaries of the permitted are not as much  
33 outlined by taboos on content as they are by regulations of space: Political art’s relative  
34 acceptability in the museum or dedicated art venue does not stretch to public multipurpose  
35 spaces. Regulations—and censorship—kick in the moment art stages its interventions in spaces  
36 where it is not sequestered as “art”: in public streets and squares, multi-use buildings, airports, or  
37 subway stations.

38          In 2011, when African-American artist Fred Wilson’s proposed monument to slavery,  
39 *E Pluribus Unum*, was cancelled due to pressure from parts of the community in Indianapolis,  
40 Indiana, the artist was, tellingly, invited to take his art to a museum rather than to a public  
41 space. Viewed as a museum piece the work would apparently be acceptable, its complexity of  
42 connotations less disturbing. Unlike a museum piece, a disruptive intervention in the city fabric  
43 not only affects our perceptions before we can take the distancing attitude of aesthetic appre-  
44 ciation, but also directly enters the stream of daily political give and take.<sup>12</sup>

45          Public art is increasingly restricted by various committees and permission processes, whose  
46 Byzantine complexity appears to be made to keep political messages safely out of the view of  
47 those who need to see them. Witness the saga of artists’ team LigoranoReese who melted a  
48 two thousand pound ice sculpture of the words “Middle Class” in Tampa, Florida, on the first  
day of the 2012 Republican National Convention. Initial contact with Tampa’s Office of

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1 Special Events was discouraging: the Republican National Committee had bought access to  
2 all city parks for the duration of the convention and the city had almost no plans for granting  
3 public space to protest groups. But the artists refused to give up. Multiple follow-ups with the  
4 Tampa Public Arts Commission yielded some good news: less than two months before the  
5 convention, unused RNC holds on public parks would become available through a lottery.  
6 There was hope for realizing the project, but no certainty. LigoranoReese were eventually  
7 granted space through the lottery, but the location was far from the convention and away  
8 from foot traffic. The waiting and uncertainly continued until just weeks before the Con-  
9 vention, when another group gave up its Lykes Gaslight Park permit and the city gave it to  
10 LigoranoReese. The sculpture went into production. Then, 48 hours before the launch, a  
11 hurricane threatened the city, canceling the first day of the Republican convention. The city  
12 refused to reschedule the permit. Frantic phone calls followed and city officials finally ceded  
13 after an intervention by the Florida affiliate of the ACLU. In the process the artists logged in  
14 hundreds of phone calls and emails to public officials, arts council representatives, and free  
15 speech advocates.<sup>13</sup>

16 Public space—especially in urban areas—bombards us with thousands of messages every day.  
17 However, almost all of those messages urge us to consume and come from billboards or other  
18 displays that are privately owned. Worse, a handful of companies own the vast majority of  
19 public displays around the nation—and the world. The effect of this consolidated ownership  
20 emerges when one of these companies decides to reject a politically inconvenient message.

21 During the RNC in New York in 2004, for instance, Clear Channel, which owns half the  
22 billboards in Times Square and 600,000 public displays worldwide, rejected an anti-war message  
23 by Project Billboard, a progressive advocacy group, because it was “distasteful” and “politically  
24 charged”. In 2013 CBS and JCDecaux—companies that own 70 percent of all public advertis-  
25 ing space in the UK—rejected an exhibition poster advertising a show at the Imperial War  
26 Museum in Manchester. The poster featured “Photo-op”, an iconic anti-war photomontage by  
27 Peter Kennard and Cat Phillips representing Tony Blair taking a selfie in front of an explosion.  
28 CBS rejected the ad because it was “deemed political” and involved explosions. JCDecaux  
29 refused to even provide a reason.<sup>14</sup>

30 Given the restrictions put on our increasingly privately owned public spaces, which appear as  
31 hostile to political art as they are friendly to corporate advertising, artists are most successful in  
32 creating meaningful artistic interventions by doing it without permission—often transgressing  
33 laws and regulations. Their work counters what I would call “structural pre-censorship.” Con-  
34 trary to censorship, which happens after a work has been produced and put on display, struc-  
35 tural pre-censorship regulates what can be put on display before it can ever appear in public  
36 space. Structural pre-censorship constrains the very possibility of production.

37 Structural pre-censorship is a result not so much of specific regulations on the content of  
38 speech per se, but of laws and other economic and cultural practices that determine what con-  
39 stitutes “legitimate” artistic expression and where it can be displayed. Though by definition  
40 outside the law and thus beyond any free speech protection, guerilla cultural tactics are worth  
41 mentioning as a suggestion of how some of the most interesting political art today entirely  
42 bypasses the free speech debate: its very creation breaks regulations and hence cannot hope to  
43 be protected as free speech under constitutional standards. Such cultural tactics comprise illegal  
44 street art or graffiti, altering the messages of corporate advertising billboards.

45 In 2012 Essam Attia started swapping advertising posters for his own drone alerts bearing a  
46 fake New York Police Department logo: an efficient way to startle passers-by into an awareness  
47 that a domestic drone surveillance program is certainly not unimaginable. The NYPD was not  
48 amused. Criminal charges for using a forged document (similar to those used in credit card

*Perverse joy*

1 fraud) were filed against Attia.<sup>15</sup> Works like Attia's depend on being taken—at least for a  
2 while—as what they claim to be, real NYPD posters or corporate announcements. As a result  
3 they run afoul of various laws and turn a socially engaged artist into a criminal.

4 The work can, of course, be shown in a museum without a problem, but that would entirely  
5 obviate its purpose. Contrary to activist political statements on the one hand and art as object  
6 for contemplation on the other, public political art makes an impact by introducing an alien,  
7 autonomous element in the public sphere. It maintains its difference from the daily flow of  
8 events but cannot be bracketed off as something with no relation to the social and political. It is  
9 simultaneously autonomous and engaged: but that effect depends on the moment of hesitation,  
10 which occurs when an encounter with art is unexpected. Are Attia's drone posters real or fic-  
11 tional? Has Tony Blair really posed himself with an explosion? The moment of uncertainty,  
12 when the viewer re-conceives reality around the new information (before they realize this is  
13 “just” art) is key to the intervention of art in public space.

14 Paradoxically, old style censorship, brutal as it is, is easier to confront than the defanging  
15 embrace of ever-flexible neo-liberal structures and the seemingly neutral regulations of  
16 our shared public spaces. That does not mean that overt censorship is innocuous: it not  
17 only impacts the life of the artist, but also results in fear and self-censorship, both individual  
18 and institutional.

19 Nonetheless, in today's media-driven democracies there is a symbiosis between old style  
20 confrontational censorship and political art, with the former giving fuel to the latter at the  
21 moment it tries to suppress it. Should it be such a surprise then that a clear censorship con-  
22 troversy pitching the forces of conservatism versus engaged artists could contain a small perverse  
23 component of unavowed joy?

24  
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# 13

## ART IS GARBAGE

*Toby Miller*

“That really was rubbish.” “It’s a trashy show.” “Total garbage.”  
*AN Other (any day of the week: n.p.)*

Sintana E. Vergara and George Tchobanoglous tell us that ‘[t]hough widely understood as a concept, waste—garbage, rubbish, discards, junk—eludes definition. Engineers define [it] as materials that are discarded from residential and commercial sources ... or as materials that have ceased to have value to the holder. ... Anthropologists hold that garbage is factual evidence of a culture. ... Ecologists claim that there is no waste in nature. ... [R]efuse workers ... treat it as valueless, and waste pickers ... treat it as ore’ (2012: 279). Of these two quotations above, my favorite is the first. I don’t just like it because I invented it. Such formulations are typical expressions of dislike for art, everyday evaluative dismissals. Sometimes these handy components in the argot of aesthetic opinion are used to distance oneself from cultural forms, and sometimes to describe them as guilty pleasures marked by unworthy industrial rather than aesthetic norms (Trumpeter, 2013).

The foundational figure of British cultural studies, left Leavisite Richard Hoggart, developed a sorrowful paradox to describe this wider tendency of leisure and pleasure in the Global North: ‘Liberty is the freedom to be abused and to be constantly urged to consume garbage’ (1995: 61). Doris Lessing saw beyond the manipulative aspects of the culture industries, regarding banal trivialization as almost a private joke between the press and its readers: ‘Asked in a moment of repletion what they believe, their answers would have little to do with the garbage they have imbibed “just for a laugh”’ (1990: 18). As Stuart Hall puts it, ‘I speak and talk to the radio and the TV all the time. I say, ‘that is not true’ and ‘you are lying through your teeth’ and ‘that cannot be so.’ I keep up a running dialogue’ (Taylor, 2006). After all, Foucault said: ‘On ne me fera jamais croire qu’un livre est mauvais parce qu’on a vu son auteur à la télévision’ [You’ll never persuade me a book is no good simply because its author has been on television], adding ‘[o]n se plaint toujours que les médias bourrent la tête des gens. Il y a de la misanthropie dans cette idée. Je crois au contraire que les gens réagissent; plus on veut les convaincre, plus ils s’interrogent’ [Some complain that the media brainwash people. This seems misanthropic to me. I believe that people resist; the more one tries to convince them, the more they ask questions] (2001: 925, 927).

But what if a more profound truth underpins this metaphorical rhetoric of garbage, a truth that escapes left Leavisism and hipster Foucauldianism alike, and is more attuned to the first epigraph above?

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1 This would be a deep and disturbing truth of art and politics that lurks behind, beneath,  
2 above, and below artworks and their reception—the truth of the environmental impact of art.  
3 Such a truth applies not in the mere communication of ecological ideas, but at the more  
4 material level of physical responsibility for deleteriously changing our earth.

5 Such a perspective would take garbage seriously, as an index and a cause of dislocation and  
6 danger, just as the state did when it responded to Civil War rubbish in 1860s US cities and race  
7 riots in 1960s' US cities by upping garbage removal services. And just as neoliberals did when  
8 they thinned down the state in the 1990s, starting with reduced garbage removal services (Adams,  
9 2001; Harvey, 2007). And it would note with paradoxical humanistic hubris that paper is the  
10 world's largest source of rubbish, and Americans deposit almost a million books a year into landfill  
11 and incinerators (Shanks et al., 2004; Trumpeter, 2013). It would also recognize garbage as a site  
12 for street art, where graffiti reference both dross and its reclamation (Visconti et al., 2010).

13 Italo Calvino's (1994) elaborate aperçus about daily life include a lengthy paean to 'taking out  
14 the rubbish.' That ignoble, cold task stood alone among 'housework' as something he could  
15 undertake with 'competence and satisfaction.' The poubelle agréée, the model Parisian rubbish  
16 bin he became familiar with, embodied 'the role that the public sphere, civic duty and the  
17 constitution of the polis play in all our lives.' Without that object, and the institutions and work  
18 associated with it, Calvino 'would die buried under my own rubbish in the snail shell of my  
19 individual existence.' The daily need to slough off the abject permits artists, intellectuals, and  
20 their fellow travelers to 'begin the new day without having to touch what the evening before  
21 we cast off from ourselves forever.'

22 A complex philosophical heritage underpins artistic ambivalence about the old and the new:  
23 anthropocentric versus eco-centric worldviews. The former emphasizes the overarching legitimacy  
24 of human interests, the latter the necessity of preserving Earth's complexity. From an anthropo-  
25 centric point of view, Francis Bacon avowed four centuries ago that 'commerce between the mind of  
26 man and the nature of things ... is more precious than anything on earth' (1620). Two hundred years  
27 later, Hegel argued that semiosis is the distinctive quality of humans. It elevates them above other life  
28 forms: making meaning is evidence of a beautiful and sublime human quality—putting one's 'will  
29 into everything.' An object or place thereby 'becomes mine.' As a consequence, people alone on  
30 earth have 'the right of absolute proprietorship.' A capacity to restrain ourselves, mastering both  
31 'spontaneity and natural constitution,' distinguishes humans from other living things. The inevitable  
32 relationship between humanity and nature asserts itself at the core of consciousness as a site of struggle  
33 for 'us' to achieve freedom from risk and want. We are unique in our wish and ability to conserve and  
34 represent objects, so a strange dialectical process affords us the special right to destroy them. This  
35 willpower distinguishes us from other animals because it expresses the desire and capacity to trans-  
36 cend subsistence. Semiotic power legitimizes the destruction of semiotically unmarked sites: 'respect  
37 for ... unused land cannot be guaranteed.' Nature's 'tedious chronicle' provides 'nothing new under  
38 the sun'—valueless without the progress signified by human dominion (Hegel, 1954: 242–43, 248–  
39 50 and 1988: 50, 154, 61). Hence the anti-indigenous, anti-flora, anti-fauna doctrine of terra nullius  
40 <http://www.migrationheritage.nsw.gov.au/exhibition/objectsthroughtime/bourketerra/>.

41 But can this opposition of semiotic richness versus natural primitiveness work? Simmel  
42 thought not:

43  
44 When we designate a part of reality as nature, we mean one of two things ... an inner  
45 quality marking it off from art and artifice, from something intellectual or historical.  
46 Or ... a representation and symbol of that wholeness of Being whose flux is audible  
47 within them

(2007: 21)

*Art is Garbage*

1 The very concept of nature as something to be molded, discarded, or preserved forgets the  
2 principles of unity that animate the sign ‘nature’ as an idea and a representation, which have long  
3 been touchstones of the philosophy of art and hence semiotic and financial value.

4 In 1832, Charles Babbage, the mythic founder of programmable computation, noted the  
5 partial and ultimately limited ability of humanity to bend and control natural forces without  
6 unforeseen consequences:

7  
8 The operations of man ... are diminutive, but energetic during the short period of  
9 their existence: whilst those of nature, acting over vast spaces, and unlimited by time,  
10 are ever pursuing their silent and resistless career.

11  
12 Humanity’s finally fateful drive to control components of what had appeared uncontrollable now  
13 compromises the very ability of humanity to live in nature. This is not news, however. Bacon, for  
14 example, was far from a mere anthropocentrist all those years ago. Prior to the Industrial  
15 Revolution, he could see that we must be ‘content to wait upon nature instead of vainly affecting  
16 to overrule her’ (1620).

17 And David Hume approached these matters from an almost eco-centric persuasion: even if  
18 rights are only accorded to those with semiotic abilities, animals deserve them, too, because they  
19 ‘learn many things from experience’ and develop ‘knowledge of the nature of fire, water, earth,  
20 stones, heights, depths, etc.’ Rather than being merely sensate, our fellow creatures infer  
21 material truths (1955: 112–13) through what he called ‘the reason of animals’ (1739).

22 William Morris’ call for the art world to recognize its links to everyday life, as per ethnological  
23 artifacts, and to problematize Romantic fetishes for a separation of work and creativity, took as its  
24 lodestone the need to recreate beautiful surroundings as a precondition for beautiful creations:

25  
26 Of all the things that is likely to give us back popular art in England, the cleaning of  
27 England is the first and most necessary. Those who are to make beautiful things must  
28 live in a beautiful place. Some people may be inclined to say ... that the very oppo-  
29 sition between the serenity and purity of art and the turmoil and squalor of a great  
30 modern city stimulates the invention of artists, and produces special life in the art of  
31 today. It seems to me that at best it but stimulates the feverish and dreamy qualities  
32 that throw some artists out of the general sympathy

(1884)

33  
34  
35 In other words, the semiotic marks so prized by Hegel are, ironically, only sustainable in a state of  
36 nature, which in turn depends on the hope that people can ‘abstain from wilfully destroying that  
37 beauty’ (Morris, 1884).

38 The duality of nature—that it is simultaneously self-generating and sustaining, yet its survival is  
39 contingent on human rhetoric and despoliation—makes it vulnerable, even as its reaction to our  
40 interference will strike back sooner or later in mutually-assured destruction: no more nature, no  
41 more humanity, no more art. As a consequence, sacred and secular human norms conflict as often  
42 as they converge in accounting for changes in the material world and the rights of humanity as its  
43 most skillful and willful, productive and destructive inhabitant (Marx, 2008). As Latour explains:

44  
45 From the time the term “politics” was invented, every type of politics has been  
46 defined by its relation to nature, whose every feature, property, and function depends  
47 on the polemical will to limit, reform, establish, short-circuit, or enlighten public life

(2004: 1)

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1 This necessitates allocating equal and semi-autonomous significance to natural phenomena, social  
2 forces, and cultural meaning in order to understand contemporary life. Just as objects of scientific  
3 knowledge come to us in hybrid forms that are coevally affected by social power and textual  
4 meaning, so the latter two domains are themselves affected by the natural world (Latour, 1993:  
5 5–6). This is why museums focused on nature are encased within imperial domination and  
6 industrialization as well as scientific knowledge, and tightly linked to the Global North’s colo-  
7 nizing and classifying tendencies over peoples and places (Barrett and McManus, 2007). Half of  
8 the two hundred million objects housed in British museums fall into this category (Alberti, 2008:  
9 73). But it may equally provide the preconditions for such institutions as Toronto’s artist-run  
10 Whippersnapper Gallery featuring Brazilian street artists creating gigantic urban sculptures from  
11 garbage (Bain and McLean, 2013: 107).

12  
13  
14

### **The Artists’ Answer**

15 So what could be done to deal with this complex milieu of art and the environment? Growing  
16 numbers of creative artists are taking on apolitical cybertarian celebrations of digital technology  
17 that ignore the environmental implications of such fetishes. Consider Arte Povera’s use of found  
18 materials, railing at errant, arrogant consumption in highlighting e-waste, recycling, and rag-  
19 pickers, or such artists as Jessica Millman, Miguel Rivera, Alexdromeda, Sudhu Tewari, Natalie  
20 Jeremijenko, Nome Edonna, Chris Jordan, Erik Otto, and Jane Kim. Yona Friedman focuses on  
21 re-use rather than originality, while Julie Bargmann and Stacy Levy start with a creative clean-up  
22 rather than concluding with a painstaking one. Carnegie Endowment’s Foreign Policy magazine  
23 circulated into the mainstream Natalie Behring’s stunning collection of photos from “Inside the  
24 Digital Dump” (2007).

25 And the art world could implement ecological reforms at the level of its own organization as  
26 well as its works. Some of these could arise from any conventional manual or consultancy (for  
27 example Museums Association, 2010 and Julie’s Bicycle, 2012). They include:

- 28
- 29 • using carbon calculators to establish institutions’ environmental impact due to heat, light,  
30 and travel
  - 31 • encouraging electronic attendance at art events
  - 32 • requiring artists and curators to transform purchasing and recycling
  - 33 • producing matte rather than glossy catalogs to avoid use of virgin paper
  - 34 • awarding period contracts to green suppliers; and
  - 35 • busing donors to major museum events rather than have them chauffeur-driven by folks  
36 who idle engines outside while checks are promised within

37  
38

Is this sufficient? Latour sees things rather differently:

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we were able to think we were modern only as long as the various ecological crises  
could be denied or delayed. ... When the first tremors of the Apocalypse are heard, it  
would seem that preparations for the end should require something more than simply  
using a different kind of lightbulb ... a timid appeal to buy new garbage cans [sic.]  
(2009: 462)

46 The second set of changes is wider ranging. It is definitely not to be found in manuals or  
47 consultancies (for a wonderfully schizoid conversation alternating between these norms, see Lam  
48 et al., 2013):

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- 1 • engage ecocritical art history (Braddock, 2009)
- 2 • boycott polluters' money; and
- 3 • defang senior management

4

5 It would mean articulating art, its development and administration, its gestation and curation,  
6 directly to labor. An alarming Adornian quotation, oft-cited and -derided, proposes this option  
7 in starkly metaphorical and literal terms:

8

9 All culture after Auschwitz, including its urgent critique, is garbage. By restoring itself after  
10 what transpired in its landscape without resistance, it has turned entirely into that ideology  
11 which it potentially was, ever since it took it upon itself, in opposition to material existence, to  
12 breathe life into this latter with the light, which the separation of the Spirit from manual labor  
13 withheld from such (Adorn, 2001: 360)

13

14

15

**The Corporate Answer**

16

17 The separation of art and labor producing garbage is also indexed by corporate art sponsors. Big  
18 polluters make cynical use of art in order to greenwash their public image. The idea is to obtain  
19 'a social license to operate.' This surprisingly overt term has been adopted with relish by  
20 polluters to explain their strategies for winning over local, national, and international com-  
21 munities to accept mining (<http://sociallicense.com/definition.html>; Thomson and Boutilier,  
22 2011). Forbes magazine announced 2013 as the year for the extractive sector to gather such  
23 licenses (Klein, 2012).

24

25 Polluters' ignoble search for legitimacy can be understood differently. Consider this view,  
26 from the British environmental-activist collective RisingTide:

27

28

29

By sponsoring our cultural institutions, Shell tries to protect its reputation, distract our  
attention from its environmental and human rights crimes around the world and buy  
our acceptance

30

(2012)

31

32 Corporate largesse gets whatever its return on investment is (this is tough to measure) as a  
33 quid pro quo for very little—for example, private money accounts for well under 20 percent  
34 of the income that goes to UK museums and other not-for-profits. But the blockbuster art  
35 shows often associated by polluters provide alibis to big cultural institutions as well as their  
36 brethren in big oil, because they counter the populist claims that only elite segments of  
37 society visit such places.

38

39 BP has dedicated much of its corporate carapace over the past decade to creating relationships  
40 with Britain's principal cultural institutions, such as the National Gallery, the National Maritime  
41 Museum, Tate Britain, the Natural History Museum, the Science Museum, and the National  
42 Gallery (Chase, 2010). BP explained the strategy to Marketing Magazine as a 'return to above-  
43 the-line advertising ... showcasing the contribution the company makes to society' (Reynolds,  
44 2012). BrandRepublic uses it as a case study (Chapman, 2012).

45

46 BP says it 'has proudly supported arts and culture in the UK for over 35 years,' and shows  
47 particular reverence for exhibits that attract large numbers of visitors. At ten million pounds cost  
48 in 2011 <http://www.bp.com/en/global/corporate/about-bp/bp-worldwide/bp-united-kingdom/bp-in-the-community/arts-and-culture.html> this is small fry for a company with revenue  
that year of US\$75,475 million [http://www.bp.com/content/dam/bp/pdf/investors/BP\\_Annual\\_Report\\_and\\_Form\\_20F\\_2012.pdf](http://www.bp.com/content/dam/bp/pdf/investors/BP_Annual_Report_and_Form_20F_2012.pdf).

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Figure 13.1 BP Grand Entrance at the Los Angeles County Museum of Art.

BP paid the Los Angeles County Museum of Art US\$25 million in 2007, in return for which the Museum christened a BP Grand Entrance (<http://www.lacma.org/sites/default/files/bpgef.pdf>). As shown in the picture above, it is neither grand nor an entrance, in fact it is barely noticeable, but the thought counts!

In 2006, BP paid a million dollars to Long Beach's Aquarium of the Pacific. When one of the company's oilrigs exploded in the Gulf of Mexico four years later, both sides reconsidered the partnership (in the UK, BP quickly withdrew much of its marketing). Today, the company luxuriates in naming rights over the Aquarium's 'BP Sea Otter Habitat,' which opened a month later—its sponsors felt too shy to turn up, perhaps in order to avoid negative externalities and protests (Boehm and Sahagun, 2010; Reynolds, 2012; [http://www.aquariumofpacific.org/exhibits/northern\\_pacific\\_gallery/otters](http://www.aquariumofpacific.org/exhibits/northern_pacific_gallery/otters)).

BP also participates in more overtly ideological activities, notably at Britain's Science Museum, where school students are encouraged, according to the corporation, 'to explore and understand how energy powers every aspect of their lives and to question how to meet the planet's growing demands in the future.' A 'partnership' between the two virtuous institutions was necessary because of 'a shared concern over the public lack of awareness of energy-related issues.' This awareness is generated via 'an interactive game where visitors play the energy minister and have to efficiently power [courtesy of a split infinitive, it seems] a make-believe country by balancing economic, environmental and political concerns before the prime minister fires them' (Viney, 2010). The game sets up BP and the Science Museum as reasonable people in a world of extremes, capable of a measured and fair-minded engagement with the central issues by contrast with hot-headed, green-gaseous, environmentalists. It positions the firm as a benign intermediary between present and future, science and childhood, truth and innovation, rather than as one of the worst polluters in human history. Now that's garbage.

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1 Chevron in Colombia boasts that its goals include ‘promover el desarrollo cultural de  
2 Colombia’ [promoting the country’s cultural development], as evidenced by sponsoring an  
3 exhibit at the Museo del Gas de Riohacha that explores pre-invasion and colonial settlements  
4 and the ongoing cultures of indigenous peoples, such as the Wayúu (<http://www.fundaciongasnaturalfenosa.org/es-ES/MuseoGas/Paginas/subhome.aspx>; “Ficha Técnica,” 2013).

5  
6 The reality is that Chevron disrupts the Wayúu’s form of life, who have protested (<http://chevrontoxico.com/take-action/colombia>; <http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=5RKR2NKdsgQ>).

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9

**Answering Back**

10  
11 RisingTide UK’s Art Not Oil project takes as its motto: ‘For creativity, climate justice & an end  
12 to oil industry sponsorship of the arts.’ It began in 2004 as a challenge and a stimulus to current  
13 and potential artists to forge their practice and exhibitions in sustainable ways, and to work against  
14 the unsustainability of Shell, BP, and their kind—as businesses in general, but more particularly as  
15 sponsors of the arts. Art Not Oil boasts numerous on-line galleries. Along with direct, material  
16 activism, the galleries are designed to criticize and undermine ‘the caring image’ that corporate  
17 polluters seek via various nefarious initiatives such as the BP Portrait Award and Shell supporting  
18 the “Wildlife Photographer of the Year” exhibit at Britain’s Natural History Museum. The goal  
19 is to see ‘Big Oil’ go ‘the way of Big Tobacco in being unwelcome in any gallery, museum, opera  
20 house or theatre’ (<http://www.artnotoil.org.uk/about>).

21 Tobacco killers exited sponsorship of the National Portrait Gallery two decades ago, opening  
22 room to fuel killers (Chase, 2010). One day, non-smokers and governments may feel the same  
23 disdain for high-octane drivers, pilots, and passengers as they presently exhibit towards nicotine  
24 pushers and users. But this is much more than an issue of consumerism and individual foibles. It  
25 is about large institutions and their place within international and national power élites, drawing  
26 on minimal, cheap sponsorship to gloss their image and win goodwill from the public while  
27 maintaining oligarchical ties. No surprise, then that 8,000 signatures on a petition opposed the  
28 Tate’s renewal of its sponsorship with BP (“Cuatro museos,” 2011), had little effect given that  
29 the Museum’s Director, Nicholas Serota, avowing during the spill of the year before that ‘You  
30 don’t abandon your friends because they have what we consider to be a temporary difficulty’  
31 (quoted in Culture Beyond Oil, 2011: 12).

32 For its part, the Reclaim Shakespeare Company’s flash mob insisted “Out Damn Logo” in its  
33 critique of the British Museum’s complicity with big pollution for accepting BP money to help  
34 fund ‘Shakespeare: Staging the World’ ([http://www.britishmuseum.org/whats\\_on/past\\_exhibitions/2012/shakespeare\\_staging\\_the\\_world.aspx](http://www.britishmuseum.org/whats_on/past_exhibitions/2012/shakespeare_staging_the_world.aspx); Kocialkowska, 2012). Such alliances as “Good  
35 Crude Britannia” and the “Greenwash Guerrillas” engage the maddening contradictions of cultural  
36 institutions seeking to be conservatories and green while rushing like orgasmic teenagers towards  
37 nocturnal pollution (<http://greenwashguerrillas.wordpress.com>; “Activistas y artistas,” 2010).

38  
39 The Liberate Tate group has mounted several intense actions using spectacle (what it refers  
40 to as ‘creative disobedience’ <http://liberatetate.wordpress.com/liberating-tate/about/>) that  
41 highlight the museum’s sycophancy to polluters. In 2011, activists poured a simulacrum of oil  
42 over a cringing, bedraggled, abject artist on the floor of the Tate (“Human Cost”) among  
43 BP’s proud “Single Form” exhibit, dedicated to the human body (“Repudian artistas,” 2011).  
44 And the following year, they lugged 55 melting kilos of Arctic ice—named “Floe Piece”—  
45 from Occupy London on the steps of St Paul’s Cathedral to the Tate’s Turbine Hall to protest  
46 the museum’s murky intercourse with BP (Anderson, 2012; Lam et al., 2013). Liberate Tate is  
47 particularly exercised to exorcize the Tate’s incorporationist hipster tendencies, notably the  
48 Tate Modern’s 2010 “Disobedience Makes History” workshop on activism and art, which

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1 forbade participants from criticizing sponsors. In similar vein, Shell sponsorship of the  
2 South Bank Centre buys it proscription of leafleting against this most disgraceful of polluters  
3 (Culture Beyond Oil, 2011: 19).  
4

### 6 Conclusion

7 Absent external evaluation of the social composition of counter-BP/Shell art world participants, the  
8 nature of old, middle-aged, and new media coverage, and subsequent shifts in public opinion and  
9 reactions from lawmakers, it's difficult to be sure about the impact of such spectacles. I generally  
10 incline towards the skeptic's view of populist activism—but not in these instances. Why? Because I  
11 think the lugubrious hyper-rationality associated with environmentalism needs leavening through  
12 sophisticated, entertaining, participatory spectacle. A blend of dark irony, sarcasm, and cartoonish  
13 stereotypes effectively mocks the pretensions of high art's dalliance with high polluters. And this can  
14 and must be twinned with a radical departure from existing museum hierarchies in order to break  
15 apart their oligarchical ties to nicotine, oil, and anyone else lining up to exploit the earth.

16 The complicity of institutions and artists with the ideology of growth is quite evident, as it is  
17 with anarchists, protestors, academics, anti-globalizers, occupiers, and the rest of us: we just can't  
18 stop trying to get noticed, to be heard and read, to have our struggles noted. Seeming repu-  
19 diations of a despised other frequently rely on just that other.

20 Rather than easily denouncing us for this complicity, Latour invites us to accept it:

21  
22 To explore a positive, energetic, innovative set of passions to repair and pursue the  
23 modernist experience at a more fundamental level? Can we imagine a Doctor  
24 Frankenstein who would not flee in horror at the creature he bungled at first—a  
25 Frankenstein who goes back to his laboratory? Can Prometheus be reconciled with  
26 the seemingly antithetical notions of care and caution?

27 (2009: 462)

28  
29 With fewer rhetorical flourishes, marginal ragpickers, the people on whose labor so much of  
30 modern life depends, also speak out:

31  
32 Today, thanks to all, we celebrate the National Waste-picker Day in Colombia,  
33 remembering fellow waste-pickers who passed away, after 40 or 50 years of working  
34 as waste-pickers, without health coverage, pension, housing or security. We, waste-  
35 pickers, will keep the hands in the garbage bag that provides our livelihood, but the  
36 head outside of the bag, to fight for the public policies that we need to improve our  
37 situation. Intermediaries wait comfortably in their warehouses, and waste-pickers do  
38 the hard work of collecting. Waste should not be of the intermediaries, but of the  
39 waste-pickers who do all the work. United, we can fight for what is needed—Silvio  
40 Ruiz Grizzales, Association of Waste-Pickers of Bogotá.

41 (quoted in *Women in Informal Employment Globalizing and Organizing et al.*, 2008: 15)

42  
43 This is where art and garbage must meet, in the forces of nature and labor, where semiotic marks  
44 are as much the property of the world's birds and ragpickers as its bourgeoisie and big oil.

45 It is clearly true that:

46  
47 American households have ceased to be centers of material production and reuse, and  
48 consumer culture, with its emphasis on convenience and fashion, has encouraged the



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1 creation of lighter-weight, shorter-lived products. Although vestiges of reuse remain  
2 (or a return to reuse practices), such as garage sales and craigslist exchanges, product  
3 reuse is a minor sink for waste products in the industrialized countries

(Vergara and Tchobanoglous, 2012: 294)

4  
5  
6 We can only grasp the implications of these actions by putting them into a context beyond  
7 consumption, however. Responsibility for our environmental chaos lies most clearly with corporate  
8 criminality rather than bland, blind, consumer self-aggrandisement. A truth much deeper than  
9 Hegel's semiotic sovereignty must animate our future, and artists and the art world can be in the  
10 vanguard if they focus on work and ecology and eschew social licensing and polluter sponsorship.

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## 14

# GRASS STAGE'S THEATER OF PRECARITY IN SHANGHAI

*Mark Driscoll*

This is a figure ubiquitous in contemporary Shanghai. He enters a simply-lit stage, carrying two soiled leather sacks full of the emblematic commodity of ecocidal, hypercapitalist China—empty plastic water bottles—the detritus he collects to survive. Despite readily available recycling bins, the bottles are now an integral part of the Shanghai cityscape, marrying the class polarities of bottle-collector and financial analyst as the only two expanding jobs in urban China.<sup>1</sup> Echoing Walter Benjamin's ragpicker from the *Passagenwerk*, the bottle recycler applies himself assiduously to his work, deftly salvaging the empties that will pay him the equivalent of one cent for ten bottles and ignoring those lacking any value. The obvious skill at identifying value where others see only trash is registered smugly on the face of the collector, who after a few minutes of focused salvaging, stuffs his bags to the limit and proceeds to break the fourth wall by smiling directly at the audience. Closing up (*shoulong*) the bags to prevent any losses, he breaks into a communist song popular in the 1950s.

Our future lies in working the fields  
The smoke drifts from the kitchen chimneys of the brand-new farmhouses  
Life takes on a whole new form when we are working  
The elderly raise a glass to toast, and the children laugh loudly  
We work the fields for the honor and glory of our epoch.

As the bottle collector concludes the song and withdraws to the back of the stage, the character of “play director” walks to the center of the stage and directly addresses the audience: “Welcome all of you who’ve come tonight to see the play *Little Society* (*Xiaoshehui*). We welcome any input big and small you want to bring from the outside world, as our theater group is intimately connected to your lives.” Then, on a blank white sheet a simple rear projection displays *Little Society, Part I*.

While the bottle collector falls onto a chair for a well-deserved snooze, a second figure enters the stage dressed in a raggedy old overcoat, and sits down on a chair in the middle of the stage peering out into the audience:

“I see pedestrians with cheap casts protecting broken legs hobbling along Nanjing Road/I see the Oriental Pearl Tower wearing an old, ragged straw hat/I see the gangrened legs of cats at the entrance to Longhua Martyrs cemetery.” Described as a middle-aged beggar (*qigai*), this woman

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1 concludes her schizoid scan with: “I really don’t want to see you all, but you are all I can see from  
2 here in the city; you are my non-revolving anchoring point” (*rao buguo qu de dibiao*).

3 As the woman beggar leaves the stage, we are left with a camera obscura inversion of  
4 Shanghai’s most iconic sights—the consumer district of Nanjing Road; the futuristic Oriental  
5 Pearl Tower on the Bund; and Longhua Martyrs cemetery, a popular Chinese tourist attraction  
6 and former site of the infamous Guomindang prison where Communist Party members were  
7 tortured and killed. Jacques Rancière’s class specific “sensible” of what I will call the lumpen-  
8 precariat here sabotages the pristine consumerism of Nanjing Road, corrodes the corporate  
9 confidence of the futuristic Oriental Pearl Tower in Pudong, and disfigures the Chinese gov-  
10 ernment’s official version of communist history (Rancière 2006: 21–23). The perceptual ven-  
11 geance of the beggar is an open invitation to the Shanghai audience to put under erasure the  
12 nationalist and consumerist everyday. The defamiliarizing device is accented by the sudden  
13 release of plastic bottles from the recycler’s overstuffed sacks, cascading onto the floor.

14 This prompts the bottle collector to move onto the center of the stage where he takes a small  
15 red scarf out of one of his huge bags and starts to caress it. The scarf is the kind worn by Chi-  
16 nese kids in the Youth Pioneers League, and the physical touch sets him off singing the anthem  
17 of the group.<sup>2</sup> Apparently a former member of this political group, the act of singing impels a  
18 bleedthrough to encounters with friends in the group. Hailing these friends, he leaps off the  
19 chair he had just a moment ago sat down on, only to slump back into it when their virtual  
20 presence can’t be actualized.<sup>3</sup>

21 At this point the presence of three or four people surrounding him on the chair (referred to in  
22 the script as the “masses” [*zhongren*]) becomes apparent. They constantly hover around these  
23 characters, but both the beggar and the bottle collector go about their lives oblivious to their  
24 presence, reminding us of Michel Foucault’s state of “darkness and blindness” experienced by  
25 atomized subjects in capitalism (Foucault 2008: 279). When the bottle collector starts singing a  
26 traditional Chinese wedding song, the masses move in tandem with him in welcoming the  
27 phantom presence of his “bride” (*xinmiang*). Next, the masses shuffle off stage leaving the collector  
28 and virtual bride in romantic isolation, exposing the fact that the collector is hallucinating the  
29 presence of his former love. Suddenly, the terrified collector feels himself being pushed to the  
30 ground and we see him there filled with fear. The virtual wife pulls him off the floor back onto  
31 his chair and he sits there yelling and bickering with her until she leaves. Even after her seeming  
32 departure, the collector continues to argue with her, until the virtual presence of the collector’s  
33 young comrades from the Youth Pioneers League bleeds through again, only to fade out quickly,  
34 leaving the collector looking sad and despairing on the ground. He manages to sing several stanzas  
35 from the Youth Pioneers’ anthem, which centers him enough to enable a return to his chair.

36 A third Shanghai precariat appears at this point; an attractive woman around 20 named Lulu.  
37 Carrying a roll of toilet paper, she makes her way to the center of the stage, climbing up on a  
38 stool. Looking furtively at the audience, she pulls a virtual condom out of her wallet and rolls it  
39 on to the penis of a phantom john. Suddenly, she lies back prostrate while balancing on the stool,  
40 as an act of penetrative sex bleeds through to the here and now: “Master, are you comfy?”

41 She abruptly steps off the stool and, in a relaxed, playful manner, walks round and round in a  
42 circle, reverting to a child-like demeanor. Like the bottle collector and beggar before her, she  
43 enters some kind of dream space (*mengjing*), albeit continuing to pantomime putting condoms  
44 on the penises of virtual johns:

45  
46 I had a dream I was back home surfing the net.  
47 I had a dream Mom’s illness was completely cured.  
48 I had a dream I was earning lots of money.

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1 I had a dream I was a guy. (She giggles to herself.)  
2 I had a dream I was a rich guy, but I still kept doing sex work.

3  
4 Returning to her stool while smiling confidently, this time she puts a condom on her own virtual  
5 penis, “as if she were a man.” Her next transgendered act has her ordering a sex worker to “Take  
6 your clothes off!” and after her facial expression alternates between a “sweet subservience” and a  
7 masculine “brutality” (*hendü*) Lulu, in obvious distress, returns to her previous state of subservience  
8 and intones, “Master, are you comfy?” She then falls onto the floor and lies straight out on her  
9 back while experiencing imagined penetrative sex and, after stopping, gratefully blurts out “Thank  
10 you! Thank you!” to a virtual john throwing money at her. Overcome by more psychic distress,  
11 with one hand she strikes herself on the face, while with the other picks up the money. Then she  
12 repeatedly exclaims, “I want to be punished!” before moving to the front of the stage to declare  
13 “I’m a whore.” This is immediately followed by “I’m not a whore,” after which a series of ratio-  
14 nales follow: “I have to earn money”; “the money I’ve worked hard for is rightfully mine”; etc.

15 At this point the masses return to the center of the stage and gather right behind her, staring  
16 at her intently. They start speaking her lines in unison:

17  
18 All money is clean.  
19 There’s no such thing as clean money.  
20 Some customers are generous.  
21 *Some customers are scary and pervy* (bientai).  
22 Some customers send me gifts after sex.  
23 Some customers are so rough that I ache afterwards.  
24 I feel lonely.  
25 When I’m in this city I feel free.  
26 I want to make friends.  
27 What use are friends?  
28 I want my own house.  
29 What can a house do for me?  
30 I am playing the role of this girl named Lulu; she’s 18 years old.  
31 How could she ever be my friend?  
32 She has encounters with lots of people.  
33 But she’s an individual.  
34 Do you have any friends like me?  
35 There’s no such thing as a good man.  
36 Is there even one exception to this rule?  
37 I’m here playing the role of a woman who sells herself.  
38 Does this mean I’m playing a woman worker?  
39 Someone wants to help me.  
40 What can you do to help me?  
41 You don’t really want to help me.  
42 I don’t really want you to help me.  
43 I want to go out of the city.  
44 I don’t want to go out of the city.  
45 I want to leave Shanghai.  
46 I don’t want to leave Shanghai.  
47 I want to go back to my family in the country.  
48 I can’t go back to the country.

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1 This goes on for another few minutes, until the masses slink off the stage, leaving the sex worker  
2 Lulu alone. She continues:

3  
4 There aren't any sincere people.  
5 There's no one I can trust.  
6 How do you deal with the distance separating you from me?  
7 What can we do about this distance?  
8 What can I do about this distance?  
9

10 Lulu ceases abruptly when she accidentally spills a bag of dried melon-seed shells onto the floor.  
11 Having a kind of panic attack, she gathers the seeds up and darts crazily around the stage, finally  
12 collapsing on the floor lying on her back again. Softly, she sings a popular song from the 1990s  
13 called "A story of springtime." The first, and most important, half of *Little Society* concludes  
14 with the appearance of a character called "the soliloquizer" (*dubai zhe*).

15 For fifteen minutes or so, this soliloquizer declaims an exhaustive list of all the social actants  
16 in both communist (1949–78) and reform period (1979–present) China.

17  
18 I'm standing here and, you know what I call you?  
19 I call you comrade!  
20 I call you comrade!  
21 I call you teacher!  
22 I call you Miss!  
23 I call you comrade!  
24 I call you work-unit leader!  
25 I call you collectivist!  
26 I call you party leader!  
27 I call you upper-class!  
28 I call you superficial club-kid!  
29 I call you proletariat!  
30 I call you oppressed!  
31 I call you public-bond market!  
32 I call you hedge fund!  
33 I call you red-light district!  
34 I call you New Left!  
35 I call you public security cop!  
36

37 *Little Society* is the most recent play from the most important avant-garde theater troupe in  
38 Shanghai—Grass Stage/? (Tao 2013). Founded in early 2005, the director Zhao Chuan decided  
39 to make Grass Stage an amateur-only group. Although a few of the original members had studied  
40 dance or art, only one had any background in theater. Therefore, the great majority of Grass  
41 Stage's 200 or so members have lacked any experience in the arts before joining the troupe. The  
42 only requirement for joining is to attend the long, all-day rehearsals and collective writing sessions  
43 held on Saturdays, and to pay the 5 RMB dues—about 85 US cents.

44 In Zhao Chuan's own words, he wanted to completely invert the politics and aesthetics of  
45 the Shanghai theater world, which he condemns as solely concerned with "using beautiful  
46 actors and actresses to make as much money as possible." A site for disseminating official com-  
47 munist ideology in the 1950s and 1960s, with a few notable exceptions, the contemporary  
48 Chinese theater scene has been transformed—in Zhao's eyes—into a place for the wealthy to

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1 display the fashionable trophies emblematic of victories in the capitalist world; in other words  
2 an elite “white collar theater” (*bailingxi*).

3 Drawing on a long tradition in China of performers going to the countryside to bring art  
4 directly to working people (their name refers to medieval travelling performers who constructed  
5 humble stages in rural grasslands), Grass Stage was formed to bring theater to Shanghai’s 99  
6 percent—not the rich businessmen and 20-something club-kids who often serve as Shanghai’s  
7 synecdoche in the Chinese national and global media, appearing most recently in the  
8 blockbuster films about crass materialism in Shanghai *Tiny Times* (*Xiao shidai*). The first twen-  
9 tieth-century version of populist performing arts emerged during the May 4 (1919) republican  
10 movement, followed by Mao’s 1942 *Talks at the Yan’an Forum on Literature and Art* (*Zai Yanan*  
11 *wenyi zaotanhui shang de jianghua*) which established that all art would serve and “learn from the  
12 masses” (*xuejun xuenong*). Learning from and serving the masses meant, during this period of  
13 communist war against both Japanese imperialist invaders and the Guomindang, art for and  
14 from soldiers and the peasants who sustained them—configuring the masses as the sine qua non  
15 of an independent Chinese nation-state itself. This all changed dramatically in the post-Mao era  
16 when avant-garde (*xianfeng*) theater first emerged in Beijing (Chen 2004; Yin 1999).

17 Although the interventions of the Euro-American avant-garde since Dadaism have normally  
18 featured a combination of formal experimentation, an attack on previous aesthetic standards,  
19 and a political refusal of the ideology of bourgeois possessive individualism, the specificity of  
20 China’s history and geopolitics calls for a provincializing of this European logic. While avant-  
21 garde pioneers in China in the late 1970s and early 1980s rejected the official aesthetic regimes  
22 of socialist realism and naturalism, their political refusal focused on the notion of the masses and  
23 the one-party state in Chinese communist orthodoxy. The critique of the masses naturally led  
24 to an exploratory celebration of individualism and personal expression in China, almost directly  
25 opposite to the tendencies of the avant-garde in the West. As Liu Kang has written about cut-  
26 ting-edge Chinese literature of this same period, “the targets of assault and deconstruction in  
27 China were different from those of the European precursors: not bourgeois values and norms  
28 but the revolutionary ideologies and discourses that dominated Mao’s China” (Liu 2002: 98). In  
29 particular, the emphasis on individualism and private expression in the early performing arts  
30 avant-garde is crucial to keep in mind when thinking about Grass Stage.

31 We also need to foreground the different set of conditions determining the relation between  
32 art and the state in East Asia. Like in Japan in the 1950s and 1960s, the overwhelming majority  
33 of performing artists in China are connected to state institutions, and almost all have worked for  
34 state-owned theaters after graduating from state universities or art schools. This means that a  
35 performing artist’s outright opposition to the state was inconceivable in China until the early  
36 1980s, after the capitalist reform period took off in 1979 and made available spaces for inde-  
37 pendent art and theater.

38 Almost immediately, young dramatists like Gao Xingjian and Wang Peigong attacked the  
39 hegemony of naturalism by trying their hands at Dadaist and modernist non-realism. This  
40 resulted in new theatrical techniques emphasizing the de-familiarization techniques of Brecht  
41 and the general absurdity of Ionesco. But after the promising successes of productions like *Bus*  
42 *Stop* (*Chezhan*), *Savage* (*Yeren*), and *Rubik Cube* (Mofang) the proliferation of local film and  
43 television companies began to offer urban consumers unprecedented entertainment choices,  
44 making it difficult for the new avant-garde to survive at the box office. This was compounded  
45 by occasional government attacks on these fringe dramatists for their “bourgeois liberalism”  
46 imported from the West.

47 So as experimental dramatists started fleeing the theater, several brave performing artists star-  
48 ted the first self-funded, non-governmental theater troupes committed to working and

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1 performing completely outside the state-run arts institutions. The most influential of these—and  
2 an important precedent for Grass Stage—was the Frog Experimental Drama Club (*Wa shiyan*  
3 *jutuan*) led by Mou Sen and Meng Jinghui. Mou and Sen established the group in 1987 and put  
4 on three influential productions before the Tiananmen Square crackdown of June 4, 1989,  
5 which forced Mou and others to deal with the consequences of personal expression and avant-  
6 garde aesthetics in a newly repressive China. Despite this, a novel political culture of opposition  
7 to the government in the performing and media arts would emerge a few years later.

8 Mou Sen's new group, Garage Theater, put on a production called *A Chinese Grammatical*  
9 *Discussion of the "The Other Shore"* (*Guanyu "Bian" de yihui hanyu cixing taolun*) in 1992, which  
10 was the first play to confront life in China after the Tiananmen Square incident. It was a  
11 reworking of a 1986 play called *Other Shore* by Gao Xingjian that was banned by the govern-  
12 ment. Using standard avant-garde techniques like inner-monologue and the breaking of the  
13 fourth wall by directly addressing the audience, it depicted a group of individuals who had lost  
14 all sense of purpose, or a shore to orient one's future towards.

15 Mou found it difficult to put on plays after his 1994 critique of the Orwellian character of  
16 the Chinese state, *Zero File* (*Ling dangan*), because he was prevented by the government from  
17 showing at a theater festival in Brussels in 1994. He subsequently relocated to Europe. It was  
18 left to his old friend Meng Jinghui's new Beijing group to try to advance the agenda of politi-  
19 cized avant-garde theater. Meng's group started out putting on loose adaptations of Euro-  
20 American avant-garde standards by Beckett and Ionesco using the techniques of collective  
21 reading and collective performance where all the group members democratically worked out  
22 parts and interpretations. This practice led to the breakthrough 1995 work *I Love XXX*, based  
23 on a script by Meng. It emphasized physical movement over verbal expression and when dia-  
24 logue did happen, it was often absurdist. As Rosella Ferrari writes:

25  
26 It is thus no accident that the new generation of Chinese theatre-makers, who had  
27 witnessed the hysteria of the Cultural Revolution as children and the June Fourth  
28 bloodshed as adults, did regard grotesque aesthetics and the fragmented structures of  
29 the Theater of the Absurd as privileged allegorical grounds in which to materialize the  
30 post-utopian mood of China after Tiananmen Square.

(Ferrari 2012: 121)

31  
32  
33 According to the critic Tao Qingmei, the additional emergence of consumer society in the  
34 intensified capitalist reform period after Deng Xiaoping's southern tour in 1992 impelled  
35 political performing artists like Meng to address the issue in their work, along with the issue of  
36 government repression (Tao 2011). Meng's projects from the mid-1990s featured stinging  
37 critiques of the new "consumer individualism" (*xiaofei gerenzhuyi*) that, for him, wasn't an  
38 individualism at all, but actually a new authoritarianism of the commodity lurking behind the  
39 shiny surface of consumer society. The concomitant sense of beauty consolidated by con-  
40 sumer society was, in Meng's well-known abjection, the "aesthetics of dog shit" (*goushi de*  
41 *meixue*) (Chen 2004: 117). It was obvious, though, that several independent dramatists were  
42 willing to put clothespins on their noses to block the stench, as the intensification of capitalist  
43 reform after 1992 led to a temporary relaxation of government control over the performing  
44 and media arts. This produced a small wave of completely independent theater troupes who  
45 were allowed to promote their own performances and sell tickets. In 1992, three new groups  
46 appeared—the most famous of which was the Wild Swan Creative Collective in Beijing—  
47 and in 1993 several more, including the Fire Fox Drama Society (*Huohuli jushe*) and the  
48 Saturday Theater Workshop.



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1 The appearance in the 2000s of a new “people’s theater” (*minzhong xiju*) movement emerged  
2 from these earlier independent groups. As the acuteness of Tiananmen faded and capitalist  
3 consumerism intensified, they deepened the critique of commodified desire even as they  
4 negotiated the dialectic of singular individual and mass Chinese nationalism emerging in the  
5 reform period. Along with Cotton Flower in Guangzhou, Grass Stage’s productions (*Lu Xun*  
6 *2008; Squat; Madman’s Story*) expand on Meng’s critique of commodity aesthetics in Chinese  
7 society as they move into thinking and feeling new notions of collectivity.

8 Zhao Chuan’s intention only to include “ugly or average-looking” people in Grass Stage was  
9 just the beginning of the group’s critique. The next level of critique has to do with a fuller  
10 inversion of the logic of commodity aesthetics in the form of valorizing refuse, detritus, and the  
11 lumpen. This valorization involves not only giving “voice” to socially marginalized subjects in  
12 *Little Society*, but also extends to their choice of venues for performances: buildings ordered to  
13 be demolished to give way to expensive high-rises; abandoned warehouses on the outskirts of  
14 the city; and regular schools and empty bookstores—the “grass stages” of urban, hypercapitalist  
15 China. The final level of critique is the refusal to turn their art into a detached commodity, as  
16 Grass Stage doesn’t charge admission and always holds an open discussion with the audience  
17 after each of their shows, building in a space for the input and criticism Zhao invites from the  
18 public as *Little Society* begins.

19 Grass Stage limits membership to people without formal training in the performing arts. Zhao  
20 Chuan sees this restriction as maintaining a revolving door with the Shanghai *demos*, where  
21 anyone with the time and desire can be involved. Open membership comes with the responsi-  
22 bility of collective creation in all of Grass Stage’s production. Although Zhao Chuan normally  
23 presents the larger idea for any particular play, the process of creating dialogue and *mise-en-scene* is  
24 collective and democratic. Members are urged to bring their intensities, affects, and percepts to  
25 the characters and issues of any particular play. New members are encouraged by the veterans not  
26 to “possess” the roles of the dramatis personae, but to use the characters as interfaces between  
27 their singular bodies and the outside social world—recreating both in the process.

28 This generative praxis of Grass Stage has resulted in several independent productions by  
29 members, one which was banned by the Shanghai authorities. However, it is the completely  
30 independent and collectivist nature of their creative process that potentially poses the biggest  
31 threat. Jacques Rancière identified a socialist tradition in working-class theater in nineteenth-  
32 century France he called a “theatocracy,” which established a grounding for real democracy and  
33 thus a defining framework of “self-representation” through which the people “could view their  
34 own actions” (Rancière 2012: 12). Grass Stage is similarly carving out a mode of collective  
35 praxis in its theater productions (and through its eliciting of critique by their audiences which  
36 allows them to “view their own actions”) that contains the potential to seed some undefined  
37 democratic future.

38 After graduating from college, Zhao went to live in Australia for 13 years, before returning to  
39 Shanghai in 2000; he then spent a year in Taiwan working with the innovative director Wang  
40 Molin. Wang’s “action theater” was influenced primarily by contemporary Japanese theater and  
41 dance, especially *butoh*. Zhao has similarly come to prefer to work within the parameters of  
42 contemporary East Asian performing arts, and this sets Grass Stage off from much of the Beijing  
43 experimental theater of the 1980s and 1990s. Wang’s description of the impulses for his thea-  
44 trical work—“current events write our scripts, the people are our actors and society our  
45 stage”—could very well double as Grass Stage’s motto as well (Tao 2013).

46 At one level, Grass Stage works to liberate repressed personal expression in China, which is  
47 evident in their emphasis on “individual voice” (*geren de biaoda*). Zhao understands Grass Stage’s  
48 eliciting of regular people’s voices to be explicitly political in a society that restricts expression

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1 to consumer acts and reactive nationalism. But he also has a more encompassing sense of politics  
2 in deliberately refusing the Chinese government's restrictions for theater, which state "no vul-  
3 garity and no politics." As Zhao ironically claimed in an interview I did with him in May 2012,  
4 "for me, it's vulgar not to be political."

5 This feedback and feedforward between the world of socio-politics and personal embodied  
6 expression impels a different configuration of the "art and politics" binary. Félix Guattari's  
7 recommendation for a "new aesthetic paradigm" offers an ideal transcode for Grass Stage's  
8 mode of political art. For Guattari, art is an existential interface that multiplies one's capacity to  
9 feel, which for him means the Spinozist capacity to affect and be affected. Establishing art as an  
10 interface sets up a "double process" that transforms and multiplies the individual subject as it  
11 creates a new world. (Guattari 1995: 106–7). This aesthetic paradigm is thoroughly fleshed out  
12 in Grass Stage's theocracy

13 The affecting/affected subject and world need to be seen as enveloped in *Little Society* by a  
14 specific affective and perceptual matrix consisting of nostalgia and alienated fear—nostalgia for a  
15 communist past invoked by the lumpenproletariat subjects as pristine belonging, and an acute fear  
16 of psycho-somatic disintegration faced with the capitalist present. These affective-perceptual  
17 polarities are shown to work directly on the bottle collector, sex worker, and beggar, resulting  
18 in schizoid movement and dialogue. (*I want to make friends. What use are friends?*) Although the  
19 precedent for these avant-garde techniques is the Chinese experimental theater of the late 1980s  
20 and 1990s, in the hands of an explicitly anti-capitalist group like Grass Stage, the schizoid mode  
21 is more the result of an artistic confrontation with the actual violence of the Chinese capitalist  
22 present as it works to extricate itself from the communist past. But as that past maintains a  
23 sensate hold on mainland Chinese—reproduced both by revolutionary communist history itself  
24 and the ways in which the ruling Chinese Communist Party needs to constantly invoke that  
25 history as legitimating device—Grass Stage's performing art as existential interface intensifies the  
26 capacity of its members to affect and be affected in the present. The simultaneous creation of  
27 new selves and a new world in *Little Society* unleashes intensities with the potential power to  
28 dissolve the alienation of the lumpenproletariat. When the members of Grass Stage create pre-  
29 carious characters like the sex-worker, bottle collector, and beggar (loosely based on their own  
30 experiences and those of their friends), this allows them to "view their own actions" theo-  
31 cratically and thus to feedback into the creation of transformed singular selves and feedforward  
32 into the production of democratically communist worlds.

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*Grass Stage's Theater of Precarity in Shanghai*

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**Notes**

- 1 New Chinese Prime Minister Li Keqiang has promised significant deleveraging as the pillar of China’s economy going forward. While designed to avoid the systemic presence of finance-driven bubbles characteristic of Euro-American capitalism of the last three decades, this axiom of Li-kenomics will also inevitably lead to the contraction of the erstwhile booming construction and housing markets when easy financing disappears, downsizing what has served as a safety net of sorts for rural migrants forced off farms and into the city in desperate search for work. Although promising to maintain growth rates of 7 percent annually, Li is also vowing to cut support for state-owned enterprises, which have continued to serve as job-producing engines in medium and heavy industry. It’s unlikely Li’s call for more individual “entrepreneurship” (gongshangqiyejia) can make up for impending job losses in these sectors.
- 2 The Youth Pioneers League (shaonianfengdui) is an organization for youth leaders inside the Communist Party and membership is often a requirement for advancement in the party hierarchy. It was officially formed in November 1949 after the Chinese Communist Party’s victory over the Goumindang.
- 3 Post-Deleuzian cultural theory deploys the pair virtual/actual to depict equally real entities; see Massumi (2002). Here I use virtual to signify that entities aren’t actually present, but who nevertheless have a very real hold on the characters.

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## 15

# EVANGELICALISM AND THE GAY MOVEMENT IN SINGAPORE

## Witnessing And Confessing Through Masks

*Keng Sen Ong*

This chapter focuses on evangelicalism in Singapore and its direct contestation with the gay movement of this island city-state. Singapore is a culturally diverse country of 5.3 million people in 275 square miles of land (which makes the entire country smaller than the five boroughs of New York City). Forty percent of its population is comprised of foreigners who study, work, and live there.<sup>1</sup> This ex-British colony became independent in 1965 although it still harnesses English as its first language to bring together its different races and cultures. The default language of English has made Singapore economically viable although it has no natural resources. Today, it is one of the largest financial centers in the world together with London, New York City, and Hong Kong. It is also one of the world's busiest ports together with Shanghai. Contrary to popular misconception, Singapore is not part of China and is instead geographically situated with Malaysia, Thailand in the north and Indonesia to its south. It comes as no surprise that the Singapore military was trained by the Israeli army as there is a parallel situation of Singapore being a non-Muslim island in a sea of Islam. Ethnically, it is 75 per cent Chinese, with smaller populations of Malays Muslims, Indians, and Eurasians. Religious freedom is guaranteed under the Singapore Constitution.

In recent years, born-again Christians have thrived in Singapore, becoming a central force with many rich, powerful, and political elite belonging to this religious sector.<sup>2</sup> This has become the most conservative population in Singapore. It can be said that the evangelical charismatic Christian voice is the most politically dominant, much more present than Buddhism, Hinduism, or even Islam. One of Singapore's most powerful evangelical megachurches is New Creation<sup>3</sup> which has valued its assets to be US\$ 110 million in the recession year of 2008 compared with a recent US\$ 35 million assets of New Life Church of Colorado Springs. New Creation Church in Singapore smacks of the prosperity gospel that Ted Haggard preached; free market economics is not a problem.<sup>4</sup>

### **The Pentecostal and Evangelical Movement in Singapore**

The Pentecostal and evangelical churches, derived from American influences, have become the most successful churches in Singapore since the late 1990s, replacing liberal Christianity and

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1 Catholicism.<sup>5</sup> The roots of Singapore evangelicalism can be traced back to the 1950s and to the  
2 Bible Presbyterian Church, modeled after the fundamentalist sect of the same name in the US.<sup>6</sup>  
3 By the 1970s, all churches working in Singapore were gripped with Asianized reorientations of  
4 theology and experimental adaptation, be they evangelical, Pentecostal, or liberal Christian.<sup>7</sup>  
5 Evangelicalism received a great shot in the arm when Rev. Billy Graham visited Singapore,  
6 preaching for a week to a congregation of 65,000 people every night—he successfully garnered  
7 12,000 conversions.<sup>8</sup> Scholars have argued that the explosive growth of Pentecostalism in  
8 capitalist East Asia has involved the hybridization of American Pentecostalism, with the syncretic,  
9 shamanistic practices of Asian folk religions.<sup>9</sup>

10 Most importantly, Daniel Goh posits that Pentecostalism has become increasingly popular as  
11 it provides a practical contextual framework to make sense of the spiritual telos of the post-  
12 colonial nation; it also intertwines successfully with the developmental ethos of the Singapore  
13 state.<sup>10</sup> Mega-churches like New Creation flaunt their wealth as God’s service. The wealth is  
14 part of the spiritual warfare, a defensive exercise of standing on victory ground with the armour  
15 of God.<sup>11</sup> The Pentecostal is called upon to display his or her success to edify and evangelize. In  
16 their research, Donald Miller and Tetsunao Yamamori have documented another church in  
17 Singapore, the 24,000-strong City Harvest, as the most extravagant church they visited in their  
18 study of global Pentecostalism.<sup>12</sup> Pentecostals acquiesce in the status quo to enjoy the fruits of  
19 decades of Asian development, particularly the rise of Asian middle-class consumption.

20 The status quo of Singapore’s remarkable climb from third world country to first world  
21 country in 40 years of post-independence is hence not threatened. The Singapore government  
22 has not shown the same hostility<sup>13</sup> that it demonstrated to liberal Christianity (alleged to have  
23 been a Marxist conspiracy) in 1987 where church workers were arrested for their community  
24 work supporting workers and the working class, particularly blue-collared foreign labor. The  
25 social concern of liberal Christianity (it was a Japanese American Ron Fujiyoshi who was first  
26 sent to train church workers in community organizations as early as 1968<sup>14</sup>) was seen as  
27 hijacking the development covenant of the nation. Development, stemming from rapid mod-  
28 ernization and national liberation after colonial humiliation, exploitation, was of supreme  
29 priority. The government did not take kindly to the liberal Christian criticism of transnational  
30 capitalism, for it threatened the state’s monopoly on setting the public agenda of the day-to-day  
31 running of the country.<sup>15</sup>

32 I support Goh’s argument that Pentecostalism is accepted in post-colonial Singapore because  
33 it ties in well with the self-image of independent Singapore as a secular first world country  
34 where commerce and economy is above all else.<sup>16</sup> The state has not intervened with Pente-  
35 costalism and evangelicalism as these churches have shown themselves to be critical of liberal  
36 Christianity’s call for political action and social liberation.<sup>17</sup> Still, the typically top-down gov-  
37 ernment has been cautious about the political clout of evangelicalism in Singapore. Minister  
38 Mentor Kuan Yew Lee, the founder of modern Singapore, has commented in a National  
39 Geographic interview that the government places a premium on racial and religious harmony  
40 (as evidenced by the Maintenance of Religious Harmony Act 1990) and he, for one, equates  
41 the rise of evangelical Christianity to American efforts.<sup>18</sup> The Pentecostal and evangelical  
42 churches, on their part, have been very politically savvy to avoid visible affiliation with churches  
43 overseas. They know the Singapore government’s paranoia about external interference and its  
44 possessive nationalistic pride against foreign international agendas.

45 Reverend Lawrence Khong of Faith Community Baptist Church, one of the main advocates  
46 of spiritual warfare, illustrates this savvy well. When questioned by one of his members about  
47 whether the American method of raising a spiritual army would work in Singapore, he imme-  
48 diately called this “a lie from the evil one” denying it vehemently. He emphasized that his

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1 version of spiritual warfare was more communitarian and steeped in Asian values.<sup>19</sup> However he  
2 cannot deny that the LoveSingapore movement he started, began after meeting American  
3 preacher Peter Wagner at the first International Spirit Warfare Network in 1993. Khong  
4 assumed leadership of the network in Singapore, targeting to infiltrate and destroy Satan's  
5 perimeter by healing the land.<sup>20</sup> He has aligned this movement politically, the modus operandi  
6 is to show the Singaporean how much God loves him. He promotes that his participants are  
7 God-fearing people, active citizens who feel passionately for all Singaporeans.<sup>21</sup> In this manner  
8 he links Pentecostal theology to nationalism.

9 Meanwhile in another study, Rudy Busto tracks Asian-American evangelicalism with the  
10 InterVarsity Christian Fellowship in Singapore. Many Asian Americans feel comfortable with  
11 the coexistence of Asian culture and the use of English as first language in Singapore.<sup>22</sup> These  
12 are some of the tentacles of the evangelical movement beyond the shores of the US apart from  
13 those which Tanya Erzen marvelously makes us aware of in her first chapter<sup>23</sup> of her study of  
14 the ex-gay movement. It is to the international face of that movement, as it manifests in Sin-  
15 gapore, that I now turn.

### **An Ex-Gay Ministry Linking Singapore and the US**

16  
17  
18  
19 The megachurch in Singapore, Church Of Our Savior (COOS), houses the ex-gay Choices  
20 Ministry founded with Sy Rogers in 1991.<sup>24</sup> Choices is affiliated with Exodus International  
21 started by Frank Worthen, the main protagonist of New Hope Ministry extensively studied by  
22 Erzen.

23 COOS actively markets Choices as a way to salvation, stating that Choices has effectively  
24 converted homosexuals, though it offers no numbers or statistics or case studies.<sup>25</sup> Recently  
25 there have been controversies including an ex-gay who gave a testimonial of the trauma he  
26 suffered under COOS.<sup>26</sup> COOS's obsession, firmly based on the belief that God abhors  
27 homosexuality, with "curing a nation of homosexuality" has led some to call it the most  
28 homophobic church in the Asian region.<sup>27</sup> As Erzen spotlights, Exodus has also been called  
29 "homophobia with a happy face" by its defecting founding member Bussee.<sup>28</sup>

### **Evangelicalism Resists the Decriminalizing of Homosexuality in Singapore**

30  
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33  
34 S377A ("outrages on decency") of the Singapore Penal Code states that:

35  
36 Any male person who, in public or private, commits, or abets the commission of, or  
37 procures or attempts to procure the commission by any male person of, any act of  
38 gross indecency with another male person, shall be punished with imprisonment for a  
39 term which may extend to 2 years.

40  
41 This antiquated law since Queen Victoria's era has remained in Singapore law books despite  
42 being repealed in the UK, Hong Kong and rejected by the courts in India. There is no sanction  
43 against gay women in the penal code. During the 2007 debates to decriminalize S377A in the  
44 Singapore Parliament, Pastor Derek Hong of COOS allegedly sent a mass email out.<sup>29</sup> Whether  
45 or not Pastor Derek Hong sent this email, there was an online petition to keep S377A.<sup>30</sup>

46 The counter-online petition site Repeal377A.com was also established and 7,058 signatories  
47 were collected to repeal this law.<sup>31</sup> The petition was officially presented at the second reading  
48 of the Amendment of the Penal Code Bill in Parliament by the Member of Parliament Kum

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1 Hong Siew on 22 October 2007. In the petition, the petitioners argued that the clause dis-  
2 criminated against homosexuals and bisexuals and was an “unconstitutional derogation” from  
3 the Constitution, which provides that all persons are equal before the law and entitled to equal  
4 protection of the law [Article 12(1)]. In his speech to Parliament, Siew argued that a private  
5 consensual act between adults should not be treated as a criminal act as it did not harm others,  
6 regardless of one’s view on homosexuality. The proposal for repeal was not accepted by the  
7 Singapore Parliament.

8 But this was not before further violence of shaming occurred. In the parliamentary  
9 arguments against decriminalizing homosexuality, another Member of Parliament who is also  
10 a member of Church Of Our Savior, lawyer Li Ann Thio, spoke out to keep S377A.  
11 Underscoring the full political implications and the power of ex-gay ministries in the role of  
12 social discipline and punishment, which Erzen also detailed,<sup>32</sup> she stated “shamelessly” in  
13 Parliament what most political representatives, lawmakers, and academics would think twice  
14 before saying:

15  
16 Sir, public health and safety is a legitimate purpose served by 377A’s ban on homo-  
17 sexual anal and oral sex. Both these practices are efficient methods of transmitting  
18 sexual diseases and AIDs/HIV which are public health problems. These are not vic-  
19 timless crimes as the whole community has to foot the costs of these diseases.

20  
21 Anal-penetrative sex is inherently damaging to the body and a misuse of organs, like  
22 shoving a straw up your nose to drink. The anus is designed to expel waste; when  
23 something is forcibly inserted into it, the muscles contract and cause tearing; fecal  
24 waste, viruses carried by sperm and blood thus congregate, with adverse health impli-  
25 cations like “gay bowel syndrome,” anal cancer. ‘Acts of gross indecency’ under 377A  
26 also covers unhygienic practices like “rimming” where the mouth comes into contact  
27 with the anus.<sup>33</sup>

28  
29 Thio disingenuously did not add that sodomy was in recent years legalized for heterosexuals,  
30 making nonsense of her hysterical remarks in Parliament.

31  
32  
33

**The Witnessing of an Ex-Lesbian**

34 The continued criminalizing of consensual same-sex acts between adults allows for outrageous  
35 remarks made by evangelical pastors who conduct public testimonials. In February 2010, Pastor  
36 Rony Tan of another megachurch, with a 12,000 strong congregation, Lighthouse Evangelism  
37 (which has a lighthouse logo reminiscent of New Hope) made comments like “Proper sex means  
38 life. Lesbianism and homosexuality simply mean death, barrenness.”<sup>34</sup> Pastor Tan also equated  
39 homosexuality with paedophilia and bestiality.

40  
41 If we don’t warn people against this, then there will be more and more homosexuals  
42 and many of these people will be harassing and seducing young boys (young girls are  
43 never mentioned!), and they in turn will become homosexuals. And very soon, half  
44 the world will be homosexual. Half the world would be barren ... You see man’s  
45 heart is so wicked that If you allow [homosexuality], next time people will want  
46 to get married to monkeys. And they will want rights. They’ll want to apply for  
47 HDB [public housing]. With a donkey or a monkey or a dog and so on. It’s very  
48 pathetic, really.<sup>35</sup>

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1 In an 80-minute clip posted onto Lighthouse Evangelism's website as a miracle testimony by  
2 an ex-lesbian, the pastor and his congregation witnesses a coming out or an identity talk by  
3 Cheryl Batchelor who is now also a part-time employee of Lighthouse Evangelism. The auto-  
4 biographical testimonial, an outrageous rehearsed ritual of power between Cheryl and Pastor  
5 Tan, portrayed gay people as sad pathological creatures with dysfunctional families, victims of  
6 sexual abuse, abusers of drugs and alcohol, insecure and possessive predators who seduced het-  
7 erosexuals into homosexual encounters. In his introduction, Pastor Tan said, "Don't believe all  
8 those loud-mouthed gay people who tell you they are born this way. 'We are as right as any  
9 heterosexual, this is normal.' I tell you this is abnormal."<sup>36</sup>

10 Michael Warner has said that these performative genres of identity talk, autobiographical  
11 declarations also known as witnessing, are like fundamentalist versions of coming out.<sup>37</sup> Fou-  
12 cault's history of sexuality has argued that the West has become a confessing society:

13  
14 one confesses one's crimes, one's sins, one's thoughts and desires with explicit articu-  
15 lation and endless accumulated detail. It is a ritual that unfolds within a power rela-  
16 tionship, the authority who requires the confession, prescribes and appreciates it and  
17 intervenes in order to judge, punish, forgive, console and reconcile.<sup>38</sup>

18  
19 Erzen also talks about the healing that happens with witnessing where intimacy is transformed  
20 into a public testimonial discourse of conversion.<sup>39</sup> However, the Tan-Batchelor testimonial  
21 covers up the continuing struggle by ex-gays to walk the straight path as they try to avoid falls in  
22 their love for God:

23  
24 I love God - very deeply. When you give up something as deep as your sexuality  
25 there's always the doubt inside you that you're doing something impossible. Maybe  
26 they're right. Maybe you can't change. You start to worry that maybe what you're  
27 doing is crazy. So in other words, in order to go forward, you have to walk in faith in  
28 a dark room without seeing things clearly for the sake of one thing, and that is that  
29 you love God.<sup>40</sup>

30  
31 Erzen's deep ethnographic work with ex-gays have resulted in ongoing heart-felt confessions to  
32 her as part of the friendships and intimacy they share. This is never possible in a flashy public  
33 witnessing where the effect is to "perform" for effecting a congregation:

34  
35 Cheryl Batchelor (C): She was having affairs with different sorts of men and I found that out  
36 and there were very aggressive fights.

37 Pastor Rony Tan (R): OK, Its very strange now, we have a case this lady, she could be  
38 involved in lesbianism

39 C: Right

40 R: But yet she could also be involved with men sexually

41 C: Yes

42 R: So we call that

43 C: Bisexual.

44 R: Bisexual. I want to pause here to ask a question, "Is such a lady created by God this way?"

45 The natural tendency with be your own sex, will be YUCKS, you know what I mean.

46 Being attracted to one sex is a problem already. She is attracted to both, its double trouble.

47 C: Right, because with her she always has a different partner, every month she will change.

48 R: I see.



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- 1 C: Because she's like a nymphomaniac, she has to have a different partner all the time.  
2 R: But for you, you could not be  
3 C: No, no I was different  
4 R: You would only stick to ladies but she could go both ways.  
5 C: Yes correct  
6 R: That made you mad. When you said fights, is it verbal fights?  
7 C: Verbal and physical.  
8 R: How physical?  
9 C: I used to punch her and slap her. (*congregation roars with laughter*)  
10 R: And she would  
11 C: Hit me back  
12 R: So you got frustrated with that kind of relationship?  
13 C: Because in a lesbian relationship or a homosexual relationship, there is so much insecurity.  
14 You don't know how long that person will be with you. You are just taking it on face  
15 value because you cant go any deeper, there's no commitment. As you get involved in this  
16 sort of relationship, you tend to be very possessive  
17 R: Ah ha  
18 C: Aggressive. And you want control. You must be in control of the situation.  
19 R: Do you think Cheryl, thats true with homosexuals as well?  
20 C: Of course because I have homosexual friends. It's the same. In the emotions of a homo-  
21 sexual or a lesbian, they cannot have any security with anybody. Because first and foremost  
22 they are also very self-centred, they are more into self. "What I want." There is always a  
23 dominating figure and a figure who is more subtle. But if the other person is not sub-  
24 missive, big fights happen.  
25 R: There have been writeups that homosexuals are more possessive, therefore a lot of fights  
26 and jealousy. But they turn around and say, you heterosexuals also the same. You try to  
27 dominate each other, you also have problems. But just now, you brought a point, the  
28 homosexuals don't feel secure because its not something you display in public, its kind of  
29 covert. Of course they try now to carry flags and all that. No matter what they do  
30 C: The emotions, the feelings are the same  
31 R: They are very uncertain about each other. Now, you think the lesbians are more stable  
32 than homosexuals?  
33 C: No no no, I think they are more insecure than a homosexual, because for lesbianism if your  
34 partner is good looking you've got problems. If the other partner is not so goodlooking the  
35 person who is goodlooking will tend to find another person. they won't stay together unless  
36 they are able to complement each other. Then, both of them will be each other's back to  
37 lean upon. A homosexual or a lesbian relationship wont last for long. Because there are  
38 bound bound bound to be fights and arguments.<sup>41</sup>  
39  
40 Pastor Rony Tan had just made headlines for making insensitive comments about Buddhism  
41 and Taoism. The Internal Security Department (ISD) or the police called him up for his anti-  
42 Buddhism remarks. The ISD said that his comments were highly inappropriate and unac-  
43 ceptable as they trivialized and insulted the beliefs of Buddhists and Taoists. As a result, the  
44 pastor issued a public apology and assured these religious institutions that the mistake would not  
45 be repeated.<sup>42</sup> In a country where gay individuals have no rights, where gay sex is criminal (as  
46 opposed to constitutionally guaranteed religious freedom), Pastor Tan has refused to apologize  
47 despite 85 police reports lodged by Singaporeans against him for his homophobic disparaging  
48 remarks. He stood by his statements: "I've said nothing wrong, you know. Like I said, my stand

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1 is with the average person and the Government. Of course, you know there is a law against  
2 homosexual acts, so that's always been my stand."<sup>43</sup> It was not surprising that the ISD did not  
3 call on him again for his anti-gay remarks.

4 In the constant violence of shaming inflicted upon gay individuals in Singapore, what are the  
5 options available for the gay community to intervene? Perhaps the shamelessness proposed by  
6 Virginia Burrus is not yet an option.<sup>44</sup> The abject coupling of refusal and willful embrace of  
7 shamelessness in the making of martyrs and saints is not the first choice of action in a country  
8 where life as a gay man is immediately criminalized. Stonewall has not arrived in Singapore, the  
9 everyman still has a hyper-awareness of "the face" which is an integral part of the experience of  
10 shame. Shame has yet to become transformative pleasure in Singapore. The Chinese have an  
11 expression for shame which approximates "dropping of the face." The face or the mask has not  
12 dropped yet. Church Of Our Saviour member, Li Ann Thio wielded a sword of righteousness  
13 in the Singapore Parliament: "Religion makes available a language of ecstasy, a horizon of sig-  
14 nificance within which transgressions against the normal order of the world and the boundaries  
15 of self can be seen as good things."<sup>45</sup> The time has not come in Singapore where gay indivi-  
16 duals can appropriate the strategies of this language of ectasy, where they can talk dirty in a  
17 cathedral of power, in Parliament. They cannot yet borrow from ecstatic religion's expressive  
18 interplay of power and abjection to legitimate self-transgression. This path, a meaningful fra-  
19 mework for the sublime play of self-realization and self-dissolution,<sup>46</sup> is not open to them.  
20

### **Art and the Abyss**

21  
22  
23 I want to end with the proposal of art to counter the abyss threatening the gay movement in  
24 Singapore, an abyss which has been heightened today by radical evangelicalism and a continuing  
25 authoritarian patriarchal government. In this arena, the conservatism of Pentecostals and Evan-  
26 gelicals "collaborates" well with the government, a mostly one-party system that has retained  
27 power since independence. Law and the religious right distance the gay community from the  
28 heterosexual population in Singapore in a totalizing manner. The totality of facts and events are  
29 focused on, such as that ascertained by Pastor Tan in the miracle testimony. Art, on the other  
30 hand, can bring the gay community closer to the general population in a rich, emotionally  
31 sensitive manner. The gay community needs "art – the language of infinity – to mourn the losses  
32 and to face up to what in traumatic memory is not closed and cannot be closed."<sup>47</sup> We need art  
33 to start to apprehend and to retrieve what totalization has left out.

34 Shoshana Felman writes that the abyss is a fissure or split that "inhabits human sexuality,  
35 like an internal hollowness at the bottom of a whirling chaos of attractions and repulsions, of  
36 rivalries and of conflicting, secret sexual ambiguities. This abyss of difference cannot but  
37 become an abyss of conflict."<sup>48</sup> Her description of a "metaphor of darkness" is particularly  
38 relevant to discuss the abyss between homosexuals and heterosexuals in Singapore. The  
39 recent refusal of the Singapore government to decriminalize S377A means that gays continue  
40 to live in the closet without the ability to embrace the self with dignity or pride. It also  
41 allows the heterosexual population to continue to legitimize its power and violence as there  
42 is no "face" to the gay community beyond that of the radical rebel, the unsightly marginal,  
43 the disgusting abject. Into this frame; the present evangelical fervor targeting the gay  
44 community (Pastor Derek Hong, parliamentarian Li Ann Thio), the ridiculous witnessing of  
45 ex-gays (e.g. Cheryl Batchelor with Pastor Rony Tan) have further accentuated this black  
46 hole. I would like to contrast the testimonial of Cheryl Batchelor with the confession of the  
47 main character in a short film by Jun Feng Boo called *Tanjong Rhu*, a film that engages this  
48 abyss with dignity and responsibility.

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1       Tanjong Rhu (The Casuarina Grove) is the stretch of gay beach in Singapore where in 1993  
2 a brutal entrapment exercise was carried out by the police against gay men. Employing young  
3 policemen as agent provocateurs, active seduction traps were laid. When gay men approached  
4 the disguised policemen for sex, they were immediately arrested. However this was not the end  
5 of the story, the ultimate shaming was the public outing of the names of the arrested gay men.  
6 Jun Feng Boo specifically did not interview on film any of the victims of this entrapment. In  
7 the film, there is a fictional character who recapitulates the evening of the arrest and the shame,  
8 the trauma that befell him thereafter. Boo refuses to perpetuate once again the violence of  
9 outing that occurred in 1993. The fictional character confesses in front of the camera to a fic-  
10 tional filmmaker played not by Boo but by an actress. After the filmed confession, all who have  
11 witnessed it are transformed, especially the soundman on the fictional shoot who is a closeted  
12 gay. There is a delicate transition to “some other kindred quality” that de Man talks about in  
13 *Autobiography as De-facement*.<sup>49</sup>  
14

**Confessing through a Mask**

15  
16  
17 In this way, the strategy of witnessing used in evangelical churches can be harnessed to tell the  
18 queer story of the “shamed” victim of legal violence. In the specific context of Singapore,  
19 witnessing perhaps has to occur through a “fiction.’ In the light of S377A of the Penal Code, the  
20 traumatic public exposure of these 12 men in 1993, the closets that many Asian gay men live in,  
21 Boo sensitively and quietly chooses to mobilize art as the victim’s ally. In identifying art’s voice,  
22 both marginal and expressive, with the victim’s voice, Boo universalizes the victims in a moving  
23 and powerful way.

24       Walter Benjamin originally coined the term “expressionless” as a concept that links art to  
25 the mute yet powerful communication of what cannot be said in words. The expressionless  
26 is thus an utterance that signifies although and because it has no possibility of statement.<sup>50</sup>  
27 It shatters art into the torso of a symbol, into a fragment of the real world.<sup>51</sup> For Levinas, the  
28 expressionless are those whom violence has deprived of expression, those who have been  
29 historically reduced to silence, made faceless.<sup>52</sup> Felman argues convincingly from Levinas that  
30 the vision of a Face is a correlative of the emergence of ethics and of justice, it rigorously  
31 defines violence. “The Face is the ‘Thou shall not kill’ ... it is the fact that I cannot let the  
32 Other die alone, it is like a calling out to me.”<sup>53</sup> Violence effaces the face, effaces its human  
33 appeal. *Tanjong Rhu*, the film, reinstates the Face of the fictional character in the centre of  
34 the image. Often, as he confesses to the camera of the fictional filmmaker, there is a close-up  
35 on his Face. The filmmaker asks:  
36

37       “What regrets do you have for going to Tanjong Rhu that night?”  
38

39       “No I haven’t regretted. My grandmother used to tell me when I was growing up  
40 ‘always answer to your own conscience’ (he quotes here in a local Chinese dialect  
41 which is immediately affecting as it firmly places the grandmother-grandson in the  
42 reality of Singapore where most grandparents do not speak English as they were the  
43 first wave of working-class migrants to the country). I have my conscience, I did not  
44 do anything wrong. So I don’t regret.”  
45

46       The last third of the short film focuses on the editing of the rushes by the filmmaker. We see once  
47 again the fateful night, the waves, desire glistening like raindrops on the casuarina trees, the flash  
48 of a naked torso, the predation, the handcuffs. We hear once again:

*Keng Sen Ong*

1 “Do you hate anyone? Blame anyone?”

2

3 “No I don’t blame anyone. Who am I supposed to blame? This society, those  
4 policemen or the homophobes?”

5

6 Like a repeated ghost trapped in the machine, the close-up Face, the repeated confession haunts  
7 the viewer. As Felman says, “Art is a language of embodiment, of incarnation, and of embodied  
8 incantation or endless rhythmic repetition.”<sup>54</sup>

9 I propose that Boo’s film invokes the figure of prosopopeia, the fiction of an apostrophe to  
10 an absent, deceased, or voiceless entity, which posits the possibility of the latter’s reply and  
11 confers upon it the power of speech. Voice assumes mouth, eye, and finally a face, a mask.<sup>55</sup> A  
12 mask which is intelligible and memorable, giving face to the victims of 1993 without effacing  
13 their dignity and their responsibility. The expressionless and the legal mute (the lgbt community  
14 of Singapore) can break their silence with confession in art, bringing the public closer to the  
15 trauma of being different in Singapore. Art can translate the incomprehensible into some sort of  
16 sense, bridge the gap in perception through revealing with “a mask” or with “a fiction.” Art  
17 can destabilize stereotypes and open up issues for further interrogation. The film ends with this  
18 text on the screen:

19

20 In September 1993, 12 men were arrested in an entrapment by the police. They were  
21 charged with outrage of modesty. 6 pleaded guilty. They were punished with 3  
22 strokes of cane and 2 – 6 months imprisonment each. The names, ages, occupations of  
23 the 12 men were published in all major newspapers.

24 This is a work of fiction based on true incidents.

25

26 This “fiction based on true incidents” can wrench apart what is covered up by glib public miracle  
27 testimonies of evangelicalism. The force of the stories that cannot be articulated can be confessed  
28 in art, invading and transpiercing miracle testimonies. This force refuses to relegate traumatic  
29 suffering to the past unlike the ex-gay narrative of Cheryl Batchelor but continues to challenge  
30 the heterosexual public through its endless timelessness until the day comes when S377A  
31 becomes history, when the religious right takes responsibility for its statements. Pastor Rony  
32 Tan’s refusal to apologize is evidence that the law is behind him, no libel defamation suits can be  
33 brought against him. In a country where religious harmony is safeguarded zealously by law and  
34 regulation, unlike his violence to Buddhism when he was forced to apologize, his violence to the  
35 lgbt community of Singapore cannot yet be made accountable.

36

37

38

### Notes

39

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48 for its purpose-built 400,000 square feet complex in Singapore’s high-tech district completed in 2012.  
The new church complex accesses retailers, food, and beverage outlets in an adjacent mall, has an  
amphitheatre, a multipurpose hall, multiple studios, a roof loft, wedding caterers, and a 5,000-seat

*Evangelism and the Gay Movement in Singapore*

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37 monials by ex-gays: [http://www.coos.org.sg/testimonies\\_text.php?id=shawn#top](http://www.coos.org.sg/testimonies_text.php?id=shawn#top)  
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*Keng Sen Ong*

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# 16

## A TRANSFORMATIVE INITIATIVE FOR ACHIEVING CULTURAL EQUITY

### Community Arts University Without Walls

*Marta Moreno Vega*

#### **What It Is!**

The challenge for historically marginalized communities that are part of the matrix of the United States and other colonial countries is how to have their cultures and contributions valued as integral to the civil society they have been critical in forming. As colonies have won their independence many find themselves still beholden to their former colonial oppressors due to the underdevelopment of their infrastructures that were and are kept fragile to assure continued dependency through mis-education and creation of a labor force directed to continued enrichment of the colonial power while keeping the colonized in a pattern of economic servitude. Important to the process of sustaining people on the margins of colonial imposition has been devaluing the humanity, history, and creative products of those historically oppressed which renders invisible the contributions they have made to their countries and to world cultures.

According to José Luis González (1993: 3), in *Puerto Rico the Four-Storeyed Country*,

in any society with classes the true relation between the two cultures in that society is one of dominance, with the culture of the oppressors dominating and the culture of the oppressed being dominated. It follows that what is often passed off as “the general culture,” even as “the national culture,” is, naturally enough, merely a description of but one of these cultures—the dominant culture of the oppressors.

#### **Mis-Education—Why It Is!**

Throughout my educational journey in public schools and institutions of higher education the history of the Puerto Rican experience that speaks to the contributions of my forebears remained invisible and hidden from the history books, art classes, and educational programs that prepared me as an educator. A teacher who was prepared to share what I had learned in my studies with my students in the Lower Eastside of New York City, an underserved economically poor

Marta Moreno Vega

1 community where education was viewed as the road to a better tomorrow.

2 I felt woefully inadequate as I stood before them. My students shared my brown complexion  
3 and shared the migrant/immigrant experience of my family to El Barrio, East Harlem New  
4 York. Their stories were my family's story coming to New York in search of a better future in  
5 the land of promise that had colonized their homeland—Puerto Rico.

6 Their parents like mine faced overt racism, verbal, and physical abuse when seeking  
7 employment. When jobs were available they worked in underpaid menial positions often off  
8 the books and were not paid after doing the work. They labored in invisible positions with no  
9 benefits or security at the whim of their employers. The poet Pedro Pietri immortalized the  
10 struggle of our parents in his legendary poem *Puerto Rican Obituary* describing the commitment  
11 our parents had to jobs that exploited their labor and their love of family that kept them  
12 working for little financial gain, today the working poor.

13 Our parents labored in deplorable conditions to pay unaffordable rents in heatless apartments.  
14 Without health care or official employment their lives were dedicated to keeping a roof over  
15 their family's head and food on the table. My students in junior high school were young adults  
16 before their time, often working in after-school jobs to help their parents. They were substitute  
17 parents so their parents could sustain their jobs.

18 As an arts education student teacher and graduate of New York University P.S. 121 in the  
19 Lower Eastside employed me. The student body was primarily Puerto Rican, Dominican, and  
20 from different parts of Latin America. The faculty with the exception of three of us was White.  
21 On the second day of class the principal waited by the time clock to inform another Puerto  
22 Rican teacher and me that we were not allowed to speak in Spanish in our classes although  
23 our classes were comprised primarily of non-English-speaking students. Needless to say com-  
24 munication was close to impossible.

25 Feeling like a total failure as a teacher I got home one day and I started crying. My mother  
26 asked me what had occurred for school. My response to her was that my students didn't  
27 understand me as I was acting on the instructions of the principal not to speak Spanish. With  
28 my mother's usual wit, she proceeded to ask me if the classroom had a door. When I nodded  
29 yes, she laughed and said, "lock the door and speak in Spanish to your students."

30 The next day with the door closed I spoke in Spanish to my class. The classroom turned into  
31 a joyous celebration as students who had placed bets on whether I was Puerto Rican, Domin-  
32 ican, or Panamanian celebrated my speaking in Spanish.

33 My students became my co-conspirators; I instructed them not to let anyone know that we  
34 spoke Spanish in class.

35 A few weeks into the school term I presented the class the paintings of one of my favorite  
36 artists Paul Gauguin attempting to interest the students in an art history that excluded our  
37 experience. When the students saw the brown skin of the women painted by Gauguin I cap-  
38 tured their interest in viewing and discussing his work. One student in her excitement said that  
39 the women looked Puerto Rican and another student said no, they were Dominican; another  
40 said they could be Black.

41 My students saw themselves in the artwork and I realized that my love for Gauguin's work  
42 was more than his incredible artistry. It also spoke of my need to be visible in the field I had  
43 chosen. The Tahitian women depicted were brown-skinned like me.

44 I also realized that in the questions of my students I had never learned about Puerto Rican,  
45 Caribbean, and African American artists in my school journey nor the history of my people.  
46 Through my students I understood the power of education to render visible and invisible the  
47 stories of different human experiences. The power and process of valuing and devaluing people  
48 and their cultures while imposing stories of dominance as true history became clearer to me.



*A Transformative Initiative for Achieving Cultural Equity*

1 I thank my students for making me self-realize and push me into breaking the chains  
2 of my invisibility providing the pathway to insert our experiences and create places that  
3 nurture our humanity and value from the frameworks that sustain and honor our legacy and  
4 contributions.

5 This chapter is dedicated to all of us that insist on being visible by claiming and writing our  
6 narratives and assuring our stories are integral to the telling of history and the valuing of our  
7 people and their experience while breaking the system of mis-education that renders some  
8 people and their stories invisible. It is the process of understanding that we are all valuable and  
9 vital contributors to history making.

10  
11 **Context—What has Happened!**

12  
13 New York City is a reflection of the nation; it is home to populations from all parts of the world.  
14 We are all migrants and immigrants brought to these shores by force, exile, or the promise of new  
15 beginnings and a better future in a democratic nation.

16 Native peoples are the only cultural group that can authentically claim to be the First  
17 Americans. Yet through mis-education we continue the mythology that there was a discovery  
18 ignoring that Christopher Columbus came upon populations of Native people in the Caribbean  
19 who had a complex system of farming, housing, medicinal, and hunting skills. Also in the fab-  
20 rication of the story of discovery it is forgotten that Columbus was lost and thought he was in  
21 India or China when he landed in the Caribbean which caused him to misname the people he  
22 met living on the islands. The groups he met were Tainos, Caribe, and Siboneys among others  
23 with their distinct cultural traditions and practices. The islands had names; Boriken is the native  
24 name of Puerto Rico renamed San Juan Bautista by Columbus as Turtle Island in the original  
25 name of New York City.

26 Columbus and his crew were the immigrants who imported the racists and discriminatory  
27 practices of Spain to the Americans. According to Eduardo Galeano (1992: 180) in the pub-  
28 lication *We Say No*, according to the mindset of the invaders, “God and Man lived in Europe;  
29 the New World was inhabited by demons and monkeys.”

30 In the colonial mindset of Columbus types it is evident that the power to name, the power  
31 to label, positions others as primitive—lacking in value and power. The colonization of the rest  
32 of the Caribbean, Latin American, United States, Africa, and other countries soon followed  
33 framed within the lenses of the mind-set of dominance.

34  
35 **Colonial Mindset—Why It Continues!**

36  
37 The mindset of dominance continues in contemporary society as we witness the shifting demo-  
38 graphics within the United States and other urban international countries closing their doors to the  
39 people they have oppressed in their former and in the case of Puerto Rico present colonies.

40 According to Galeano (1992: 180):

41  
42 No imperial undertaking, neither the old kind nor today’s has the capacity to discover.  
43 An adventure of usurpation and plunder does not discover; it covers up. It doesn’t reveal  
44 it hides. To be successful it needs ideological alibis that turn arbitrariness into law.

45 *Ibid.*

46  
47 It also requires an educational process to disseminate arbitrariness to assure that generations are  
48 instilled with the “cover up” turning a lie into “truth.” History has taught us that conquering

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1 nations as a first step use their power to subjugate the conquered by relegating their cultural  
2 history to the margins and invisibility through force and legal systems.

3 Galeno (1991: 212) further notes that:  
4

5 The dominant culture expressed through the educational system and above all through  
6 the mass media does not reveal reality; it masks it. It doesn't help bring about change;  
7 it helps avoid change. It doesn't encourage democratic participation; it induces pas-  
8 sivity, resignation and selfishness. It doesn't generate creativity it creates consumers.  
9

10 The recent defeat of the Dream Act in the New York Senate by two votes speaks of the  
11 continued framing and labeling of the illegality of immigrants that are viewed as lesser by those  
12 former immigrants and descendants of immigrants who now have the political power to  
13 exclude.

14 Senator Kevin Parker of Brooklyn posted the following on March 17, 2014 on his website:  
15

16 This piece of progressive legislation was brought to the floor earlier this evening and if  
17 passed, would have ensured immigrant children, in search of the American dream  
18 through educational access and financial aid, the road map to success.

19 Senate Republicans failed our young people. Not a single member of the Repub-  
20 lican Conference voted yes. Not a single member of the Republicans voted yes for  
21 opportunity or yes for equality. Instead, the Republican Conference stood up and  
22 implied that the Statue of Liberty no longer stood for an open door.

23 They stood up and argued that our great state of New York has limitations on who  
24 should succeed. They argued that there was a time the Statute of Liberty stood for  
25 opportunity for all, but even though they were all descended from immigrants, that  
26 was then and this is now.<sup>1</sup>  
27

28 In the voice of a student echoes the words of Galeano and the sentiment of centuries of those  
29 groups excluded and labeled the "other" by those with the power to legislate, Luba Gomez stated  
30 to NY 1 News:  
31

32 "We're criminalized, and we have to sort of hold this cross over us saying, 'Oh, you're  
33 not worthy,' which is really what I feel the senate said today, that we're not worthy of  
34 a higher education because we are what they call as 'illegals,' and it's really heart-  
35 breaking," voiced volunteer Luba Gomez.  
36

(*WWWN1.Com*)  
37

38 The denial of formal education to young people is the denial of their right to be active parti-  
39 cipants in the potential of their lives and that of the country they are part of. The inability for the  
40 New York State Senate and the Nation to pass the Dream Act continues the segregation of  
41 educational opportunity in this State, in this Nation. Although formal segregation, expressed  
42 through the framework of separate but equal schools, were outlawed by Brown V. Board of  
43 Education in 1954–1955, the actions of government, the under-resourcing of schools in his-  
44 torically marginalized communities and the rising costs of education makes education available to  
45 the economically privileged at the expense of the poor. Economic disparity continues to create a  
46 system of segregation and inequality. Immigrants, primarily of color, of economically poor  
47 communities, are now caught in the continuing battle over who has the right to a formal  
48 education and who doesn't.

*A Transformative Initiative for Achieving Cultural Equity*

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**To Be or Not to Be!**

The importance and control of education and its content is mirrored in how the United States government instituted its educational policies in the island of Puerto Rico. Note that the island became a booty of the Spanish American War in 1898 and continues as a colonial possession of the United States.

In the chapter entitled “Puerto Rico: The Permanent Possession” in *The Disenchanted Island: Puerto Rico and the United States in the Twentieth Century*, author Ronald Fernandez (1992: 56) addresses the educational system in Puerto Rico, a Spanish language-dominant island still.

Beginning with the military occupation, English was the mandated medium of instruction; however, none of the children, and few of their native teachers, understood English. So like the biblical Tower of Babel, education in Puerto Rican schoolhouses confused everyone in the room. Even in 1991 only 20 percent of islanders spoke English, in the first decades of the twentieth century the tiny portion of islanders who spoke the language was a sure guarantee that few students would ever garner even basic educational skills.

The attempts to Americanize the population by changing the name of schools to Lincoln, Washington, Jefferson, and attempting to remove traditional holidays like the Three Kings Day and other island holidays met and continue to meet with failure and resistance. The cultural identification of the people continues to be Puerto Rican and the language Spanish under a colonial framework of the United States that is now 116 years old.

The role of cultural as affirmation and resistance is powerful! A racially mixed population with a significant Black presence in Puerto Rico was and continues to be an anomaly for the United States. While racial segregation reigns in the United States the racial policies of oppression in Puerto Rico carry a similar mindset relegating Puerto Ricans to an inferior race, as noted by the comments of Representative Atterson Rucker of Colorado at a Congressional Hearing during 1907: “The production of children, especially of the dark color, is largely on the increase ... ” (Fernandez 1992: 57).

The colonial status of Puerto Rico with the United States is a reality that insists on understanding the role of culture, community, national identity, and the role of education is creating spaces of free thought and creative action.

**History Speaks**

As the United States commemorates the 50th anniversary of the Civil Rights Act, part of the thrust of President Lyndon Johnson to create a just and civil society, it is important that we connect the direct linkages between race, limited access to education, healthcare, housing poverty, law, class, and social status, and all other systems that rendered and continue to frame too many of our population in a devalued status.

According to Mark Updegrove, director of the LBJ Library in Texas, as quoted in *Diverse Issues in Higher Education*, April 7, 2014:

“President Johnson’s vision for a more just and honorable America contributed to the most transformational civil rights legislation since Reconstruction and a crucial step in the realization of America’s promise,” says Updegrove. “But his vision went far beyond ending racial discrimination. He believed that education, economic

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1 opportunity, health care, clean air and water, and access to the arts and humanities  
2 were inherent civil rights for all Americans.”  
3

4 The need for legislation to state what should have been a given in a democratic society, a promise  
5 to its citizens, was and is a dream deferred to its Native inhabitants of the land and other  
6 populations who are of color and poor within the borders of the United States of America.

7 President Lyndon Baines Johnson in the State to the Union of January 8, 1964 stated:  
8 “Unfortunately, many Americans live on the outskirts of hope—some because of their poverty,  
9 and some because of their color, and all too many because of both. Our task is to help replace  
10 their despair with opportunity.”

11 Governmental ratification in 1964 was a result of many non-violent and confrontational overt  
12 reactions to the ravages of inequity suffered by different racial and cultural groups within the  
13 United States and its dominant policies abroad. Before the passage of the 14th amendment in  
14 1868 the cry for freedom and equality for African Americans reigned as it did after in the “offi-  
15 cial” end of enslavement in 1865. The refusal by African Americans to allow the indignities of  
16 racial segregation were met by violent behavior by the Whites in the South that included  
17 bombing of churches, vicious dogs being released to attack African Americans and their suppor-  
18 ters; beatings and death speaks of the magnitude of fundamental immoral behavior that persists.  
19

### 20 21 **Voices from the Cultural Battlefield**

22 “Setting the Record Straight: A View from Seneca Country”, by G. Peter Jemison in *Voices from*  
23 *the Battlefield: Achieving Cultural Equity*, addresses the plight of Native Americans in having their  
24 history rendered invisible and where present recorded incorrectly and inaccurately.

25 Who has the power and distribution system to tell the story and determine the point of view  
26 from which it is told? The result is that the information that is taught to the young is thereby  
27 circumscribed and then reflected in the conventional media.  
28

29 The story told by the textbook writers has been carefully edited for the young minds  
30 that the system wanted to mold. But we are challenging the American educational  
31 system, which has permitted amnesia to replace a truthful history. The continuing  
32 activities of our movement are forcing the system to reexamine the presentation of  
33 historical contributions of all peoples to the fabric of America.

34 *(Vega and Greene 1993: 24)*  
35

36 Jemison reminds us that among the Native community the following are part of their goals:  
37

38 Our movement seeks the recognition of Native American artists, writers and musi-  
39 cians. It relies on a conceptual reawakening of our way of life.

40 Actually this way has never vanished, but most Americans still know very little  
41 about the Native Americans. Our art is the indigenous art of this country, in fact. The  
42 American Indian way of life goes on despite systematic attempts by the United States  
43 government to extinguish our languages and traditional ways.

44 *(Vega and Greene 1993: 23)*  
45

46 What the Native American experience teaches us is that inequity is at the foundation of the  
47 colonial mindset that frame the power structure of this nation as that of other countries and  
48 people that follow a structure of dominance. It is so embedded in our thinking and teachings that

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1 it is reflected both in the mindset of those who imposed their dominance and those who have  
2 been dominated.

3  
4  
5 **What We Mean!**

6 "In Rethinking Who We: Are A Basic Discussion of Basic Terms" by John Kuo Wei Tchen, we  
7 are encouraged to look deeply into our ideas and the framing of our worldview.

8  
9 I'd like to make a few comments on some underlying ideas that are so pervasive in the  
10 United States life that, like the air we breathe, they are so much a part of the basic ways  
11 in which we think of ourselves and others that we seldom consider what they are truly  
12 about. The simple declarative statement "We are modern individuals living in a plur-  
13 alistic, democratic society" embodies much of what Americans would say about  
14 themselves. Now let's dissect the phrase and analyze the ideological baggage it contains.

15 First of all, *we* is a nationalist term still used in this increasingly global, trans- and  
16 international world. Despite this culture's fascination with encounters of the third  
17 kind, it resolutely stands for those who are inaccurately self-designated as *Americans* –  
18 which only truly means those of the United States. Of course, we can immediately  
19 sense some of the limits and complications of such binary terms. Does *we* necessarily  
20 mean a legal citizen? What if due to racist laws a person of color is not allowed to  
21 become a citizen? Why are Asians who have been in this country for generations still  
22 viewed as foreigners by virtue of their "look"?

23 In addition, *we* is juxtaposed to *them*, which presumably refers to peoples of other  
24 nations and cultures who do not necessarily have this combination of qualities we  
25 believe we embody.

26 *(Vega and Green 1993: 4)*

27  
28 Tchen insists that we critique words' hidden meanings and have the courage to reinvigorate and  
29 redefine and invent words with inclusive definitions directing us to reconstruct American society  
30 incorporating social and I would add artistic movements to his statement making this nation a  
31 humane and just society. He states the following: "To truly make these words sing to our hearts,  
32 we have to build popular, grassroots places for engaged and meaningful dialogue about who we  
33 are becoming" (Vega and Green 1993: 4).

34 In "Battle Stancing" Bernice Johnson Reagon (Vega and Greene 1993: 69–70), like a weaver  
35 creating a tapestry, unites the strands that provide the path to our work as disenfranchised  
36 communities still, as the nation celebrates the 50th anniversary of the Civil Rights Legislation in  
37 2014. As a prominent cultural activist in the Civil Rights Movement her voice framed and  
38 continues to voice our reality.

39  
40 We are African American, Asian American, Chicano; we are Iroquois, the Hopi, the  
41 Puerto Rican Americans; we are women, we are the differently abled. We are citizens  
42 of this land and a part of the cultural future of this society. Our constituencies are  
43 cultural and historical communities that have been neglected and attacked by a  
44 majority culture that upholds the principle of cultural dominance, which holds Wes-  
45 tern European culture and its derivatives as supreme ...

46 Through our work as scholars, cultural programmers, art managers, community  
47 organizers, artists, educational specialists, or institution builders, some of us work to  
48 challenge monocultural dominance.

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1 We work in many ways so that we can bring an end to the false and crippling  
2 concepts of cultural dominance and superior knowledge.

3 We see our work as a part of a contemporary struggle to bring into being a new  
4 national format, generated from a community base that will allow for the survival and  
5 prosperity of our cultural communities as equal partners within the society.  
6

7 The excerpts from the essays of contributors to *Voices From The Battlefield: Achieving Cultural*  
8 *Equity*, edited by Marta Moreno Vega and Cheryl Y. Greene, are versions of papers presented at  
9 the Cultural Diversity Based on Cultural Grounding II Conference in New York, October 17–8,  
10 1991; a series of conferences designed to bring cultural activists and advocates together to create  
11 pathways to equity for all communities.  
12

### 13 **Creating Cultural Spaces of Our Truth!**

14  
15 In the United States the Harlem Renaissance, Black Arts, Nuyorican, La Raza/Chicano, Native  
16 American, Asian, Rural, Gay Movements, although considered and treated as marginal, have  
17 consistently sustained their aesthetic centrality defining and creating from their standards of  
18 excellence.

19 Understanding the importance of education as the promoter of the values of the dominant  
20 cultural and social values groups considered marginal during the late 1970s and 1980s advocated  
21 for departments focused on their contributions to world cultures. The growth of Chicano,  
22 Puerto Rican, Asian, Native, and African American studies departments and programs that  
23 emerged in higher education carried the stigma of being marginal histories and often empha-  
24 sized the point by being non-credited courses.

25 Like the Freedom Schools of the Civil Rights Movement, the concept was to develop  
26 curriculums of a true history that inserted the accomplishment of historically disenfranchised  
27 communities of color, poor white communities, the voices of women, address gender  
28 and the broader inequities that impacted all. The importance of assuring that scholars  
29 and experts from historically marginalized communities should be the creators of educators  
30 in these programs was key to assuring an educational process of inclusion and historical  
31 correctness.

32 Similar to opportunities that would be available through the Dream Act to young people  
33 today, government programs like SEEK opened access and created opportunities for econom-  
34 ically challenged students from marginalized communities.  
35

#### 36 **The Creation and Purpose of SEEK**

37  
38 SEEK was created in 1966 when the New York State Legislature enacted a law that man-  
39 dated the creation of programs providing access and support for New York City residents  
40 and to advance the cause of equality and educational opportunity at the City University of  
41 New York. Today the university maintains a commitment to admit students under the pro-  
42 visions of this law and accept students who normally would not qualify through regular  
43 admissions criteria.

44 *([www.york.cuny.edu/student-development/seek](http://www.york.cuny.edu/student-development/seek))*

45  
46 As noted by the last line the programs also stigmatized the students applying for these oppor-  
47 tunities so as to “accept students who normally would not qualify through regular admissions  
48 criteria.”

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1 Outside the anti-poverty and educational opportunities that the Johnson administration  
2 launched to create a more equitable society, communities organized cultural movements to give  
3 voice to the authentic voices and issues plaguing our people. On the West Coast the Black  
4 Panther Party emerged in 1966 at the height of the Civil Rights Movement on the East Coast.  
5 This impetus was reflected in the Young Lords Party founded in 1969 in Chicago followed by  
6 a New York Chapter in East Harlem by Puerto Rican youth. They were the first generation of  
7 university students out of Old Westbury College and Columbia University who aspired to  
8 achieve professional careers. The founders of the New York Chapter, who were brilliant young  
9 people, soon understood that the formal educational school college process was not providing  
10 the education that was needed to improve the conditions of their communities.

11 Felipe Luciano, former Chairman of the Young Lords Party, voiced his thoughts published in  
12 *Palante Young Lords Party* states the importance of education in the following statement:  
13 “America should never have taught us how to read, she should never have given us eyes to see”  
14 (Abrahamson 1971: 28).

15 In Harlem parents also reacted to the mis-education of their children by insisting that the  
16 school district should develop a project called El Museo del Barrio. Witnessing the African  
17 American artistic movement’s creation of Studio Museum in Harlem, Puerto Rican parents  
18 understood the importance of creating a space of cultural identity. The vision was a partici-  
19 patory children’s museum providing historical and creative arts education placing the narrative  
20 of Puerto Rico at the center of their consciousness and learning. As a project of District 5  
21 artists Rafael Ortiz was its first director. Under school decentralization it was moved to  
22 District 4, and the second director educator Marta Moreno Vega was appointed the director  
23 of El Museo del Barrio.

24 Arlene Dávila in her article entitled “Culture in the Battlefront: From Nationalist to Pan-  
25 Latino Projects” in the book entitled *Mambo Montage The Latinization of New York* by Augustin  
26 Lao-Montes and Arlene Dávila (2001: 506) notes:

27  
28 El Museo del Barrio, for its part, was similarly involved in larger social struggles of civil  
29 empowerment in the late 1960s. In particular, this was the result of the growing  
30 demands for education equity and for the representation of Puerto Rican history and  
31 culture in public schools, issues that provoked demonstrations and boycotts through-  
32 out the 1960s. The idea to develop a non-school educational program that would  
33 provide Puerto Rican children with a positive self-image came out of a group of  
34 parents and educators from community school district 4.

35 El Museo was conceived by its founders as a community museum that, following  
36 the emergent model of such institutions, sought to place people rather than collections  
37 at the center of its mission.  
38

39 El Museo del Barrio, Studio Museum in Harlem, and other cultural organizations across the  
40 country sought to redefine the role of museums creating a vision and mission of inclusiveness.  
41 The openings provided by the Civil Rights Movement and Anti-Poverty Programs created the  
42 resources and opportunities previously not available.

43 Education was more affordable to historically excluded communities with open enrollment  
44 programs and low-cost student loans. Today affordable loans have virtually disappeared while  
45 public and private higher education generate escalating quantities of debt making it almost  
46 impossible for the economically challenged marginal and middle-class communities to afford  
47 higher education without going into significant debt. This is certainly a reversal of the goals of  
48 the Civil Rights and Anti-Poverty goals of the Kennedy and Johnson administrations.

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### Getting it Wrong!

Traditional museums, according to Susan E. Cahan (2007: 423) in “Performing Identity and Persuading a Public: The Harlem On my Mind Controversy”:

In the 1960’s, art museums in the United States were forced to respond to an unprecedented set of democratic demands from artists and activists ...  
... Many artists also asserted that institutional equality required racial integration of mainstream arts museums.

Cahan notes that on January 18, 1969 the Metropolitan Museum of Art opened an exhibition called “Harlem on My Mind: Cultural Capital of Black America, 1900–1968.” In response to the demands of inclusion by the Black community the response was an exhibition conceived and curated by Allon Schoener, a White curator. The exhibition was primarily a photographic documentation of Harlem that didn’t include the work of Black artists. The overt demonstrations and negative reactions of Black Arts and community spoke of the indignity and patronizing irrelevancy of the exhibition.

In response to the exclusion of communities of color the New York State Council on the Arts created a program called Ghetto Arts:

In the past several years many New York State municipalities attempted to reduce racial tension during the summer months by offering ghetto residents arts and recreation programs. Inadvertently, they helped to bring to light artists who would speak for the ghettos artists who existed within the communities and had something to say about their lives there. The Ghetto Arts Program seeks to develop these artists by giving them an audience, a training ground, and a place to experiment. Hopefully, it will also help to place them in the larger art world so that the now disquieting title of “ghetto arts” will no longer be needed.

*(NYS COUNCIL ON THE ARTS 1969–70: CHAIRMAN’S REVIEW,  
Seymour, Knox, New York State Council on the Arts)*

Although disquieting to the Chair of the Council Mr. Know, the program was still given the name Ghetto Arts by the National Endowment for the Arts. Like Schoener, the curator of Harlem on My Mind, instead of including artists and scholars from the Black community being invited to curate the show and program, the mindset of arrogance prevailed.

There is no question that there have been changes since the Civil Rights and opportunities that were unavailable in the past are now more available. Nonetheless significant inequity and disparity continue as is evident in the funding patterns of public and private foundations.

### Cultural Equity—Up from the Ground—Rather than Top Down!

The push by historically marginalized communities in part were successful in making a broader community aware of the vast contributions of individuals and their cultural groups to society. The narratives of multiculturalism and programs that have emerged in large traditional Eurocentric institutions while creating an awareness have also made diversity the “flavor of the month” or exceptional rather than the norm. Ghetto Arts at the New York State Council is now the Special Arts Program although the mindset remains tied to its creation.



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1 Arts organizations of color still remain marginalized in the Special Arts Program with few  
2 organizations of color being funded by other art-disciplined categories. The Special Arts  
3 Program has the most extensive programs to fund with limited resources that continue  
4 to diminish as state funds are cut. The New York City of Department of Cultural Arts funds  
5 34 traditional arts organizations called the Cultural Institutions Group with 85 percent of  
6 its funds while 15 percent is distributed to more than 1,200 small and mid-size organizations  
7 in the Program Category where the predominant number of art organizations of color are  
8 relegated.

9 This holds true for the national funding patterns across the nation. In “Fusing Arts, Culture  
10 and Social Change: High Impact Strategies for Philanthropy” by Holly Sidford<sup>2</sup> as follows:  
11

12 A growing number of artists and cultural groups are working in artistic traditions from  
13 Africa, Asia, Latin America and the Pacific Rim, as well as in new technology-based  
14 and hybrid forms. They are using the arts in increasingly diverse ways to engage and  
15 build communities and address the root causes of persistent societal problems, includ-  
16 ing issues of economic, educational and environmental injustice as well as inequities in  
17 civil and human rights.

18 Much of this work is being done at the grassroots and community levels by artists  
19 and relatively small cultural organizations. Yet, the majority of arts funding supports  
20 large organizations with budgets greater than \$5 million. Such organizations, which  
21 comprise less than 2 percent of the universe of arts and cultural nonprofits, receive  
22 more than half of the sector’s total revenue. These institutions focus primarily on  
23 Western European art forms, and their programs serve audiences that are pre-  
24 dominantly white and upper income. Only 10 percent of grant dollars made with a  
25 primary or secondary purpose of supporting the arts explicitly benefits underserved  
26 communities, including lower-income populations, communities of color and other  
27 disadvantaged groups. And less than 4 percent focus on advancing social justice goals.  
28 These facts suggest that most arts philanthropy is not engaged in addressing inequities  
29 that trouble our communities, and is not meeting the needs of our most marginalized  
30 populations.  
31

32 The data in my opinion reflects that the more things change the more they stay the same. The  
33 inequity forged throughout our history continues although the population of communities of  
34 color rapidly grows larger and contributes to the economic growth of the nation as “illegal  
35 immigrants”, “legal” citizens, and “migrants”. The income gap between the top and the bottom  
36 grows ever larger as the conversation on inequity as demonstrated by the occupiers of financial  
37 centers attested.  
38

39 Issues of inequality seem poised to play a large role in the public discourse this year.  
40 President Obama is expected to use his Jan. 28 State of the Union speech to promote  
41 specific proposals aimed at inequality, such as raising the federal minimum wage.  
42 Congressional Democrats reportedly see inequality as an issue that could help them in  
43 this year’s midterm elections. And some Republicans, such as Sen. Marco Rubio of  
44 Florida, have begun talking about creating “a new opportunity society in America” as  
45 a conservative approach to addressing persistent poverty.

46 As the debate gears up, it’s important to understand some basic facts about how  
47 inequality is measured, the trends over time and how the U.S. compares globally.  
48 Here’s a “5 Facts” primer ... :

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1       **1: By one measure, U.S. income inequality is the highest it's been since**  
2       **1928.** In 1982, the highest-earning 1% of families received 10.8% of all pretax  
3       income, while the bottom 90% received 64.7%, according to research by UC-  
4       Berkeley professor Emmanuel Saez. Three decades later, according to Saez' pre-  
5       liminary estimates for 2012, the top 1% received 22.5% of pretax income, while the  
6       bottom 90%'s share had fallen to 49.6%.

(<http://www.pewresearch.org/fact-tank/2014>)

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The result in part is startling and offensive as the aesthetic centricity and cultures of marginal communities are too often coopted and viewed as commodities in commercials, multicultural exhibitions, festivals, and higher educational programs that are developed to “serve” marginal communities without their presence or significant input. The model set forth by the exhibition Harlem on My Mind continues to exist in similar ways although more covert. Whether well intended or not the result is the appearance of inclusion while in actuality historically marginal communities are at increased risk.

Developing ways of understanding and valuing the wide range of aesthetic visions, standards, systems of learning, and identifying experts that have to work with a inclusive equitable framework is essential in developing approaches and systems that are directed at achieving cultural equity.

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21

### **Ways of Learning—Shifting Dominance!**

Community Art University Without Walls is an initiative that seeks to engage the process of higher education in a more equitable inclusive process bringing together the expertise of varied sources to share and involve students in transformative experiences that honor cultural equity and social justice as a way of thinking and functioning in the world. The community and course facilitators are community members with a long and current history of working within their communities as partners for progressive change.

Community Arts University Without Walls is a special course of study for those interested in the impact and role of cultural arts in engaging issues of social justice within communities. The courses taught by renowned community experts and scholars culturally grounded in the arts, public policy, and advocacy will present and engage with students on best practices that have made positive and significant contributions to diverse communities. The two-week intensive course of study focuses on the legacy of the Civil Rights Movement, important contemporary issues including cultural equity, social and economic justice and their continuing impact on the present and future generations of cultural arts activists.

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### **Courses**

The courses are designed to provide for reflection and examination of students' core beliefs and assumptions in the areas of cultural equity, advocacy, and art for change as it relates to their realities, ideologies, and assumptions. Engaging with colleagues in similar areas with other working frameworks provides for critical analysis and exchanges to further enhance their praxis. The exchange of information and knowledge is designed to motivate creative and innovative thought, while exploring possibilities for joint work and collaborations with community cultural advocates in Puerto Rico and other locations during the two-week intensive courses and over time as work with mentors continues.

Each day is divided between classroom sessions in the morning where all students attend together, and site-based study in the afternoon for smaller groups of 12–15 students. The

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1 morning classes provide cultural, historical, and policy contexts while the afternoon sessions  
2 afford practical experiential learning opportunities with established local community groups.

3 There are two classes a morning session and afternoon intensive classes, The Community  
4 Imperative: Achieve Cultural Equity and Global Cultural Social Justice Movements. In the  
5 afternoon, students actively engage in community innovative and transformative projects with  
6 cultural workers. This two-week intensive is designed to provide significant immersion into  
7 community engagement strategies focused on cultural equity and social justice.

8  
9  
10 ***The Right to Cultural Equity: The Community Arts Imperative—Credits***  
11 ***per course: Undergraduate 3 credits; Graduate and Doctorate 4 credits;***  
12 ***Special Students certificate accreditation***

13 This course brings together an analysis of global contexts and local innovations to develop an  
14 understanding of a movement for cultural equity through advancing community arts. The  
15 continuous challenges posed by racial and cultural diversity within nations and globally insist  
16 upon the need for understanding how cultural issues of equity and inequity are addressed in  
17 varied locations and at the manner that communities generate forms of cultural expression and  
18 ways of life that affirm and express their values and sensibilities. Understanding the global  
19 landscape necessitates an understanding of the global issues impacting cultural communities that  
20 are a reflection of public policy that determines the social status of varied communities ranging  
21 from cultural issues to economic opportunities.

22 The why and art of community cultural work are important to understand the art of mean-  
23 ing and intent that addresses issues and solutions. These narratives have been marginal and/or  
24 excluded from the the traditional arts narrative from the perspective and voice of the culturally  
25 grounded communities that are the articulators of their political and creative work.

26  
27 ***Cultural Arts Policy and Advocacy/Activism in Puerto Rico and the***  
28 ***Caribbean and other Global Cultural Movement—Credits per***  
29 ***course: Undergraduate 3 credits; | Graduate and Doctorate 4 credits; | Special***  
30 ***Students no credit course completion verification***  
31

32 The importance of cultural preservation through education and the arts is of paramount  
33 importance. Coursework develops an understanding of community-based initiatives, varied  
34 narratives, and organizational frameworks that assure the recognition of the heritage and legacies  
35 of cultural communities. Included in this pursuit are new heightened levels of public discourse,  
36 awareness, and involvement leading to significant policy changes. Special emphasis is placed on  
37 the analysis of goals, strategies, and outcomes of student involvements. A first-hand dialogue  
38 with Puerto Rican university students actively involved in raising issues of social, cultural, and  
39 economic equity is provided.

40 The program is conceived in partnership with advisory groups of community leaders, edu-  
41 cators, scholars, and students to assure the best thinking of the diversity of perspectives. Aimed  
42 at developing cultural equity and social justice as cultural ambassadors, the two-week engage-  
43 ment is designed to witness the power of community members in designing their present and  
44 future as positive change agents in their communities.

45 In the words of Galeano (1992: 213):

46  
47 The struggle against structures hostile to democracy, structures of impotence, requires  
48 the development of a liberating national culture, capable of unleashing people's

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1 creative energy and capable of washing the cobwebs from the eyes so that they might  
2 see themselves and the world.  
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# 17

## HAPTICALITY IN THE UNDERCOMMONS

*Stefano Harney*

In what follows I want to suggest that we need a way to think about how our labour is being broken up and redistributed, reassembled, across our bodies, and across bodies, space and time more generally. Against the propaganda of creative cities, but also against our own assumptions that our subjectivities are being put to work, I want to use contemporary operations management to point to another process. I want to talk about a line cut loose, a work rhythm unbounded but insistent, a line that must be served, attended, connected to ensure 'thruput'. There are no subjects on this line, and the only thing whole is the line itself. Finally I want to point to some contemporary artists who draw on a tradition of critiquing this kind of work and producing undercommon rhythms against such work. I use Fred Moten's (2008) term Black Ops to name these rhythms.

### Fanon

In the conclusion to Frantz Fanon's (2004) classic work *Les damnés de la terre* something remarkable happens.<sup>1</sup> In the course of the book, Fanon has taken us through his searing analysis of the psychology, culture, class and nationalism of the colonized and the colonizer. He has examined revolutionary thought and action as never before. And he has vividly portrayed the gravediggers of colonialism. Then, in the conclusion, he focuses sharply and suddenly on the relation of the newly liberated post-colonial peoples to work.

Fanon begins his conclusion by calling for the rejection of what he calls the 'European model' in the coming post-colonial world:

When I search for Man in the technique and the style of Europe, I see only a succession of negations of man, and an avalanche of murders.

But what is this European model, what is at the heart of this model, why the negations, the unending blood-soaked dawns? Here is Fanon's answer:

But let us be clear: what matters is to stop talking about output, and intensification, and the rhythm of work.

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1 The coming post-colonial nations must break not only with the negations of history, culture, and  
2 personality wrought by colonialism but also with the 'rhythm of work' imposed by the European  
3 model. And he clarifies:

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No, there is no question of a return to Nature. It is simply a very concrete question of  
not dragging men towards mutilation, of not imposing upon the brain rhythms that very  
quickly obliterate it and wreck it. The pretext of catching up must not be used to push  
man around, to tear him away from himself or from his privacy, to break and kill him.

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Here is that word 'rhythm' again. 'Rhythms imposed on the brain' this time, imposed by a drive  
to 'catch up'. Catching up was a phrase much circulated in the takeoff theories of capitalist  
development pushed by the United States in the Cold War. But, Fanon points out, this catching  
up institutes a rhythm that 'breaks' and 'kills' man. This is a rhythm that 'tears man away from  
himself', that 'obliterates' and 'wrecks' his brain. Fanon uses the metaphor of the 'caravan' for an  
entire system that tears man away from himself.

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No, we do not want to catch up with anyone. What we want to do is to go forward  
all the time, night and day, in the company of Man, in the company of all men. The  
caravan should not be stretched out, for in that case each line will hardly see those  
who precede it; and men who no longer recognize each other meet less and less  
together, and talk to each other less and less.

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The 'caravan', or what would come to be called globalization, or indeed what might be termed  
more precisely, logistics. Notice that the caravan, a term of trade, is here transposed to a chain of  
work, a line, an assembly line with a rhythm that breaks and kills man. This is a pathological  
caravan that 'tears apart the functions' of man.

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It is a question of the Third World starting a new history of Man, a history which will  
have regard to the sometimes prodigious theses which Europe has put forward, but  
which will also not forget Europe's crimes, of which the most horrible was committed  
in the heart of man, and consisted of the pathological tearing apart of his functions and  
the crumbling away of his unity.

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Fanon reminds us here too of the 'prodigious theses', Marxism and the history of enlightenment  
thought. But it has not been enough to prevent 'the most horrible crimes.' These crimes are  
racism and colonialism but these crimes wrap another at the heart of the model – this 'patho-  
logical tearing apart of his functions', Fanon says. It is this rhythm of work, this pathological  
global caravan of work, that is not only at the heart but is the truth of the European model. Even  
if racism and colonialism cannot be reduced to the crime of slave, indentured, and colonial  
labour, this truth lies at the heart. The European model of domination, Fanon reminds us in his  
conclusion, was to steal land and people not to support their mode of production as in past  
empires, but to impose a new rhythm of work on a global scale, a global assembly line tearing  
apart the functions of man.

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### **Social Factory**

Of course, there is an important difference between the rhythm of work Fanon is describing and  
the historical institution of Fordist and Taylorist rhythms of the assembly line. The Fordist and

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1 Taylorist factory had an outside, however unstable and unjust. Control of cooperation at work  
2 was given up, but was supposed to return individually, at least for white men and settlers, in  
3 politics, in rights, and votes. In the European model imposed on the colonies, there was no  
4 return. The rhythm was all in factory, field, and mine, on the ship, the road, and the rail, in the  
5 shop and the house. Or at least, this was the system's intent. In this sense the colony was the first  
6 social factory. Everywhere you went in the colony it was work, or else it was criminality. And  
7 any other connection, any other line, was conspiracy. No citizenship, no consumers, no land,  
8 nation, or culture, no outside. That was the regime, the rhythm.

9 Fanon feared post-colonial nations would keep the regime and merely erect the outside, with  
10 flags, anthems, and new ruling classes. Who can say he was wrong? But Fanon's warning was  
11 more than a post-colonial critique of the idea of the outside. It was an analysis of the European  
12 model and its tendency towards producing this rhythm without an outside. Indeed Fanon saw  
13 the colony as the first social factory, where worker replaces subject in society as a whole. In the  
14 colony, in the first social factory, any move to other social being was, as it is today, criminal,  
15 conspiratorial. The only sound in the social factory is the rhythm of work because that is what  
16 takes place in a factory.

17 This may sound surprising to say: that there are no subjects in the social factory or that the  
18 rhythm of work is omnipresent today. We face millions without work or not enough work in  
19 the North and amongst the migrants from the Global South seeking to reach the North or in it  
20 without being of it. We are told that the future of work in both 'developed' and 'emerging'  
21 economies is subjective, creative, professional, and most of all managerial, not rhythmic. And at  
22 any rate from more reliable sources like Michael Hardt and Antonio Negri (2011) we under-  
23 stand that we are living in an era when immaterial labour – cognitive and affective labour –  
24 dominates and commands other forms of labour, even if factories and warehouses are still  
25 widespread. But this should not make us deaf to the rhythm we hear no matter where we go,  
26 the rhythm that breaks and kills humans.

27 We have heard a lot from business about how we can become entrepreneurial, or how we  
28 can transform ourselves into leaders, of how we can become responsible for our own careers.  
29 And again from our comrades we have received a more accurate picture: conceptions of the  
30 artist, the bohemian, the researcher and the performer have been twisted by business to make us  
31 work harder, to convince us we can fulfil ourselves through work. Andrew Ross's (2004) work  
32 is excellent here. Christian Marazzi has written about the way our bodies are today a kind of  
33 constant capital, machines for which we are responsible, which we must upkeep because they  
34 are the site of production. He is right. Franco Berardi (2009) speaks of the way our psyche and  
35 our souls descend into work as if engulfing our whole being, and Emma Dowling (2007) of the  
36 way even our affect is measured and managed, brought into metrics. It is easy to feel that work  
37 for those who have it is about the risk of having your subjectivity and your talents swallowed  
38 whole, about having your virtuosity consumed as Paolo Virno (2004) might put it.

39 But a factory is neither a collection of machines nor a collections of workers however skilled,  
40 however virtuoso. A factory is a line.

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**Operations Management**

44 The area of management studies concerned with the factory is operations management.  
45 Operations management has always been pretty clear about what a factory is, and however much  
46 it has expanded its understanding of the factory, this definition has not wavered. This is business  
47 'knowledge', with all its ideological limits, but it can be helpful to our own considerations here.  
48 For operations management, the factory is the scene of a process. This is process in the sense of

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1 procession, procedure and movement. Inputs go into the factory to move along a process, a line,  
2 and outputs come out of the factory. Most importantly what machines and especially workers do,  
3 according to operations management, is work on the process not the product. In contemporary  
4 operations management theory this has meant improving that process. This is often designated by  
5 the Japanese term '*kaizen*' originally associated with workers and managers devoting themselves  
6 to the continuous improvement of the line's efficiency in Toyota factories. Soon *kaizen* expanded  
7 throughout service, extraction, information, and other sectors.

8 Rather than attention to the product, including the immaterial product, which remains as much as  
9 ever the purview of a small fraction of the workforce, most workers are subjected to increased  
10 attention to the 'assembly' line. For management science, this is what a factory is: a line, a process, a  
11 procession, a movement, a rhythm through from inputs to outputs. For operations management  
12 metrics differ from management precisely because they measure progress on the line itself, the  
13 improvement of the process, an improvement which knows no end, and so unlike measurement,  
14 metrics move. And this too is what the social factory is. Its name is accurate even if we have sometimes  
15 been distracted by everything from the propaganda of creative classes to the critical discourse of the  
16 precariat. The social factory is about making and remaking the line better and better. But that is not  
17 all. *Kaizen* has been accompanied by another development in the line. This is the extension of the  
18 management of inputs and outputs, of the extension to supply chains understood as part of the line,  
19 not just a raw clusters of labour, natural resources and machines waiting outside the door of the fac-  
20 tory. And with logistics and reverse logistics this line is expanding exponentially, or rather, algor-  
21 ithmically. Logistics and supply chain management extend the metrics of line in both directions,  
22 towards inputs and outputs which now have their own work rhythms.

### Synaptic Labour

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26 This algorithmically expanding line means the outside of the factory is measured like the inside,  
27 aligned with the processual inside. And when the factory is virtual, post-Fordist, a social factory,  
28 the algorithms of the line extend the rhythm of production, of assembly across our lives. The two  
29 meanings of assembly, or perhaps two modes of assembly, begin to merge; to assemble is both to  
30 come together and to make, anywhere, anytime. But what is made when we assemble and  
31 reassemble is the line itself first and foremost, not a product or a service. And we might go so far  
32 to say, with Marx, the first thing we make is ourselves as the line, not as subjects.

33 This is our work today. We take inventories of ourselves for components not the whole. We  
34 produce lean efforts to transconduct. We look to overcome constraints. We define values  
35 through metrics. These are all terms from operations management but they describe work far  
36 better than recourse the discourse of subject formation. Creativity itself, supposedly at the heart  
37 of the battle for the subject today, is nothing but what operations management calls variance in  
38 the line, a variance that may lead to what is in turn called a *kaizen* event, an improvement, and  
39 is then assimilated back into an even more sophisticated line, which in turn demands more.  
40 Today ours is primarily the labour of adapting and translating, being commensurate and flexible,  
41 being a conduit and receptacle, a port for information but also a conductor of information, a  
42 wire, a travel plug. We channel affect towards new connections. We do not just keep the flow  
43 of meaning, information, attention, taste, desire, and fear moving, we improve this flow con-  
44 tinuously. We must remain open and attuned to the rhythm of the line, to its merciless var-  
45 iances in rhythm. This is primarily a neurological labour, a synaptic labour of making contact to  
46 keep the line flowing, and creating innovations that help it flow in new directions and at new  
47 speeds. The worker operates like a synapse, sparking new lines of assembly in life. And she does  
48 so anywhere and everywhere because the rhythm of the line is anywhere and everywhere. The



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1 worker extends synaptic rhythms in every direction, every circumstance. With synpatic work, it  
2 is access not subjects that the line wants, an access, as Denise Ferreira da Silva (2007) reminds us,  
3 was long at the heart of the abuse of the affected ones, the ones who granted access out of love,  
4 out of being, out of the consent not to be one, even before that granting was abused.  
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6 **The Groundations**  
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8 The rule of the line persists beyond the factory in time and space, and its rhythm makes the time  
9 and space of our lives. There is no outside to the line, or rather we might say the line runs  
10 through the outside promised in Fordism and supposed to be so heterogeneous in post-Fordism.  
11 A rhythm that tears us apart, a rhythm that obliterates and wrecks our brain. In some places the  
12 line is all that is left of the factory, and logistics in this expanded sense is all that is left of the  
13 production. The science of operations management becomes the science of society, the common  
14 sense of our lives.

15 No wonder Fanon feared this rhythm, and warned against participating in its pathological  
16 caravan, its global logistics. But this is why I turn to him now. Because we need more than the  
17 European theses to fight the European model in its fully realized form. Anti-colonial critique,  
18 and its grounding in the black radical tradition give us something more, launched as they are  
19 from a world with no outside but the criminal one, the fugitive one, conspiratorial one, a world  
20 where we are nothing but an input but somehow remain responsible for upkeep, improvement,  
21 and innovation of the line. The colonial world and the slave world were just that: populated by  
22 those who simultaneously had to care for and improve that world while being nothing in it.  
23 But of course nothing was not nothing. The critique included practices of resistance, autonomy,  
24 and most of all a tradition of producing other lines, other rhythms, in a militant arrhythmia.

25 The banning of the drum could not destroy these rhythms, nor the rejection of hospitality, or of  
26 common land, or any number of everyday practices that turn an inside out with another rhythm.  
27 There is a rich history for logistical populations to draw upon here and synaptic workers around  
28 the globe have finally caught up to it though it has been with us all along, in the undercommons. I  
29 will invoke Walter Rodney (2001), the great Guyanese historian, himself a part of this tradition,  
30 talking about this tradition, of a Rasta community in the poorest part of Kingston, Jamaica:  
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32 But with these black brothers you learn humility because they are teaching you ...  
33 these brothers who up to now are every day performing a miracle. It is a miracle how  
34 these fellows live. They live and they are physically fit, they have vitality of mind, they  
35 have a tremendous sense of humour, they have depth. How do they do that in the  
36 midst of the existing conditions? And they create, they are always saying things.  
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38 Rodney advises:

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40 You have to listen to them and you hear them talk about Cosmic Power and it rings a  
41 bell. I say, but I have read this somewhere, this is Africa. You have to listen to their  
42 drums to get the message of the Cosmic Power.  
43

44 These Rasta sisters and brothers are studying, making a line they call 'groundations'. This is the  
45 line of flight when there is nowhere to run that Fred Moten calls Black Ops. This is the  
46 undercommons. It's beat that will save your life. It is there in the way, as Horace Campbell notes,  
47 the Rasta community dealt with 'false Rastas' by going deeper into the rhythm, and it is there in  
48 the contemporary art that inherits these groundations.

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1 I want to take just two examples, very different. The first is the performance artist Athi-Patra  
2 Ruga. The second is photographer and filmmaker Zarina Bhimji. I don't intend to read these  
3 artists nor to place them in school or tradition. I want to say instead that they inspire me to  
4 think about the line today and its killing rhythm, and to think about the ways this line runs  
5 through us, and how it bypasses subject formation at work. But most of all I want to look at  
6 their work to think about what Fred calls Black Ops, and the undercommons their work invites  
7 us to feel around us, their militant arrhythmia.

8 When Athi-Patra Ruga stages his synchronized swimming in a bath bathed in bright colored  
9 lights, or when he or his models appear in balloon suits, or in helmets of black hair and high  
10 heels, or naked wearing a white boy kabuki mask, climbing police stations or strolling down  
11 dusty roads or painting studios with their bodies, there is no question of 'who am I'. There is  
12 nothing chameleon here, no subject in transformation. Instead there is a kind of militant access  
13 to the materials, to light, bright colours, hair, but also to flesh, intelligence, movement, liveli-  
14 ness. Ruga offers a practice of what runs through but not based on the protocols of work, or a  
15 killing rhythm. This is a practice that helps me to see that access is already granted by the time it  
16 is granted, that what is found to be beautiful, erotic or painful, or mournful is what is already  
17 conducted, transduced in the flesh and the intellect before the arrival of the performance, the  
18 figure, the bursting embroidery of the painting. This is the line before the line that makes us  
19 vulnerable to abuse, and always more than that abuse.

20 The rhythm of the line is unsettled by such practices not because these practices unsettle the  
21 subject, something about which capital could care less today, one way or the other. Ruga unsettles  
22 with what passes through, what recombines, what mocks and dances around the social factory in  
23 plain sight, late at night, on the lunch break, in the undercommons, in a differing rhythm. The line  
24 may speak of its innovation, entrepreneurship and logistical reach, but it appears like the dull  
25 rhythm that is next to Ruga's work, next to the hapticality that lets us feel our own access.

26 Empty but not unoccupied, rooms, buildings, and fields, the access in Zarina Bhimji's aes-  
27 thetically gorgeous film *Yellow Patch* at first might seem to be about memory. But memory for  
28 the line is a matter of metrics, of not making the same mistake twice. It is useful for improve-  
29 ment. And Bhimji's camera resists the application of memory to the present for purposes of  
30 improvement. Her sound rumbles with labour and logistics, above the empty buildings, echoing  
31 in the rooms. But with her we enter a militant preservation, not keeping up, not improving,  
32 not looking for productive variance. I would say that old administrative papers stacked on the  
33 aging wooden office bookcases, or the yellow shutters cut by blocks of light from outside are  
34 aestheticized not to make memory useful through nostalgia, where it can be preserved and sold,  
35 or judgement where it can be used for improvement. Instead her film displays a calmness,  
36 peace, rest, in history, in contemporary history. Not the de-historicized rest of the meditation  
37 industry nor the preservation of the history industry, but a militant rest for history, in history, in  
38 struggle, right now. Her rooms, ships, fields, and bays do not leave history to give us pre-  
39 servation or provide us with rest in the struggle. Other lines are right here, the film suggests to  
40 me, the undercommons is never elsewhere, its touch is also a reach. Its touch is a rest, a caress.  
41 Hapticality occupies these rooms with a tap, tap, stroke rhythm of love.

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**Note**

- 1 As Miguel Mellino has noted the translation into English of Fanon's work as "Wretched of the Earth" makes passive the act of damning, an act from which it is possible to rise in rebel.

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## PART III

# Modalities of Practice

### Introduction

Openings to new forms of practice are energized by deep engagements and renewals of critical thought. Jack Halberstam’s “Charming for the Revolution: Pussy and Other Riots” amplifies what is at stake for contemporary politics in a queer investment in anarchy that draws at once from 1970s’ punk movements and diverse global traditions. This Gaga Manifesto refuses a feminist or queer politics oriented around norms or their transgression and instead pursues new genders and sexualities that emerge against and fail to be reabsorbed by the seemingly voracious current manifestations of punk capitalism. These practices are re-articulated as emanating from the realm of the impractical, a break with the limits of possibility that stifle the imagination. The promiscuity of the impractical, the traffic across the facile separation of public and private yields a kind of wild theory, of refusing the normativities of space and time that the recent interventions of Pussy Riot serve to highlight. Ultimately, charming for the revolution sustains a seductive charisma of the image where failure prepares its own uncertain succession and wild projects, riotous and unexpected keeps futurity open, connected, and insurrectionary.

The Yes Men have achieved notoriety through a kind of mischievous mimesis that drifts across the corporate mediascape and turns the truth claims of power into benchmarks of dissimulation and assertions of what it would take to hold the standard-bearers of authority to their word. Jacques Servin, in his exposition of the collaborative work of Yes Lab, discloses the homeopathic interventionist tactics of their work in clowning the clownish ideology of those who handle the reins of society. Their work draws upon the inner credulity of those circuits of truth-telling by the corporate and government spokespeople who populate the theaters of press and policy conference, vesting themselves in the garb of these representational robes, and redirecting public utterances toward what might be done or said under the sign of a disavowal of self-interested perpetuation of extant hierarchies. A big part of their practice is to enlist and teach others how to replicate their tactics and amplify the viral course of making fun of the vulnerabilities in the seemingly impregnable fortress of government and corporate self-justification. Their capacity to pull off one such stunt after another is both a commentary on the presentism of self-asserting legitimation, and an invitation to one and all to join in the fun of remaking the world.

*Modalities of Practice*

1 It has become a commonplace to distinguish formal and informal dimensions of the art world  
2 in terms of work done inside or outside of institutions, part of the commodity sphere, or  
3 beyond it. Gregory Sholette’s “16 Notes on Collectivism and Dark Matter” cuts along a dif-  
4 ferent axis. Collectivism, part of the self-organizing capacity of tactical media and interventionist  
5 art, draws not only upon the repurposing of the most visible representations of authority, but  
6 also from the invisible, free labor, activity beyond measure that comprises the dark matter of the  
7 art world. If most of the universe, some 95 percent remains unobserved astrophysics is none-  
8 theless the pursuit of how this matter came into being. The art world affects a studied indif-  
9 ference toward its own shadowy marginalities. As a medium of circulation for the creativity of  
10 the multitude, dark matter links the particular piercings and formations that collectivities  
11 undertake with the sociality in which it is suspended. The lines of affinity between art school  
12 debt, contract or occasional employment, and generalized precarity render the occupationist  
13 inflection of interventionist work, such as Occupy museums, an expansive practice in the field  
14 of dark matter.

15 After more than twenty years, the novelty of the network no longer shocks but continues to  
16 pose challenges as to how these still emergent relations are to be understood with circumstances  
17 that pose art as code and code as politics. These are the terms of Ricardo Dominguez’ “Some  
18 Notes about Art, Code and Politics under Cloudy Empire(s). He is interested in the lines gener-  
19 ated out of globalization where artists could open anti-antiutopias with hyper-shared com-  
20 monisms that etch lines of post-capitalism on, in, and at the edges of networks. His own work  
21 with the Electronic Disturbance Theater exhibits efforts to connect data bodies to real bodies  
22 on the streets and online in ways that refuse the false dichotomy of digital/physical. This is a  
23 trans-border body resident in locative media that by exulting in the pleasure of locating and  
24 being located details a sociality driven by reciprocity and trust. The oceanic media of data fos-  
25 tered by the likes of Google engender a shift from the sorting of legal and illegal bodies across  
26 sovereign spaces to validate the extra legal flows of the bits of things released by data that can  
27 be considered as the Cloud Empire. To this baleful condition of ongoing mining for capital, he  
28 provides some pointed artistic interventions that are the counter-flows that can fill these  
29 unfriendly skies.

30 The question of what kinds of art and politics emerges from the formations and architectures  
31 of big data is continued in Ned Rossiter and Soenke Zehle’s “The Aesthetics of Algorithmic  
32 Experience.” They explore the ways in which experience is captured at the juncture of  
33 aesthetics and algorithmic cultures at the center of contemporary info-politics. The figure of the  
34 algorithmic underscores the shared border-crossing across machines, economy, people, and  
35 code. All operate through a common recursivity that is also a reminder of the epistemological  
36 equivalence of analogue and digital systems in opposition to the romantic nostalgia that attaches  
37 to the sentiment of a lost authenticity of the analogue. Focusing on the centrality of the algo-  
38 rithmic to current capitalism discloses the operations of experience capture, geopolitical logistics,  
39 the limits of prediction, and the agency of both subjects and objects under these conditions.  
40 The political challenge as they see it is to find ways to articulate data flows and territories of  
41 value that operate as protocological conflicts untranslatable into economies of depletion and  
42 despair. Rather than abandon sense-making and experience as horizons of the political, they  
43 imagine a basis for insurgency that emanates from a richer grasp of algorithmic cultures.

44 The ways in which art figures as a politics when the digital is expanded and commodification  
45 intensified is further elaborated by Patricia Ticiento Clough in her “Computational Aesthetics  
46 in the Practices of Art as Politics.” To speak of a computational aesthetics is to move beyond  
47 the traumatic loss of a primordial and foundational rapport between humans and their world  
48 that had been the basis of philosophical speculation. She draws upon the moves within

*Modalities of Practice*

1 philosophy that open the potentiality of relations to processes that can be divined amongst  
2 technologically mediated objects. Objects serve as not only a way of knowing but of an  
3 approach to what can now be understood ontologically as a kind of being. For the ways in  
4 which an art as politics might be conceived this ontological turn means moving beyond art as a  
5 balm for the alienating effects of commodification by reuniting people with their truest human  
6 capacities. Once art objects are seen as bearing a kind of agency then their media of commu-  
7 nication may not be entirely apprehendable to human consciousness and a limit to knowledge  
8 would be established as a creative horizon. If creativity, inventiveness, and knowledge are now  
9 all central lines for the expansion of capitalist accumulation, she asks, what isn't art, especially  
10 when art is now infused with the materiality of incomputable data? Given the play amongst  
11 fields required to realize these potentialities, art will necessarily push affiliation amongst practi-  
12 tioners of thought beyond what interdisciplinarity has been.

13 The question of how new artistic practices expand relationality between those who create  
14 and receive the work has been elaborated as participatory aesthetics. Claire Bishop has been a  
15 seminal figure in these developments and her book, *Artificial Hells: Participatory Art and the Politics  
16 of Spectatorship* is the basis of the dialogue here with David Riff of the group Chto Delat, and  
17 curator/critic Ekaterina Degot "Toward Participatory Aesthetics." The earlier term of relational  
18 aesthetics, itself a shift from the one-on-one viewer to art called interactive, could not ade-  
19 quately account for the more contemporary work where people are the medium of the work as  
20 such and at a larger scale than the interpersonal intimacies hitherto associated with aesthetic  
21 experience. Bishop delves back into the revolutionary art movements of the twentieth century  
22 for the precursors to participatory aesthetics where scale and the people as medium are very  
23 much on the agenda. On the other hand she wants to retain some specificity for the aesthetic so  
24 that participation alone cannot be the sole criteria by which artistic efficacy and the politics of  
25 form are assessed. She too wants to avoid the binaries of mediated and spontaneous, false and  
26 genuine that attended to previous evaluative criteria for political work. She is also sanguine  
27 about the ways in which participation can be instrumentalized in policy to substitute art projects  
28 for structural redress of inequalities.

29 It is crucial to maintain the specificity of the popular in relation to particular genres of poli-  
30 tical art. This conjuncture is solidified in Swati Chattopadhyay's "The Politics of Popular Art in  
31 India," which focuses on undertheorized but explicitly political Indian practices of editorial  
32 cartoons, nationalist posters, and graffiti wall-writing that have been subject to censorship for  
33 official's fear of creating dangerous publics. Wall capturing by rival political parties was pro-  
34 claimed a form of public violation where voting should be maintained as a private act of indi-  
35 vidual citizens. Similarly, cartoons of political figures were omitted from publications on the  
36 grounds that they generated excessive responses from readerships that need to be tamped down  
37 before they can become manifest. Properly normative national form was a feature of British  
38 colonial art education in India and the initial anti-colonial break entailed ennobling the vernac-  
39 ular and elevating religious iconography of the motherland. Posters and public postering  
40 emerged from these expressions and ligation of theme and site to make a claim on locating the  
41 popular in the urban surround. The secularization of the deity of the political cartoon and the  
42 immediacy of graffiti in places of liminality and counterpoint gesture toward the dominant  
43 visual logic in the very constitution by these popular practices of public space.

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# 18

## CHARMING FOR THE REVOLUTION

### Pussy and Other Riots

*Jack Halberstam*

In a new book on *The Wild* I turn to anarchist thought to elaborate a queer politics for this particular moment of crisis and renewal. As many thinkers have proposed recently, a turn to anarchy makes sense at this time precisely because people’s faith in the state and in a politics of inclusion and assimilation is wearing thin, particularly in leftist circles; and, anti-hegemonic, anti-state and anti-assimilationist positions have been rendered thinkable by Occupy movements and other global expressions of radical dissent. My recent book, *Gaga Feminism* (Halberstam 2012), in that it both calls for and describes an end to “the normal,” or that form of state power that manages people by disciplining them in relation to a fantasized norm, could be called anarchist. And my book on failure, in that it breaks with the all or nothing logics of success driven by capitalism, could be characterized as anarchist critique. In this new project, I seek to make explicit the stakes of a queer investment in anarchy that both reaches back to punk movements from the 1970s for inspiration but also seeks other traditions of anarchy globally.

The current backlash against feminism presumes a stable field of gender politics and ignores the multiple interventions made by post-structuralist and queer theorists in crafting a new, politically dynamic, field of gender critique. The critique of feminism moreover emerges in many different venues. For example, in new philosophical projects like Object Oriented Ontology mostly male-bodied theorists investigate the relations between subjects and objects and seek to decenter the human subject from accounts of object life without recognizing that this has been a central concern in feminist theory or queer theory for many years. Or in contemporary Gay Studies scholarship, gay men reach back to a time before AIDS and before lesbian feminism to consider the *good old days* of promiscuous sex and cruising, implying in the process that we have thought way too much about the politics of gender and not enough about the materiality of sex cultures. In much of this work, “feminism” is shorthand for a “stuck” or arrested mode of theorizing that clings to old fashioned formulations of embodiment and returns us to the *bad old days* of gender stability, sex negativity, and political correctness. All of these backlashes gain force despite the continued popularity of Judith Butler’s work and the post-structuralist forms of feminist critique that she has authored and inspired!

In what follows, I elaborate a Gaga Manifesto to make clear how, like Beatrice Preciado (2013) in her book *Testo-Junkie*, it no longer makes sense to remain invested in a feminist or a queer politics organized around norms and their disruption or one concerned with binary and



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1 transhistorical formulations of “men” and “women,” “hetero-” and “homo” sexualities; but,  
2 unlike Preciado, I do not believe that the triumph of global capitalism is the end of the story,  
3 the only story, or the full story. So, dear readers, please receive this manifesto as an attempt to  
4 measure the new genders and sexualities that emerge within subcultural spaces against the new  
5 forms of “punk capitalism” described by Preciado that seem to re-territorialize such new forms  
6 of life almost as soon as they emerge. In the hopes that a few disruptive forms fail to be reab-  
7 sorbed into the global marketplace, I advocate for an anarchistic relation to being, becoming,  
8 and worlding.  
9

10 **1. Embrace the Impractical!**

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12 A practical scheme, says Oscar Wilde, is either one already in existence, or a scheme  
13 that could be carried out under the existing conditions; but it is exactly the existing  
14 conditions that one objects to, and any scheme that could accept these conditions is  
15 wrong and foolish. The true criterion of the practical, therefore, is not whether the  
16 latter can keep intact the wrong or foolish; rather it is whether the scheme has vitality  
17 enough to leave the stagnant waters of the old, and build, as well as sustain, new life.  
18 In the light of this conception, anarchism is indeed practical. More than any other  
19 idea, it is helping to do away with the wrong and foolish; more than any other idea, it  
20 is building and sustaining new life.

21 *(Goldman 1910)*

22  
23 Responding to the idea that anarchism is impractical, that it advocates the use of violence, and  
24 that it is dangerous, Emma Goldman asks what we actually mean by practicality and argues for an  
25 epistemological break with old ways of thinking. In the essay “Anarchism: What It Really Stands  
26 For,” she builds on Oscar Wilde’s reminder that what counts as practical is simply anything that  
27 can be carried out under already existing conditions. What is practical, in other words, is limited  
28 to what we can already imagine. This opens up the realm of the *impractical* as a space of possibility  
29 and newness. What is impractical, Goldman proposes, could become practical if existing con-  
30 ditions shift and change. Above all, change should break with the stagnant, with what can already  
31 be imagined in order to access and embrace “new life.”

32 My book *Gaga Feminism: Sex, Gender and the End of Normal* made the claim that the “existing  
33 conditions” under which the building blocks of human identity were imagined and cemented  
34 in the last century—what we call gender, sex, race, and class—have changed so radically that  
35 new life can be glimpsed ahead. Our task is not to shape this new life into identifiable and  
36 comforting forms, not to “know” this “newness” in advance, but rather, as Nietzsche suggests,  
37 to impose upon the categorical chaos and crisis that surrounds us only “as much regularity and  
38 form as our practical needs require” (Nietzsche 1968: 278).

39 In our sense of new modes of embodiment and identification engineered by technological  
40 innovation and situated within new forms of capitalism, Beatriz Preciado and I share a common  
41 theoretical project. In *Gaga Feminism*, I examined symbols of change like the pregnant man, Lady  
42 Gaga, and gay marriage, not to mention new queer families, artificial reproduction, sperm banks,  
43 and new forms of political protest, to say that the revolution predicted and explained by Shula-  
44 mith Firestone in *The Dialectic of Sex* in 1970, had come and gone! Using Marxism as a model for  
45 the structure of her feminist revolution, Firestone claimed that if the ability to technologically  
46 produce life separate from the female body became possible, then “the tyranny of the biological  
47 family would be broken” (Firestone 1970: 11). Since the categories of male and female depend so  
48 heavily upon reproductive function, the argument goes, then the separation of childbirth from

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1 any essential link to female embodiment would necessarily change the relations of dependency  
2 between men and women; shift the centrality of maternity within both the definition of  
3 womanhood and cultural understandings of childrearing; and, finally, it would cause the nuclear  
4 family to collapse allowing for new relations to emerge between adults and children.

5 *Gaga Feminism* claims that the existence of sperm banks, artificial reproduction of life, surro-  
6 gacy, the push for gay marriage, and new arrangements of kinship and households, and not to  
7 mention the high rates of divorce, gives evidence that the revolutionary conditions for gender  
8 transformation have arrived. Of course, this is not to say that “women” have been liberated  
9 from their traditional responsibilities for childrearing or domestic labor; indeed, poverty in the  
10 U.S. pertains in large part to the plight of single women struggling to make a living while  
11 raising children. Preciado describes something similar in *Testo-Junkie* when she speaks of new  
12 configurations of masculinity and femininity within a global porno marketplace where the  
13 currency is pleasure and the labor of producing that pleasure is mostly shouldered by female-  
14 bodied people. Describing an order of power that is structured via the orgasm—this is what  
15 Preciado calls *potential gaudendi*—she writes: “Femininity, far from being nature is the quality of  
16 the orgasmic force when it can be converted into merchandise, into an object of economic  
17 exchange, into work.” In other words, femininity no longer describes the cultural norms asso-  
18 ciated with living in a female body or even a physical proximity to the capacity to give birth;  
19 rather femininity refers to a mode of labor, the production of pleasure, and a bodily relation to  
20 reproductive technologies.

21 By implication then, Preciado claims, “heterosexuality” is a “politically assisted procreation  
22 technology” (2013: 46–47). Her claim about heterosexuality is both humorous and deadly seri-  
23 ous. Heterosexuality has in fact been reduced to precisely this configuration of labor, legiti-  
24 macy, and logistics. Far from being a “natural” attraction between “opposites,” heterosexuality  
25 is a state-organized and sponsored form of reproduction. Since the alibis for the centrality and  
26 hegemony of heterosexuality have faded away (these alibis in the past have been provided by  
27 religion, science, and claims on “nature”), we can finally see heterosexuality, and by implication  
28 homosexuality, for what it actually is—state-approved intimacy. Now that in some cases, gay  
29 and lesbian partnerships have also been granted, state recognition in return for conforming to  
30 marital norms such as monogamous coupled units accompanied by parenthood, the whole  
31 edifice of the homo/hetero binary described so well by Eve Sedgwick and others in the late  
32 twentieth century, crumbles down. Under such conditions, we need a new politics of gender.

33 *Gaga Feminism* proposes that we are in dire need of a new politics of gender capable of  
34 addressing the contemporary pressures and values that we project onto gendered bodies and  
35 functions. And, while many people have objected to both terms of my book’s title—namely  
36 *Gaga* and *Feminism*—and to my sense that anarchism may be worth revisiting, I continue to  
37 build upon the traditions that these terms name, refusing the idea that any notion of change or  
38 transformation that we may conjure is naïve, misguided, or already coopted. I refuse also the  
39 hierarchy within academic production whereby those who draw maps of domination are cast as  
40 prophets and geniuses and those who study subversion, resistance, and transformation are seen as  
41 either dupes of capitalism who propose popular culture as the cure for our mass distraction, or  
42 cast as inadequate theorists who have not read their Foucault, Deleuze, or Marx closely enough!

43 A new era of theory has recently emerged, we might call it “wild theory,” within which  
44 thinkers, scholars and artists take a break from orthodoxy and experiment with knowledge,  
45 art, and the imagination even as they remain all too aware of the constraints under which  
46 all three operate. As Lauren Berlant explains in her latest book *Cruel Optimism* (2011), we  
47 hold out hope for alternatives even though we see the limitations of our own fantasies; she  
48 calls this contradictory set of desires “cruel optimism.” After showing us its forms in our

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1 congested present —fantasies that sustain our attachments to objects and things that are the  
2 obstacle to getting what we want—Berlant, remarkably, turns to anarchy by way of con-  
3 clusion and argues that anarchists enact “repair” by recommitting to politics without  
4 believing either in “good life fantasies” or in “the transformative effectiveness of one’s  
5 actions” (260). Instead, the anarchist “does politics” she says, “to be in the political with  
6 others.” In other words, when we engage in political action of any kind, we do not simply  
7 seek evidence of impact in order to feel that it was worthwhile; we engage in fantasies of  
8 living otherwise with groups of other people because the embrace of a common cause leads  
9 to alternative modes of satisfaction and even happiness whether or not the political out-  
10 come is successful. Here we can see how the embrace of the impractical proposed by Oscar  
11 Wilde by way of Emma Goldman plays out!

12 Berlant, Preciado, and I all seem to be engaging a mode of thinking that we can call “wild  
13 theory.” But what is “wild theory” and what does it want? In some ways, wild theory is failed  
14 disciplinary knowledge and it is thought that remains separate from the organizing rubrics of  
15 disciplinarity. It is philosophy on the fly. It is also a counter-canonical form of knowledge  
16 production. Berlant’s archive in *Cruel Optimism*, for example, is wide and varied and it includes  
17 both canonical material, performances, stories, and art projects that may not be known by her  
18 readership and that therefore require a certain amount of context and explanation. In addition  
19 to this wild archive, Berlant produces idiosyncratic methodologies that are born of a desperate  
20 desire to survive rather than a leisurely sense of thriving. The desperation that produces “cruel  
21 optimism” according to Berlant is born of a “crisis ordinariness” (117), a mode of living within  
22 which we experience life more as “desperate doggy paddling than like a magnificent swim out  
23 to the horizon” (117). “Desperate doggy paddling” describes a wild methodology within which  
24 we are less preoccupied with form and aesthetics (the “magnificent swim”), less worried about a  
25 destination (the horizon), and more involved in the struggle to stay afloat and perhaps even  
26 reach the shore, any shore.

27 For Preciado, wildness is also very much a part of the project of survival in a pharmaco-  
28 pornographic era. The testosterone she or he takes, partly as a body experiment and partly as a  
29 mode of gender adjustment, creates in her or him a rush, a clarity, energy, and vision. When he is  
30 in the grips of its effects, she sees clearly that the body is not a platform for health, a grid of  
31 identifications, a mechanism for desires that get produced or repressed depending upon different  
32 regimes of power that hold it in their grip. The body is “pansexual” and “the bioport of the  
33 orgasmic force” (41) and as such the body is a “techno/living system” within which binaries have  
34 collapsed, and the self is no longer independent from a system that it both channels and repre-  
35 sents. These are *wild* theories in every sense: they veer off the straight and narrow pathways of  
36 philosophy and thought and they make up vocabularies for the new phenomena that they  
37 describe at breakneck speed. Each book approaches the challenge of living, of being, and of dying  
38 in a world designed not to enhance life but merely to offer what Berlant calls “slow death.”

39 But is that all there is? Slow death, bare life, sexual capital? What else can the wild bring us?  
40 Does anything escape these forms of living and dying? Berlant hints towards alternatives  
41 throughout her book countering exhaustion with “counter/absorption,” globalization with  
42 anarchy, and so on. Wild theory lives in these spaces of potentiality even as institutionalization  
43 seeks to blot it out.

44 A brilliant rendition of the elemental struggle between wild thought and wild practices  
45 and the canny force of institutionalization can be found in *Wildness*, a documentary film by  
46 Los Angeles-based artist Wu Tsang (co-written with Roya Rastega) that presents the story  
47 of “Wildness,” a short-lived party hosted by Tsang and his collaborator Ashland Mines,  
48 which took place on Tuesday nights at a club called The Silver Platter in the Rampart

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1 neighborhood of Los Angeles. On other nights, the club was home to a community of  
2 mostly Mexican and Central American gay men and transgender women. When “Wildness”  
3 begins to take over and it brings unwanted publicity to The Silver Platter, both commu-  
4 nities are forced to reckon with the ways in which the competing subcultural spaces cannot  
5 coexist and with the possibility that one will swallow the other. “Wildness” set out to  
6 conjure and inhabit a cool, multi-racial space where performance subcultures could open up  
7 new utopian forms of life. The utopia that *Wildness* sets out to document can be under-  
8 stood in the terms that José E. Muñoz lays out for queer potentiality in *Cruising Utopia: The*  
9 *Then and There of Queer Futurity* (2009). Muñoz articulates utopia not as a place but as a  
10 “horizon,” as a “mode of possibility” (99), a queer future that is “not an end but an  
11 opening” (91). He also locates the horizon in temporal terms as “a modality of ecstatic  
12 time” (32), and referencing Ernst Bloch, as an event that is not yet here. Queerness, for  
13 Muñoz, is a way of being whose time has not yet come, for which the conditions are not  
14 yet right but which can be anticipated through fresh blasts of queer performance. This sense  
15 of a queer community that is not yet here makes the project of “Wildness” legible. What  
16 Wu and Ashland set out to do by opening up space for alternative life anticipates another  
17 way of inhabiting urban space in which the small success of one local and subcultural scene  
18 does not have to displace another one.

19 *Wildness* invests deeply and painfully in the idea of alternative space, wild space, but also  
20 acknowledges how quickly such a space is reincorporated into relentless forms of  
21 development.

## 2. Start a Pussy Riot

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25 As new protest politics have emerged in the last three years in the wake of financial disaster,  
26 economic meltdown, the waning of the nation state, and the rise of transnational corporate  
27 sovereignty, some protests have blended art and artfulness in an attempt to escape new police  
28 tactics like kettling and to evade media narratives that contain the unruly energy of the riot into a  
29 tidy story about looting and greed. At a time when the very rich are consolidating their ill-gotten  
30 gains at the expense of the growing numbers of the poor, the dispossessed, the criminalized, the  
31 pathologized, the foreign, the deportable, disposable, dispensable, deplorable mob, at this time,  
32 we should start to talk about anarchy. When the state is actually the author of the very problems  
33 it proposes to cure—lack of public funds, low rate of education and health care, business models  
34 for everything from governance to education, no redistribution of wealth, homelessness—we  
35 need to seek alternatives to the state. When the church has more power than the people, when  
36 the military gets more funding than schools, when white people get away with murder and  
37 people of color linger in overcrowded prisons for minor crimes like the possession of marijuana,  
38 we need to seek alternatives to law and order.

39 The cultivation of such alternatives occurs in a variety of cultural sites, low and high culture,  
40 museum culture, and street culture. This takes the form of participatory art, ephemeral parties,  
41 imaginative forms of recycling, and different relations to objects, economies and the environ-  
42 ment. As we seek to reimagine the here and now through anarchy, can we think about it as  
43 queer and hold it open to new forms of political intervention?

44 In a painting of Pussy Riot, Berlin-based artist Kerstin Drechsel captures the queerness of  
45 our moment of riot and revolt. Drechsel’s rendering of the masked Russian punk feminist  
46 band, currently serving jail time for staging a protest in Moscow’s Cathedral of Christ the  
47 Savior where they critiqued the Orthodox Church leader’s support of Putin’s presidential  
48 campaign, is spare and powerful and it reminds us of how often anarchy has taken the form of

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1 a feminine punk refusal rather than a masculinist violent surge. I outlined some of these logics  
2 in my chapter on “Shadow Feminism” in *The Queer Art of Failure* (Halberstam 2011), where I  
3 revisit feminist performance art from the 1970s as well as anti-colonial literary texts to outline  
4 alternative modes of resistance that are grounded in refusal and tactics of self-destruction  
5 rather than in engagement and self-activation. Within such a framework performances by  
6 Marina Abramovich and Yoko Ono and the novels of Jamaica Kincaid become legible as  
7 feminist practices.

8 The example of Pussy Riot—the group, the painting, the action, and its recreation around  
9 the world—gives rise to the question of what new aesthetic forms accompany these suddenly  
10 highly visible manifestations of political exhaustion and outrage. Pussy Riot offers hope for new  
11 forms of protest. Can we find an aesthetic that maps onto anarchy and stages a refusal of the  
12 logic of “punk capitalism”? What is the erotic economy of such work?

13 In recent years, books like *The Interventionists* (2004), *Living as Form* (2012), and *Beautiful*  
14 *Trouble* (2013) have narrated the ways in which art in the age of the art market can become an  
15 experimental zone, a place where groups, artists, activists, and theorists rehearse revolt, disruption  
16 and invent spontaneous and unpredictable arenas of disorder and opposition. Some inter-  
17 ventionist art practices draw from traditions like Augusto Boal’s “Theater of the Oppressed,”  
18 while others draw directly from the dialogic models fostered in Paolo Freire’s *Pedagogy of the*  
19 *Oppressed* (1970). Most interventionist artists stress performance and break down the split  
20 between artist and spectator, performer and audience, forging an anarchist art, or *wild* art that  
21 moves decisively away from market value modes of production, finds new forms of value in  
22 social interaction, and lives on that Wildean boundary between art and life—the zone where art  
23 and life collapse in upon one another and where questions arise about what Nato Thompson  
24 calls “living as form.”

25 In *Living as Form*, radical curator Nato Thompson moves away from typical and cliched for-  
26 mulations of the relation between art and reality and asks not what we mean by *art* but what we  
27 mean by *living*. Living, according to Thompson, also has a form. He writes: “socially engaged art  
28 is not an art movement. Rather, these cultural practices indicate a new social order, ways of life  
29 that emphasize participation, challenge power and span disciplines” (2012: 19). Similarly, Andrew  
30 Boy and Dave Oswald Mitchell, assemblers of *Beautiful Trouble* say their project is designed to “lay  
31 out the core tactics, principles and theoretical concepts that drive creative activism, providing  
32 analytic tools for *changemakers* to learn from their own successes and failures” (2012: 3). Providing  
33 antecedents as well as strategies, histories and tactics of activism, the volume becomes a toolbox  
34 for change with a distinct DIY aesthetic and an advocacy orientation.

35 There are definitely weak spots in the project of making “beautiful trouble.” Claire Bishop  
36 for example insists in *Artificial Hells* (2012) that if art is just activism by another name, we may  
37 have reached a point where art becomes meaningless as an endeavor and participatory art, with  
38 its call for collective and collaborative practices, may even dovetail with government goals to  
39 engage people in “social inclusion” initiatives. Bishop warns that we are in danger of merging  
40 art with “creativity” and in the process of losing the “element of critical negation” within  
41 artistic practices that “cannot be reconciled with the quantifiable imperatives of positivist eco-  
42 nomics” (2012: 16).

43 Art and activism, however, even among participatory artists, remain fairly distinct endeavors  
44 and are not at all engaging the same modes of speech, action or intervention. For example, artist  
45 Sharon Hayes variously interrupts the silent, random and anonymous vectors of the public  
46 sphere by delivering speeches about love in public space or by positioning herself within the  
47 public sphere as a sign that demands to be read. Hayes’ performances and her aesthetic protests  
48 may use some of the same symbols and signs as a protest march but they are not congruent with

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Figure 18.1 Sharon Hayes “In the Near Future, New York,” 2005. Courtesy of the artist.

it either in goals or in form. Less like an activist and more like a hustler, a billboard, a busker or a panhandler, Hayes forces herself upon passersby to give them her message and often to recruit them to give voice.

In “In The Near Future,” Hayes invites people to come and witness her reenactment of moments of protest from the past, like a 1968 Memphis Sanitation strike restaged in NYC at an ACT UP protest site, a restaged ERA rights march, or the revisiting of an anti-war protest. Hayes’ events were staged in four different cities where the audience was invited to witness her holding a protest sign in a public space and to record and document the event. Presented as photographic slides’ installations within institutional spaces Hayes’ documentation of these protest events are not “literal reenactments,” they function as citations of the past on behalf of a possible future, a notion that echoes Muñoz’s theory of queer utopia. For both Hayes and Muñoz, the future is something that queers cannot foreclose, must not abandon and that in fact presents a temporal orientation that enfolds the potentiality of queerness even as it awaits its arrival. Hayes’ events call for a new understanding of history and makes connections between past and present eruptions of wild and inventive protest and allows those moments to talk to each other to produce a *near future*. She reminds us that politics is work between strangers and not just cooperation between familiars and directs our attention away from the charisma of visual spectacle and toward a more collaborative and generous act of listening.

### 3. Go Wild

There are several reasons why people turn away from anarchy as a political project even when the state is inadequate and corrupt. Some see anarchy as either scary or naïve—they fear that it will unleash the terror of disorder and chaos upon society—a chaotic power that the state and capitalism supposedly keep at bay. Politically speaking anarchy has also been cast as outmoded

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1 because the nation state has given way to transnational capital and the global movements of elites  
2 and goods. It is true that capital has gone global and is no longer maintained only through  
3 national structures, but this does not mean that the political form of the nation state has given way  
4 to more global forms of rule. As long as most of us experience our political subjectivities through  
5 the nation state we need to continue imagining alternatives to it.<sup>1</sup>

6 “Hierarchy is chaos!” says the well-known anarchist slogan. But chaos is a matter of per-  
7 spective rather than an absolute value. We often see capitalism and state logics of accumulation  
8 and redistribution of wealth as natural or even intuitive and we tend to characterize them as  
9 orderly systems yet we could easily argue that the nation state produces plenty of chaos for the  
10 subjects it rules, those it abandons and those it incarcerates. Capitalism uses chaos on its own  
11 behalf while warning subject-clients of the dangers of abandoning market economies in favor of  
12 other models of exchange, barter and economic collaboration.

13 In the series “Unser Haus,” Drechsel confronts messiness directly in paintings of explicitly  
14 junky domestic interiors. In some spaces, the books and the paper overwhelm the spaces that  
15 should contain them; in others, the materials we use to clean away the traces of dirt—toilet  
16 paper for instance—becomes waste itself.

17 In this series an aesthetic of disorder prevails and the paintings dare the viewer to take them  
18 home, to hang them on the wall and they threaten to mirror back to the viewer/owner a  
19 desperate image of the disorder that the house barely keeps at bay and that this art encourages.  
20 The paintings of messy interiors taunt the collector and liken the collecting of art to the col-  
21 lecting of things, useless things, *stuff*. They menace and snarl; they refuse to be the accent on a  
22 minimal interior; they promise to sow disorder and shove any environment firmly in the  
23 direction of anarchy. In Drechsel’s work and world, the human is just a small inhabitant of a  
24 literal wasteland of objects and things. Her world is chaotic and she herself is dedicated to trying  
25 to wax, slim, domesticate, and train. Drechsel is working hard toward a conformity that is  
26 always just out a reach. And just as the human-like dolls in her work seem to be reaching for  
27 some kind of pleasure, space or activity that will offer liberty, so the object world keeps threa-  
28 tening to overrun dolls, humans, homes and hierarchies with its own form of riot.

29 In the “Wärmeland” series Drechsel places hand-made Barbie dolls in dollhouse settings and  
30 manipulates them pornographically both to reveal the sexuality that the dolls represent, and to  
31 remake the meaning of the domestic and of desire itself. Creating alluring sex scenes with the  
32 Barbies and then placing the two lusty bodies in candy colored environments that make perverse  
33 use of Barbie accessories, Drechsel draws out not only the desires we project onto the doll bodies  
34 but also the much more compelling set of desires that draws us to the accessories, to the back-  
35 drops and to the objects in our worlds. As we peer into the dollhouses we begin to see them as  
36 prisons and domestic cages, but also as film sets and stages for strange miniature sexual dramas.

37 Drechsel’s “Wärmeland” (1996–1998) is also reminiscent of the Barbie Liberation Organiza-  
38 tion (BLO), a 1990s’ group of artists and activists who engaged in culture jamming by switching  
39 the voice boxes of Barbie and Ken dolls in toy stores around the country. While previously a  
40 Barbie may have been programmed to say “I am not so good at math,” after the BLO liberated  
41 it, it says: “vengeance is mine!”

42 In an extraordinary body of work artist Kerstin Drechsel explores the sexual entropy of  
43 the everyday and the chaos inherent to capitalism. Drechsel refuses the neat division between  
44 a chaotic world ordered by capitalist modes of production and the chaos of anarchy that capit-  
45 alism holds at bay. Drechsel’s work recognizes that capitalism too is chaotic and disordered,  
46 that the world we live in tends toward breakdown, and that the state simply manages and  
47 marshals chaos for capital accumulation and biopower. Anarchy is thus is no more oriented to  
48 chaos than capitalism.

Jack Halberstam

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#### 4. Be Fantastic! Charming for the Revolution!

How do we charm and seduce for the revolution? Let's learn from one of the most charming revolutionary figures to ever grace cinema—Wes Anderson's animated genius, *Fantastic Mr. Fox*. *Fantastic Mr. Fox*, when watched closely, gives us clues and hints about revolt, riot, fugitivity and its relation to charm and theft. The film tells a simple story about a fox who gets sick of his upwardly mobile lifestyle and goes back to his roots. He lives a respectable life with his wife and his queer son by day but by night he steals chickens from the farmers down the hill. When the farmers come for him, Mr. Fox asks his woodland motley crew of foxes, beavers, raccoons and possums to retreat with him to the maze of tunnels that make up the forest underground. And in scenes that could be right out of *The Battle of Algiers*, the creatures go down to rise up and they thwart the farmers, the policemen, the firemen and all the officials who come to drive them from their homes and occupy their land. We learn many things in *Fantastic Mr. Fox* about being charming, being fantastic and creating revolt. But the best and most poignant scene comes in the form of a quiet encounter with the *wild* at the end of the film. In this scene, he is on his way home after escaping from the farmers once again. As he and his merry band of creatures turn the corner on their motorbike with sidecar, they come upon a spectral figure loping onto the horizon. Mr. Fox pulls up and they all stand in awe. They watch as a lone wolf turns and stares back at them. Mr. Fox, ever the diplomat, declares his phobia of wolves and yet tries to communicate with the other animal in three languages. When nothing works, he tries gestures. With tears in his eyes, Mr. Fox raises a fist to the wolf on the hill and stares transfixed as the wolf understands the universal sign of solidarity and raises his own fist in response before loping off into the forest. This exchange, silent and profound, brings tears to Mr. Fox's eyes precisely because it puts him face to face with the wildness he fears and the wildness he harbors within himself.

Whether you see the scene as corny or contrived, odd or predictable, generic or fetishistic, you know that you have witnessed a moment that Deleuze might call "pure cinema." This scene, in other words, draws us into the charisma of the image; it speaks a visual grammar that cannot be reduced to the plot and it enacts a revolutionary instance that we, like Mr. Fox, cannot put into words. And because we are confronted with the possibility of a life beyond our limits of comprehension, because we see the very edge of the framing of knowing and seeing, and because we see Mr. Fox reaching for something just out of reach, we, like him, are changed by the chance encounter.

*The Fantastic Mr. Fox* is moving, sharp, compelling because it offers us a glimpse of what we might want to call "the wild"—the wild here is a space that opens up when we step outside of the conventional realms of political action and we confront our fears; it rhymes with Muñoz's sense of queer utopia and manifests what Fred Moten and Stefano Harney (2013) call the power of the "the undercommons." The wild and the fantastic enter the frame of visibility in the form of an encounter between the semi-domesticated and the unknown, speech and silence, motion and stillness. Ultimately, the revolutionary is a wild space where temporality is uncertain, relation is improvised and futurity is on hold. Into this "any instant whatsoever" (Deleuze) walks a figure that we cannot classify, that refuses to engage us in conventional terms but speaks instead in the gestural language of solidarity, connection and insurrection.

#### Fail Wildly

The wild projects I am making common cause with tend to anticipate rather than describe new ways of being together, making worlds and sharing space. As Emma Goldman said of anarchy in 1910, the project for creating new forms of political life starts with the transformation of existing



*Charming for the Revolution*

1 conditions. It is urgent and necessary to put our considerable collective intellectual acumen to  
2 work to imagine and prepare for what comes after. The *wild* archive that I have gathered here is  
3 made up of the improbable, impossible and unlikely visions of a queer world to come. Change  
4 involves giving and risking everything for a cause that is uncertain, a trajectory that is unclear and  
5 a mission that may well fail. Fail well, fail wildly.

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37 **Note**

38 1 Indeed, currently many collectives and radical thinkers have been producing manifestos. In addition to  
39 The Invisible Committee’s *The Coming Insurrection* (2009), Italian Marxist Franco “Bifo” Berardi has  
40 written *The Uprising: On Poetry and Finance* (2012) and Fred Moten and Stefano Harney have colla-  
41 borated on *The Undercommons: Fugitive Planning and Black Study* (2013).  
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## 19

# THE YES MEN

*Jacques Servin*

The following interview took place on February 26th, 2014 at New York University. The conversation is between Jacques Servin of The Yes Men and the Yes Lab. The Yes Men are a “culture jamming” group, comprised of Jacques and Igor Vamos, whose aim is to re-articulate the perception of and issues around institutions in order to enact change. This technique, akin to an institutional hacking, as it were, utilizes the shifting of identity and play to reconceive how institutions and social issues are to be seen. This phenomenon, as a form of cultural activism, has been called “identity correction.” The interview was conducted by Victor Peterson II of the Center for Arts Politics and Public Policy at New York University.

(Victor Peterson of APP): What would you say is your primary motivation and goals in your practice as part of The Yes Men?

(Jacques Servin of Yes Lab): I’ve personally always had the same few motivations. I’m a Johnny Three-Note.

Politically, I’ve always enjoyed highlighting just how preposterous it is that we hand over the reins of our society to all kinds of clowns whose clownish ideology insists that for the system to work, each clown must act in accordance with the basest, most vaudevillian aspects of their identity: greed and self-interest.

Exposing such nonsense sometimes involves becoming a clown, which is what we Yes Men have done many times, with the result being a series of odd and hilarious scenes for our movies. More often of late, we’ve embodied the clowns but shown them rising above themselves, while maintaining the outer trappings of speech and dress: even for clowns, another world is possible. (This has tended to result in a whole lot more press, since the real clowns then have to deny that they’re doing anything differently.)

The motivation behind either approach has never been consciously strategic, though of course it does “work” in a certain way. The real motivation has simply been to have fun. Of course, if an action feels fun to do, it’ll be fun for others to see, and it’ll spread widely. Communicating important things with a few different layers of humor at once is part of just having fun, but it also ends up being a strategy, now ennobled by the name Laughtivism.

Another goal I’ve always had is to spread the tools I’ve learned, and inspire others to use them around issues they care about. Like the urge to have fun, this has never been consciously

*The Yes Men*

1 strategic. It's simply an urge, and a strong one: the very first activist project I made, @<sup>TM</sup>ark,  
2 began as a fake bulletin board of so-called "anti-corporate sabotage" projects, intended to  
3 inspire others to action. I put up @<sup>TM</sup>ark anonymously after engaging in a particularly famous  
4 instance of "anti-corporate sabotage"; I'd had so much fun doing that action, and it had gotten  
5 so much easy press, that I thought everyone ought to try doing this too, and why not? (@<sup>TM</sup>ark  
6 was pretty much fake, and it never did really inspire new actions, but we did use it to publicize  
7 actions that were already happening; it served as a public relations agency for anti-capitalist  
8 projects, and it helped get out the word that there was something wrong with our system, and  
9 that there were people willing to take risks to expose it.)

10 That was 1996. Now, in early 2014, I've designed something very similar, but this time quite  
11 real and with (I think) much more potential of actually inspiring action: the Action Switch-  
12 board, a platform that will allow any user to propose and join direct action projects, and receive  
13 ongoing feedback and support from veteran activists as those projects evolve. It will also unite  
14 users in weekly community workshop sessions online, to really provide a support structure for  
15 those who want to make a difference in this particular way. Since all the projects in the Action  
16 Switchboard are centered on concrete legislative goals, we also have a plan to work with news  
17 aggregators to link "goal pages" (with their associated projects) to articles about those issues,  
18 thus beginning a process of inundating the public with options for direct action.

19 The Action Switchboard is essentially the online version of the Yes Lab, a series of work-  
20 shops and trainings I founded in 2009, after our second film, in order to help activists and  
21 activist organizations carry out their own "laughtivist" projects—also with obviously the same  
22 motivation as @<sup>TM</sup>ark had way back when. I'm deeply hoping the Action Switchboard inspires  
23 people to engage in funny direct actions of their own around issues they care about.

24 I think my urge to get others on board is reinforced by my experience of being inspired by  
25 others. For example, the protests in Seattle are what gave birth to the Yes Men, even though we  
26 never went! I was playing around with websites at the time, and inspired by the movement  
27 against the WTO, I set up a lookalike satirical WTO website, which quickly gained traction in  
28 search engines thanks to the WTO's clumsy attacks against it (and our publicizing of those  
29 attacks); the fake site's presence in search engines led in turn to people accidentally inviting us to  
30 conferences, thinking we were the WTO. A movie followed, and another one after that, and ...

31 Of course the actual Seattle protests shut down the WTO's ministerial, a very dramatic suc-  
32 cess indeed—but it sure didn't help the WTO that a number of people continued laughing  
33 about it for years afterwards, thanks to our actions and film.

34  
35 (VP): Define what you mean by tactical media and how this concept has been effective in  
36 your work?

37 (JS): I had to look up the phrase "tactical media" in Wikipedia. It seems to be a very 1996-  
38 specific term to describe interventions in the mainstream media as opposed to the crea-  
39 tion of alternative media outlets. (I had thought it was one of the phrases used to  
40 describe creative, "artistic" tactics used in the service of activism; apparently not.)

41 I do like the way it's opposed to the mainstream "strategic media," though—that's  
42 very clever.

43 Since I barely know the jargon, I'll address instead the actual practice.

44 What @<sup>TM</sup>ark and the Yes Men have done, generally, is create direct actions whose  
45 entire point is to get coverage in the mainstream media; journalists' attention is drawn  
46 to these actions either automatically, by the action itself, or more usually by a carefully  
47 constructed press plan that's concocted along with the action, and that's sometimes  
48 indistinguishable from the action itself.

*Jacques Servin*

1           Our general “theory of change” is that by using humor to bring underrepresented  
2 issues to large groups of people, or (more usually) to pile on to issues that are newly  
3 getting attention, we can “shift the spectrum of allies”—getting “passive opponents”  
4 (people on the other side of the issue, but only by default, who don’t really care that  
5 much) to see the issue in a new light and become “passive allies,” and possibly  
6 getting “passive allies” to become “active allies” (for this, they need to discover  
7 ways they can act on the issue at hand, which is one of the reasons a carefully con-  
8 structed “reveal” release, pointing to ongoing initiatives of activist organizations, is so  
9 important).

10           As social media has become important, we’ve often used it as well, but our main  
11 target is still the point where more longer-form traditional media begins. A tweet or a  
12 Facebook post is fine as a means to spread an action or “meme,” but posts are generally  
13 pretty contentless and without substance by themselves, because so short; our actions,  
14 too, are fairly oblique by themselves and require explication—either in our press releases  
15 or in the traditional media that they target.

16 (VP): What has been some of your most important (at least to you) projects with which you  
17 were involved?

18 (JS): 600 articles were published in the US press connecting the Dow Chemical Corporation  
19 and the Bhopal disaster, in the wake of our 2004 BBC appearance as Dow. That’s  
20 probably the single biggest media effect of any action we’ve done, and served pretty well  
21 I think to highlight the issue where it most needed focus: in Dow’s home country.

22           When I became Dow’s spokesperson on the BBC, I adopted the name Jude Finisterra  
23 to signify the impossibility of the announced plan ever becoming reality: St. Jude is the  
24 patron of impossible causes, and “Finisterra” refers to the end of the world, something  
25 that will never happen so long as earth exists. Impossibility was also intrinsic to the  
26 announcement itself, such as when I acknowledged, as Dow, that “this is the first time  
27 in history that a publicly held company of anything near the size of Dow has performed  
28 an action which is significantly against its bottom line simply because it’s the right thing  
29 to do.” It felt important to acknowledge that, so as to focus attention on the real culprit  
30 for the Bhopal disaster and the ongoing injustice: not Dow but rather the whole market  
31 system that punishes good acts and rewards bad ones, which we’ve increasingly allowed  
32 to make our decisions for us, with the help of the hopeless “no alternative” line.

33           “Jude Finisterra” continued: “Our shareholders may take a bit of a hit, Steve, but I  
34 think that if they’re anything like me, they will be ecstatic to be part of such a historic  
35 occasion of doing right by those that we’ve wronged.” Shareholders were not delighted,  
36 but as if on cue shaved \$2 billion off Dow’s share value in 20 minutes—an excellent, if  
37 accidental, object lesson that added to the press count, and that helped enrich the whole  
38 story in our subsequent film: if we let the market make decisions, how far can that go?  
39 What for example might the market decide to do in the run-up to, and aftermath of,  
40 catastrophic climate change? Two of the actions in that film were about those questions,  
41 and our Dow action was the pivot for that, so it could be said to have engendered that  
42 entire movie.

43           Although one of the points of our Dow announcement was that the announced plan  
44 could never happen so long as we have the system we do, many of our more recent  
45 actions, especially those undertaken with activist organizations around their specific  
46 campaigns, have piled on to existing pressure towards truly achievable goals with an  
47 extra little dollop of embarrassing mainstream-media laughter. It’s hard to know what  
48 this dollop adds to the overall campaign; it’s surely a cumulative thing, the summation

*The Yes Men*

1 of many components, that has led to the minor triumphs, or triumphs-in-process, of a  
2 number of the campaigns we've been part of: against Chevron, Shell, Monsanto, two  
3 Tar Sands pipelines, police racial profiling, coal plants, the coal industry itself, and the U.  
4 S. Chamber of Commerce.

5 There's one case where, by the activists' account, a creative direct action I had  
6 something to do with resulted directly in change, by driving a large crowd to a city  
7 council meeting which, partly in response to the crowd, decided to halt eviction on the  
8 Valreep squat near Amsterdam.

9 (VP): How do we even measure success with regards to a practice such as yours?

10 (JS): Like any activists, we ultimately measure success in whether or not a problem is resolved  
11 or a new, more enlightened approach is enacted. But how to get there?

12 Like Edward Snowden, we want to play by the rules of democracy—which for us too  
13 means building public pressure through exposure to critical information. And that  
14 information must be the real information. We may count on the comedy or poignancy  
15 of actions to get public attention, but when we lie to the press it's brief and in the  
16 service of comedy only, and very quickly revealed: the content of the "reveal" must be  
17 entirely true.

18 This is in contrast to the deceptive tactics of the JTRIG unit as uncovered in the  
19 Snowden files, or of COINTELPRO in the '60s, or of the "ACORN pimp," or of the  
20 entire public relations and advertising industries, for that matter.

21 Edward Snowden noted the danger of taking action, such as he did, outside of the  
22 usual channels: "When you are subverting the power of government that's a funda-  
23 mentally dangerous thing to democracy." But he decided that enough of importance was  
24 being hidden that people had to know: "This is something that's not our place to decide,  
25 the public needs to decide whether these programs and policies are right or wrong."

26 Snowden's revelations brought to light much that was hidden; we in contrast just  
27 bring forward to slightly greater public visibility things that are kind of obscure. Ideally  
28 we then direct the newly enlightened towards other, more direct democratic ways  
29 of creating change—getting good people elected (and then keeping them pressured),  
30 pursuing evildoers, getting good laws enforced, changing bad laws, organizing workers,  
31 and performing civil disobedience. This is how mediagenic work can fit into an overall  
32 picture of effective action.

33 (VP): How do you feel using impersonation and satire as a form of political activism is parti-  
34 cularly effective? Essentially what are your feelings about the use of deception as political  
35 intervention? I believe the term you use is "identity correction".

36 (JS): It's not about deception, it's about humor. Humor is powerful, and the momentary  
37 deception we engage in is just there to add to the humor of the action, to make jour-  
38 nalist (and hence readers) laugh.

39 Many billions of dollars are spent every year deceiving the media, and the news is  
40 constantly full of such public-relations hoaxes; the only reason ours stand out is that we  
41 don't do them for profit—and we reveal them afterwards!

42 (VP): Mimesis warranted expulsion from Plato's Republic for fear of its affective power in  
43 subverting the state. How does it feel to be able to utilize this tool with regards to  
44 transforming and transfiguring issues around corporations and institutions in society?

45 (JS): (Plato seems pretty fascist to me!)

46 If you trust that the "best" people are running things, and in the "best" way possible on  
47 this planet, then perhaps it makes sense to impose rules limiting the capacity of trou-  
48 blemakers, such as poets, to disrupt the efficient functioning of the state.

*Jacques Servin*

1           Unfortunately, it often seems the worst clowns are running things. And, even worse  
2 than that, it seems the clowns aren't really in control anyhow: it's a system, convenient  
3 for the wealthy, obeying the worst tendencies of the human being, that's deferred to as  
4 being somehow "natural" and given the reins.

5           That's pretty far from Plato's ideal.

6 (VP): What is the interplay that you see between the aesthetic and the political?

7 (JS): It's a pretty straightforward, mechanical interplay between artfulness and politics: poli-  
8 tical points can be made pretty well with artful humor and beauty. There's tons of  
9 intrinsic humor in everything that just takes a nudge to get out, and when that happens,  
10 you have a joke which can be laughed at even by people who don't agree with you.  
11 When that laughter occurs, a little crack opens up in their head and in pours something  
12 new. (See also: "Why do oppressed people have such great jokes?"—The Yes Men's  
13 Andy Bichlbaum". *Waging Nonviolence—People Powered News and Analysis*)

14           I think that's true of beauty as well. The project I was part of that comes closest on  
15 that front was the fake New York Times: not so funny, but somehow beautiful, and  
16 by many accounts the moments of emotional transport helped people imagine a differ-  
17 ent world, at least for those moments.

18           The actual intention of that project was to convey that it wasn't enough to elect a  
19 leader like Barack Obama, but that we then had to pressure that leader, and force him  
20 to be what we'd elected. I don't think that really came across to many people, and so in  
21 that sense it was a failure. Ah well.

22 (VP): What are the legal implications of what you do? Do you think that the push back from  
23 corporations and institutions aids in the process by which your interventions allow for  
24 change?

25 (JS): When we do get push-back, we count ourselves very lucky. The merest cease-and-desist  
26 letter—a baseless legal threat that corporations are pretty much obliged to deploy in  
27 order to defend their trademarks—can afford much opportunity for mirth and media. So  
28 yes, in the creation of a David and Goliath story—a sure public-opinion winner no  
29 matter the outcome—a reaction by Goliath is pretty useful.

30           What we do is fully legal, though, or at least that's what we believe. We've never  
31 been given the opportunity to test it and establish that as a precedent. We almost did get  
32 that chance when the U.S. Chamber of Commerce sued us, but they withdrew their  
33 suit just as it began heading to trial (four years after the filing), probably out of fear of  
34 what we might expose during the discovery process. Drats.

35 (VP): How do you feel that your practice engages institutional and structural issues at their  
36 core or the systemic nature of the issues that you are bring to the fore in society?

37 (JS): I think the Dow/Bhopal example I gave above is one example: while there was pretty  
38 much no hope of actually forcing Dow to compensate its victims—a move that would  
39 have had enormous repercussions throughout the chemical industry—it did allow us to  
40 highlight the fact that mass murder and other crimes will continue so long as we hand  
41 the reins of society to a stock market that as often as not rewards bad behavior and  
42 punishes good.

43           The Occupy Wall Street era is a very exciting moment, in which systemic issues are  
44 brought to the fore: it's spot-on-target with the issues we (and so many others) have  
45 been trying to highlight all these years, it's just thrilling to see. During the occupation  
46 itself, we tried to contribute in a way that made sense in the context: there were some  
47 errors, but I'm proud of one action, where we created a very visible (but essentially fake)  
48 "brokers and police for the occupation" march. It got a decent amount of press, but

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1 more importantly it made a lot of Occupiers laugh. That's also critical. In that context,  
2 where the institutional and structural issues are being highlighted by the whole move-  
3 ment, it was more than enough for us to create a promotional joke; we didn't really  
4 need to add anything.

5 (VP): How has your transition been to teaching at New York University?

6 (JS): I've loved it. I've been lucky to have incredibly motivated and challenging students,  
7 some of whom really get that they have an awesome responsibility to define and feed  
8 the potentials of this unique historical moment.

9 My colleagues at Gallatin, Steinhardt, Tisch, and Poly have been incredibly suppor-  
10 tive of my work, and in fact essential to it. The Hemispheric Institute has made it pos-  
11 sible to do many things, such as invite 40 of the world's most interesting activists and  
12 revolutionaries to come speak in my Creative Activism lecture series, and to help  
13 develop the cross-fertilization of scholarship and movement. And now the Critical  
14 Tactics Lab enshrines that. Here's the text Hemi director Marcial Godoy and I wrote  
15 yesterday to define it:

16  
17 The Critical Tactics Lab (CTL) is the Hemispheric Institute's permanent forum for  
18 discussion and research on the practices and methods of contemporary and historical  
19 political action. Drawing on the work of Yes Lab and the Creative Activism Series and  
20 the Institute's ongoing work with political artists and activists from the Americas, the  
21 CTL's mission is to promote critical reflection about social movements and political  
22 activism—their strategies and tactics as well as the ways these are arrived at. Through  
23 lectures, workshops, courses, and other modes of assembly—and with an emphasis on  
24 laughter and embodied practice—the CTL seek to provide a space in which the  
25 expansive affinities of critical practice and action can be made visible and strengthened.

26  
27 (VP): How has this transition effected the ethos of your practice and how might your being  
28 within an institution evince ways of transforming and transfiguring how they work?

29 (JS): I think it will continue to push me to follow one of my natural tendencies, the urge to  
30 spread what I've learned. This will continue to happen through the Action Switchboard,  
31 of course, and also the new Critical Tactics Lab, and who knows what else.

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## 20

# 16 NOTES ON COLLECTIVISM AND DARK MATTER

*Gregory Sholette*★

### 1

Everything ever observed with all of our instruments, all normal matter - adds up to less than 5% of the Universe.

*NASA*<sup>1</sup>

### 2

As a set of rules that define the events of discourse, the archive is situated between *Langue*, as the system of construction of possible sentences—that is, of possibilities of speaking—and the *corpus* that unites the set of what has been said, the things actually uttered or written. The archive is thus the mass of the non-semantic inscribed in every meaningful discourse as a function of enunciation; it is the dark margin encircling and limiting every concrete act of speech.

*Giorgio Agamben*<sup>2</sup>

### 3

If art formed a galaxy all of its own then most of it would be invisible. In cosmological terms this is known as the missing mass problem. Simply put, 95 percent of the universe is made up of some unknown, non-reflective substance whose gravity nevertheless prevents everything from flying apart. Within the plastic, visual arts one could say that most of aesthetic production is treated like a hidden archive that is invisible primarily to those who lay claim to the management and interpretation of culture—the critics, art historians, collectors, dealers, museums, curators, and arts administrators. While scientists are eager to know what cosmic dark matter is made of, the art world by contrast prefers to look directly through its shadowy stuff, which nonetheless surrounds and perforates its very logic, even occupying its very core. But what if one wanted to operate at the margins within the art world’s missing mass? In other words, what if you wanted to identify with dark matter? Choosing to work within an artist’s collective has often guaranteed such invisibility. Figuratively amorphous (collectives lack a tidy identity in the visual arts) collectivism



16 Notes on Collectivism and Dark Matter

1 appears shadowy, even abject when compared to institutionally recognized artists and properly  
2 framed art works. Still, from a certain perspective, collectivism in the form of social production  
3 remains widespread within contemporary art. It is paradoxically indispensable for the repro-  
4 duction of the normative art world at several levels.

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Structurally, as a *corpus* or archive of all previously realized group practices, attempts, and failures  
this hidden archive surrounds every individual articulation by this or that artist. Each new claim of  
authorial originality, every artistic gesture depends on the persistence of its shadowy trace. In  
Agamben's terms it is the dark margin that encircles all concrete acts of enunciation.

5

At the level of narrative, whether calling for the radical elimination of individual authorship as  
many early twentieth-century collectives asserted, or through the embodiment of diverse subject  
positions and a profusion of aesthetic vernacular as in the case of many, youthful contemporary  
art collectives, this self-organized, social practice forms a representational boundary as well as a  
specific horizon so that on one side conventional cultural narratives are easily reproduced, but  
beyond which they come under stress, threatening to break apart. Thus belonging to an art  
collective may be a hip thing to do when one is "starting out" as an emerging artist, but it is a  
hindrance as one's career "matures."

6

Finally, in pragmatic terms, collectivism (and by extension all species of dark creativity  
including amateur and informal art that by definition or inclination remain invisible to  
institutional high culture) provides the unseen but necessary verification that specific artistic  
acts are more than merely idiosyncratic occurrences. This contradiction remains in effect no  
matter how unique or autonomous the individual accomplishment claims to be. After all, to  
attempt to read a specific work of art one must first recognize it as something that belongs to  
that set of things called art. In this sense the archive of creative dark matter functions like an  
artistic *Langue* in the broadest possible sense: it offers an excess of visual-organizational models,  
examples, and rules for building and combining and reproducing meaning. Recognition  
depends on filtering this surplus, on defining a common language. At the same time by its  
very overabundance the dark matter archive threatens to radiate this constructed set of art  
practices away from the narrow range of options and aesthetic models valued by mainstream  
cultural institutions.

7

Perhaps it is also this invisible, unspeakable link between the *corpus* of artistic collectivism and the  
generalized creativity of the multitude that helps us explain why so many self-defined artists'  
collectives—from the Constructivists to Situationists, from Fluxus to Las Agencias— have called  
for the merging of art into everyday life? Today this urge to dissolve "high" culture more or less  
directly into the public sphere manifests itself as "social practice art." The line demarcating artistic  
protest and direct forms of activism vanishes. Consternation ensues. Still, if one looks closely,  
something akin to the Cheshire Cat's enigmatic grin remains behind. Always.

Gregory Sholette

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Lacking neither a distinct history, nor an adequate explanatory theory, self-consciously produced collective art bears down on the familiar cannon of proper names, stylistic innovations, and formal typologies that populate the conventional management of the institutional art world. As part of the art world's structural shadow realm this social production invisibly transforms the culture industry, disturbing its discourse and interrupting its fondness for discrete, collectible cultural products. Because much of this group activity is in the first and last instance driven by localized group formations, or commonly held economic circumstances, or occasionally by political movements all of which seem external to art world interests, the occasional appearance of collectivism within art historical discourse typically falls within two broad representational modes: the curious anecdote or the vestigial stain. That is to say, either collective art making serves as a backdrop or way station for individual artists whose careers have permitted them to mature beyond participation in group activity. Far less decorously, collectivism is at other times demonized by its affiliation with twentieth-century totalitarian politics. How is it possible that dynamic, self-organized social formations, especially when populated by intellectually volatile art workers, could possibly remain fixed in time, nostalgically recapitulating past ideological dogma? Instead, collective artistic practice seems to be as complex and unpredictable as the social and aesthetic forces upon which it is contingent. In recent years the transformation of collective cultural activity is so dramatic as to represent a virtual paradigm shift that Claire Bishop dubbed as *the social turn*.

9

Contemporary artistic collectivism (especially in the past fifteen years) is typically characterized by its aesthetic informality, political anarchism, and its performative approach to the expression of collective identity itself. In practice, its interdisciplinary approach is also frequently interventionist. Examples of this include the creation of works that tactically infiltrate high schools, flea markets, public squares, corporate websites, city streets, housing projects, and local political machines in ways that do not set out to recover a specific meaning or use-value for art world discourse or private interests. Indeed, many of these activities operate using economies based on pleasure, generosity, and the free dispersal of goods and services, rather than the construction of objects and product scarcity that are essential to art world economics. *But above all else what the activist art collective makes tangible, and no doubt what is so anathema to the art market and its discourse, is the capacity for self-regulation over one's social production and distribution.* It is a capacity not unique to the arts, but rather available and suppressed within all productive activity. Understandably, it is also viewed as a danger to system regulators who recognize the promise collective self-determination has held out to each successive generation. The harsh military mobilizations brought to bear on recent mass occupations of public space underscores this fear.

10

This collective '*We*' appeared in 2011 in Sidi Bouzid, Tunisia; Tahrir Square, Cairo; the Wisconsin Capital Building, Illinois; Puerta del Sol, Madrid; Syntagma Square, Athens; Zuccotti Park, New York; Oakland City Hall. The 2013 takeover of Taksim Gezi Park in Istanbul and Largo da Batata, Sao Paulo, Brazil strongly suggesting that the "Occupy" phenomenon is only getting under way. What was put into doubt was the delirious notion that capitalism could go on expanding forever and for everyone. Still, the real crisis of recent years is not really so much the economy as it is about how to survive in the social ruins we are expected to noiselessly inhabit. And as it turns out artists

16 Notes on Collectivism and Dark Matter

1 are especially canny about making things out of remnants, wreckage, and debris. Not surprisingly  
2 artists were also well represented within each of these occupations, perhaps even “overrepresented.”  
3

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5 **11**

6 Cut the power and storm the museum. Barricade its entrance with Richard Serra’s sculpture.  
7 Cover its windows with Gerhard Richter paintings. Transform the sculpture garden into an  
8 organic produce cooperative, refurbish the boardroom to serve as a day care facility, and place the  
9 cafeteria under the supervision of homeless people. But like gravity issuing from a collapsed star  
10 institutional power persists. It draws us into its orbit, the very trajectory that we once sought to  
11 escape. Perhaps it is because despite our protestations we continue to love the house of culture—  
12 or at least the unselfish image it projects—love it more than it could ever love itself.  
13

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15 **12**

16 Unlike protests directed at the Museum of Modern Art (MoMA) four decades earlier by the paint-  
17 splattered members of Art Workers’ Coalition (AWC), the 2012 invasion of MoMA by Occupy  
18 Museums was carried out by post-studio *creatives*, including that surfeit of young men and women  
19 with Masters degrees in fine art who were beginning to recognize a sobering fact: their seemingly  
20 privileged place in the economy is not substantially different from the millions of other professional  
21 workers who have lost employment since the 2008–2009 financial meltdown and subsequent  
22 economic restructuring. In 1970 AWC presented a list of thirteen work-related demands to the  
23 MoMA that underscored the group’s trade-union-like temperament. The group wanted the  
24 museum to pay artists a rental fee for exhibiting their work and to have collectors pay royalties to  
25 artists if their work was resold for a profit. The group also demanded that a section of the museum  
26 should be “permanently devoted to the work of artists without galleries,” and that the museum  
27 should “appoint a responsible person to handle any grievances arising from its dealings with artists.”  
28 There was even a proposal to set up a trust fund for living artists that would provide “stipends,  
29 health insurance, help for artists’ dependents” and the money for this fund would come from taxes  
30 “levied on the sales of the work of dead artist.” In the early twenty-first century by contrast it is  
31 difficult making any demands when confronted with the profound excess of semi-employed  
32 professional art workers who gather like dross within the new normal of the “jobless recovery.”  
33

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35 **13**

36 Nonetheless, we are collectivized already, and have been for some time. From every swipe of a  
37 plastic debit card to the ubiquitous surveillance of so-called public spaces, an administered col-  
38 lectivity hides everywhere in plain sight. Every ‘I’ conceals an involuntary “belongingness,” every  
39 gesture a statistic about your purchasing power, education level, and the market potential of your  
40 desire. The only question that remains is: should we accept this involuntarily, serialized col-  
41 lectivity, or actively seek another? This is not merely one strategy to ponder among others. It is a  
42 fundamental issue at every level of lived experience today within what Gilles Deleuze aptly  
43 termed *the society of control*.  
44

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46 **14**

47 What can be said of dark matter in general is that either by choice or circumstance it displays a  
48 degree of autonomy from the critical and economic structures of the art world and moves instead

Gregory Sholette

1 in between its meshes. But this independence is not risk free. Increasingly inexpensive tech-  
2 nologies of communication, replication, display, and transmission that allow informal and activist  
3 artists to network with each other have also made the denizens of this shadowy world ever more  
4 conspicuous to the very institutions that once sought to exclude them. In short, dark matter is no  
5 longer as dark as it once was. Yet, neither the art world nor enterprise culture can do little more  
6 than immobilize specific instances of this shadow activity by converting it into a fixed consumable  
7 or lifestyle branding. Furthermore, nothing assures us that this increasingly visible social pro-  
8 ductivity, this materializing missing mass, will be a force for liberation. Dark matter is not  
9 intrinsically progressive, not in the typical liberal or radical senses of that term. Instead, it possesses  
10 at best a *potential* for progressive resistance, as well as for reactionary anger and resentment. No  
11 amount of uncertainty relieves us of the responsibility to engage with this shadow archive  
12 *politically*, as an essential element in a longstanding promise of emancipation yet to be fulfilled.  
13 Meanwhile, the real occupation of culture will not begin until a different set of values is  
14 developed, both between artists, and between artists and the institutions that hereafter make up  
15 the socialized cosmology of contemporary art.

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18 **15**

19 Like all galaxies, our Milky Way is home to a strange substance called dark matter.  
20 Dark matter is invisible, betraying its presence only through its gravitational pull.  
21 Without dark matter holding them together, our galaxy's speedy stars would fly off in  
22 all directions. The nature of dark matter is a mystery—a mystery that a new study has  
23 only deepened. “After completing this study, we know less about dark matter than we  
24 did before.” *Harvard-Smithsonian Center for Astrophysics*<sup>3</sup>

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28 **16**

29 To paraphrase the cosmologists: there is perhaps no current problem of greater importance to  
30 cultural radicals than that of the “dark matter.”

31  
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33 **Notes**

34 \* This is a revised and expanded version of “12 Notes on collectivism and dark matter,” first  
35 published in 2003 in the *Journal for Northeast Issues*, Hamburg, Germany, and again translated into  
36 Korean in 2006 for an exhibition catalog entitled “Thought is made in the mouth,” published by  
37 *Insa Art Space*, the Arts Council, Seoul, South Korea.

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39 1 NASA/National Aeronautics and Space Administration, Website “Dark Energy, Dark Matter”: [http://](http://science.nasa.gov/astrophysics/focus-areas/what-is-dark-energy/)  
40 [science.nasa.gov/astrophysics/focus-areas/what-is-dark-energy/](http://science.nasa.gov/astrophysics/focus-areas/what-is-dark-energy/)  
41 2 Giorgio Agamben, *Remnants of Auschwitz: The Witness and the Archive*, Zone Books, Brooklyn, NY,  
42 2002. p. 144.  
43 3 Harvard-Smithsonian Center for Astrophysics Dark Matter Mystery Deepens, Monday, October 17,  
44 2011: <http://www.cfa.harvard.edu/news/2011-29>

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## 21

# SOME NOTES ABOUT ART, CODE, AND POLITICS UNDER CLOUDY EMPIRE(S)

*Ricardo Dominguez*

### 1

As we watch the Internet dissipate into the endless network of things it becomes ever more important to recall the digital manifestations that occurred only a few clicks ago in the 1990s in order to grasp the question of art as code, code as politics now. The practices of network art, new media art, (net art/net.art)/software art, and tactical media were deeply enmeshed to wider network culture that started to spread with the development of the web browser (Mosaic 1993) and e-mail platforms. What is important about these two things is not the platform as technology, or as code, but the cultures that emerged as multiple social fields that new media art(s), code, and politics encountered and expanded as a wide-ranging performative matrix. It was the multitudes that gathered around networks, specifically their cultures, and not the technology itself that allowed for new frames of political art and social interventions by artists to be created. For artists the web browser was cultural readymade ready to be unmade, disturbed, rerouted, remixed, and pushed into the streets and back again. For artists who sought to develop work that would shift the digital ground between algorithms, the spirits of new capitalism(s), or neoliberalism(s), and the global social dramas that networked communities offered were continually growing and changing during the 1990s.

By 1994 you were just a two clicks away from military sites, activist networks, all kinds of list servs, porn sites, art sites, news sites, financial trading companies, gaming communities, hacker groups, early online shops, blogs, software and hardware developers, dating sites, universities, and many many more expected and unexpected cultures. The early encounters between new media artists and the politics of networks, code, algorithms in the new connectivity cultures were to create gestures to disturb, subvert, and perhaps exit the savage bubbles of wired capitalism(s) that were being constituted as the only possible political economy for globalization that organized, production and distribution of wealth needed to seize on scientific and technological developments. At the same artists and activist were routing into anti-anti-utopian spaces of hyper-shared commonism(s) creating possible out-lines of post-capitalist networks on, in, and at the edges these networks. These gestures played in many fields and have many names and aesthetic practices—but here are a few key terms: artivism, tactical media, counter-apps, minor simulations, utopian plagiarism, conceptual poetries, hacktivism(s), new media theater,

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1 software, border code disturbance art/technologies, augmented realities, speculative carto-  
2 graphies, queer technologies, transnational feminisms and code, digital Zapatismo, dislocative  
3 gps, and intergalactic performance, etc.

2

6  
7 A number of artists working with network art (net art/net.art)/software art attempted to create  
8 projects under the sign of aesthetic disappearance, to become unstable objects as vacuoles of non-  
9 communication—which signaled that for net art to be political art it must stay under the radar  
10 and stay deep inside networked cultural channels, mimicking them completely. But another  
11 signal was also at play the 1990s: the ontologies of being hyper-present, of the being all-too-clear,  
12 all-too-visible to all networked cultures. Electronic Disturbance Theater’s (EDT) pushed forward  
13 a form and practice of Electronic Civil Disobedience (ECD) that needs to be understood as the  
14 visible manifestation of the always/already present channels connecting data bodies to real bodies  
15 on the streets and online, because the dichotomy of digital/physical was a false one, at least to our  
16 social aesthetics and our politics of code. ECD involved a number of physical components, from  
17 the hardware that the webpage is displayed on and the JavaScript it runs on, to the human body  
18 that activates that code. The bodies participating in ECD “are on the radar!”, which is to say, the  
19 myth of anonymity does not apply to EDT’s aesthetic practices of ECD. The performative matrix  
20 of EDT constructs more fluid forms of embodiment—participants in a virtual sit-in are not  
21 necessarily restricted to the same rules and protocols of gender, sexuality, race, or religion that  
22 they may experience as everyday body—so that the gestures of these trans\_bodies (with the use of  
23 any of these relational systems of communication, from a webpage to a cellphone) expose these  
24 bodies visibility without the baggage of identity. Trans\_bodies are the visible moment of virtual  
25 potentials, real bodies becoming augmented things with surprising new organs that can cir-  
26 cumvent the oppressions of the logistical assembly line called savage neoliberalism(s) or top-down  
27 globalization.

28 In the last footnote of Felix Guattari, *An Aberrant Introduction*, author Gary Genosko focuses  
29 on the question of potential derelict spaces or hidden gestures that serve as a parasite on the  
30 flows of globalization and networked capital. In an interview with Antonio Negri, Gilles  
31 Deleuze addressed the issue of resistance to such ceaseless control, even though he wasn’t  
32 especially hopeful:

33  
34 Computer piracy and viruses, for example will replace strikes and what the nineteenth  
35 century called ‘sabotage’ (‘clogging’ the machinery). You ask whether control or  
36 communication societies will lead to forms of resistance that might reopen the way for  
37 a communism understood as the ‘traversal organization of free individuals.’ Maybe, I  
38 don’t know. (Deleuze 1995: 175). This opens a space for the innovation of the mul-  
39 titude, a concept that marks a passage from group to subject, through assemblage, and  
40 beyond in its formation as posse or the figure of the new militant armed with tran-  
41 versal tools (Hardt and Negri 2000: 413). Against the hegemony of communication,  
42 Deleuze raised this idea: ‘The key thing may be to create vacuoles of non-commu-  
43 nication, circuit breakers, so we can elude control.’ A kind of creativity that was not  
44 linked to communication but broke it at some point by establishing cavities through  
45 which its messages could not pass or, to put it in positive terms, passed all to well.<sup>1</sup>

46  
47 While these cavities may indeed offer a type of processual aesthetics of new media that can  
48 manufacture dynamic practices that are unseen by the forces of assembly line software or code

*Art, Code, and Politics under Cloudy Empire(s)*

1 flows (because they mimic those flows), it is equally if not more important to create gestures  
2 that rupture the invisibility of the digital assembly line, as EDT aims to do. We make visible  
3 what is hidden in the code's own gaps and cracks via 404 files/Files Not Found (which is a core  
4 part of EDT's and ECD's browser-based tactics); one strategy, for example, includes reloading  
5 the question, "Is Democracy found on this.gov site?", which elicits the response,  
6 "404\_Democracy is not found on this site." At this point in time the velocities of leaks of  
7 information also becomes part of a similar practice. The traversal action shift the tactics of  
8 invisibility to one of direct presence as a core aesthetic of non-communication that becomes all  
9 too clear.

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13 We are all walking in data clouds now, where everything that is solid melts into the Wi-Fi air.  
14 Into the Cloud Empire. We are all now the locative artifacts that Willam Gibson writes about in  
15 his 2007 novel *Spook Country*, that describes locative art as the aesthetic move to monumentalize  
16 the holographic dead. In Gibson's vision of the Cloud Empire, we are all the augmented realities  
17 of the dead River Jude Phoenix or F. Scott Fitzgerald. In *Spook Country*, the characters, perhaps  
18 like us, now travel between all that is lost to "cartographic attributes of the invisible" and the  
19 specific coordinates of our locative realities. Everything is falling between the cracks of hyper-  
20 tagging and the wave-point edges of new recombinant realities in the novel, a sentiment that is  
21 perhaps best expressed by curator Odile Richard when she notes, "The artist annotating every  
22 centimeter of a place, of every physical thing. Visible to all, on devices such as these."<sup>2</sup> At the  
23 same time, Gibson's locative media's machines can bring forth the dead and the lost before our  
24 eyes and despite the efforts of the spook-state.

25 The state machine is a spook-system that utilizes indeterminacy in its strategies of control and  
26 coercion. These strategies move from anticipatory 'pre-emptive strike' police and military action  
27 through to 'softer' media strategies that utilize the affective politics of fear. In each case, the  
28 spook-state attempts to colonize the virtual to get to the real, or, we might say, to harness the  
29 strange temporality of the event—an event that fractures the fractality between the virtual and  
30 the actual—to manifest the locative perversity of those living and breathing beyond the holo-  
31 graphic graveyard. Let us then consider the aesthetic event-based technology of EDT's Trans-  
32 border Immigrant Tool's performative matrix as a way to divert the flows of disappearance  
33 toward the mythopoetic space of the un/accountable presences of the all-too-human bodies  
34 crossing the borders of the world. The mythopoetic is about slowing down hypermedia and the  
35 habit of always being switched on, about attuning data bodies to the slow digital Dasein that is  
36 always/already linked to locations that cut and paste the borderscapes around us—the deep cuts  
37 that move across the event of mutant desires and against the abstract machine toward gestures  
38 that have a name: trans\_bodies trans-creating borderless realities now.

39 In *Spook Country* one of the characters never sleeps under the same GPS "grid" twice for fear  
40 of linking his body to his GPS body. The trans\_border body never sleeps under the same  
41 border or the same "grid"—but it does need the same sustenance and trans\_rights as the  
42 trans\_linked bodies that TBT imagines as part of its geo-poetic-system: a gps that can dislocate  
43 the utopian and dystopian conditions of the GPS locative "grid." Drew Hemment in 2004  
44 wrote on nettime, the on-line critical media list serve:

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Locative media exults in the pleasure of locating and being located, and finds in this  
the basis for an emergent sociality-driven not by marketing but by networks of reci-  
procity and trust-as well as new ways of representing, relating to and moving in the

*Ricardo Dominguez*

1 world. Just as it contests the top down approach of conventional cartography to open  
2 up a manifold of different ways in which geographical space can be countered and  
3 drawn, so in appropriating and re-functioning positioning or tracking technologies,  
4 locative media indicates how they may be used not for pinning down but for opening  
5 up. In dispersing interventions and applications outside the state-and corporate-led  
6 technology push, it transforms a system of domination into a participatory milieu. And  
7 in bringing location and the coordinate system into the foreground, by examining  
8 location-aware experience or perception and its relationship to the dominant logics of  
9 representation, it creates distortions or moments of ambiguity by which mechanisms of  
10 domination become both apparent and less certain. This does not yet allow a simple  
11 opposition to be made between locative media and surveillance or control. Locative  
12 media remains upon the same plane as new forms of pervasive surveillance, and this is  
13 a plane upon which emancipation and domination intertwine. It is not a simple  
14 question of emancipation *\_or\_* domination, but of both at once. In many ways the  
15 locative utopia *\_is\_* the dystopia of total control.<sup>3</sup>  
16

17 The both/and or the either/or of locative grid can escape the code of total control only by  
18 dislocating the technological effect with aesthetic affects that become something other than  
19 code—a performative matrix that fractalizes and reverses the disorder of things with excessive  
20 trans\_bodies acting from the in\_side\_out of that enforced borderless border; that is, a perfor-  
21 mative matrix that assembles new empirico-tran(s)cendental forms of multi-presence(s) incom-  
22 mensurable with the capitalist socius of the Cloud Empire. As the Zapatistas say, “We do not  
23 move at the speed of technology, but at the speed of dreams.”  
24

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26 4  
27 The work of EDT is to create experimental art that probes the conditions of post-Fordist factories  
28 of the “no-place” by making gaps leak beyond its networked (post/super)modernity and to make  
29 them perform their desire to be hidden for all to see, to create art that forces the Cloud Empire to  
30 stutter its demands and to measure the glitches in the currents of the Cloudy Empire around us,  
31 to stage its overwhelming need towards imperceptibility as the secret code behind code, and to  
32 capture its ‘majoritarian being’ as the imaginary manifest destiny of this floating interactive-state-  
33 machine via our speculative deployments. Art as blind probings. The Cloud Empire demands that  
34 everything should participate in software culture in order to organize the infinite databases and to  
35 establish a standardized setting or an exact market relation between real bodies and data-bodies.  
36 This standardization is the key strategy for a functional production-consumption-subjection  
37 diagram. What escapes this execution by code? Perhaps a gesture that performs the dislocative  
38 poetry of precarious trans\_ontologies, as well as a demand for the distributed presence of each  
39 unique trans\_body without database clouds—against that post-Panoptical data-body without a  
40 person as the only identification of singularity. Giorgio Agamben points to this condition his  
41 article, “Identity without the Person” (2011):  
42

43 The more the citizens of the metropolis have lost intimacy with one another, the  
44 more they have become incapable of looking each other in the eye, the more con-  
45 soling the virtual intimacy with the apparatus becomes (an apparatus that has learned  
46 in turn to look deeply into their retinas). The more they have lost all identity and all  
47 real belonging, the more gratifying it has become for them to be recognized by the  
48 Great Machine in its infinite and minute variants: from the turnstile of a subway



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1 entrance to an ATM machine, from the video camera that benevolently observes them  
2 while they enter the bank or walk down the street to the apparatus that opens the  
3 garage door for them, all the way to the future obligatory identity card that will  
4 recognize them at any time and any place for what they inexorably are. I am here if  
5 the Machine recognizes me, or at least, sees me; I am alive if the Machine, which  
6 knows neither sleep nor wakefulness, but is eternally alert, guarantees that I am alive; I  
7 am not forgotten if the Great Machine has recorded my numerical or digital data.<sup>4</sup>

8

9 The Cloud Empire is a neo-futurist syndrome that only targets non-machinic-identity as illegal,  
10 non-legal, or (a)llegal—a syndrome that functions as a machinic traversal of the fantasy of a total  
11 algorithm of control. Trans\_bodies risk exodus by crossing the desert(s) of the real; as well, they  
12 risk never arriving because their arrival cannot fully happen under the gaze of the invisible  
13 biopolitical zones of the border. The trans\_body fractalizes the porous paradoxes of globalized  
14 walls-without-laws and confronts the post-panoptical power that it is itself always/already  
15 escaping and slipping beyond; it is violently imperceptible and rejects any sustenance for any body  
16 at any level. But the trans\_bodies do not give up; they only accelerate the civil war with queering  
17 counter-inventions of activism.

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21 The channels of neo-modernity and global industrialization are redesigning reality as relational  
22 objects, as a network of things: iPad desires, texting transgressions, data-powered clouds, airport  
23 scan-bodies, and Facebook economics—what we will call the almost-fully emerged Cloud  
24 Empire, whose logistical capture-objects arrive before our optical nerves and fingers. They are  
25 designed fragments built in pieces in one place, put together in another, and delivered via  
26 multiple routes after repackaging. This same logistics governs the flows and protocols of  
27 trans\_bodies—their borderscapes, their movement towards an extra-legal formation, their ter-  
28 ritorial remixing, their counter-computational processing, their new modes of desire, and their  
29 methods for crisscrossing (by foot, by boat, by Photoshop document, or by becoming the most  
30 wanted/unwanted labor bodies demanded by the global market). These trans\_bodies form the  
31 largest flowing non-national state on the planet. The flow of 80 percent of goods for the global  
32 market are at any giving moment in transit and this massive transit of goods is equal to the flow of  
33 the trans\_bodies that are crossing borders everywhere, that are coming and have come—who are  
34 forced to sacrifice their rights, their bodies, and their kinships to the “just in time” flow of the  
35 Cloud Empire. Whether becoming trans\_bodies as post-post-citizens or dead bodies in the desert  
36 (s) of the real, these bodies are part of the overdetermined assembly line of the world. This  
37 reterritorialization of the endless assembly line traces out a map of connections between things  
38 and humans as they become border\_things. Perhaps these strange encounters between logistical  
39 objects, trans\_bodies, and the sovereignty of the assembly line over the nation, might also offer  
40 clues as to what the future of the trans\_bodies might look like: multi-node citizens moving  
41 beyond the borders of the Cloud Empire’s objects in flow.

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45 Metaleak cultures now are leaking forth swarms of hacktivist ECD actions in defense of what  
46 EDT has named since 1998 as radical transparency—an urgent call that has by now become the  
47 antagonist of superstate machines like Google, Master Card, Visa, and Pay Pal (all of them now  
48 part of the emerging Cloud Empire). Radical nodes are attempting to take on and disturb the

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1 mega-datacenters of the Cloud Empire in the tradition of EDT's aesthetic call to action for the  
2 multitude to become utopias of disturbances, blockage and trespass, by staging ethico-aesthetic  
3 virtual sit-ins. Of course the difference between EDT and the current hacktivism is that EDT is  
4 and has always been radically transparent, always connecting its data-bodies to the location of its  
5 real-bodies. Everyone knows who we are, where we are, why we are doing the gesture, whereas  
6 the Wikileaks hacktivists are hidden and do their work in secret, making no attempts to connect  
7 data-bodies and real-bodies (at odds with the radical transparency of leaking secrets put forth by  
8 Wikileaks activists, Manning, or Snowden). But this is a minor issue when compared to the  
9 command and control of information that is enabled when the atavistic state machine joins the  
10 neoliberal Cloud Empire. What is clear is that a cold civil war is growing between the Cloud  
11 Empire and trans\_bodies on the borders everywhere. While it is easy to imagine this as a civil war  
12 between clouds, to do so would risk thinking about space without location, reproducing the  
13 opaque tactics of invisibility. Once more EDT 1.0/2.0/b.a.n.g lab call for being there as  
14 immaterial formations that confront power face to face(lessness) without fear. But, we do  
15 understand that in some spaces and times the violences of the Cloud Empire are so imminent that  
16 it is foolhardy to expose oneself as a target. In a civil war on a planetary scale, it is (and will  
17 continue to be) important to understand who and when one should be seeing—but if one has a  
18 choice, it should be with the aesthetic zeitgeist, we are here, and we are less than the one and  
19 more than the many.

20 In *Introduction to Civil War* (2010), the French group Tiquun articulates the following:

21

22 Imperialism and totalitarianism mark the two ways in which the modern State tried to  
23 leap beyond its own impossibility, first by slipping forward beyond its borders into  
24 colonial expansion, then by an intensive deepening of the penetration inside its own  
25 borders. In both cases, these desperate reactions from the State – which claimed to  
26 encompass everything just as it was becoming nothing—came to a head in the very  
27 forms of civil war the State claims receded it.

28

29 This “nothing” that preceded the everything of Cloud Empire(s) is forming in the midst of an  
30 ocean of data. In fact, data is floating on and within the ocean (it is also interesting to note that the  
31 ocean has historically been a core condition of empire). Google now has oceanic data centers to  
32 support the new Cloud Empire; these data centers solve the problem of heat build up by exposing  
33 millions upon millions of processors to tidal waters. The Cloud Empire(s) is only part of Google's  
34 efforts to offshore its critical infrastructure. Those old cyber borders are unraveling, as well as the  
35 conceptual borders of the super-state machine, against all trans\_bodies. The Cloud Empire(s)'s core  
36 computing system is absorbing more and more social and economic media on expanding planetary  
37 scales. As these scales give data jurisdiction over what can cross the world and how fast things can go,  
38 those things like trans\_border bodies and old citizen formations lose rights before the power of end-  
39 user agreements. Then a new civil war waged by trans\_border bodies against the Cloud Empire is  
40 not about supporting the link between territory and state to jurisdiction and law, but about how  
41 trans\_bodies are moving from illegal bodies to extra-legal post-things, with the full rights of post-  
42 human flows and deep locative articulations of place. The first trans\_bodies to call for a planetary  
43 civil war were the Zapatistas in Chiapas, Mexico in 1994.

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Now we are no longer in log-on cultures, but always-on cultures and the aesthetics of dis-  
turbances are now about shifting a new stage of social embodiment of data-bodies that some

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1 artists have named the post-digital. Where the protocol functions as streams of control over  
2 disciplinary, apps or programs, scraping over torrents, meta stacks over stacks, gaming over  
3 games, real-time over time, and cloudy societies over private societies, synthetic biopolitics  
4 over biopolitics, nano-markets over micro-markets, dronology over ontology, and objects-in-  
5 disappearance over the appearance-of-objects, just to name of few of the binaries at play now.  
6 Artists who seek to deploy gestures at the edges of the current recombinant theaters of post-  
7 contemporary cultures must re-frame or dislocate the meta-ecologies of bio-hyper media with  
8 its endless stacks and stacks data-on/in-bodies in relation to others and objects that are  
9 enfolding the planet by any means necessary. To exist and dislocate towards trans\_bodies that  
10 activate the co-creation of a sharable commonism, a nano-commonism, of a realism without  
11 infinite debt. Instead to manifest trans[infinities of new materialism(s) whose soul purpose is to  
12 be shared. An ecology for all things becoming objects that desire only to connect and be shared  
13 in common.  
14

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15  
16  
17 It is always good to go Back to the Future to understand post-future. Here is a note I wrote in  
18 1998:

19  
20 The Zapatistas say:

21 Ya basta! Break the Mirror! Do you really need Maps!\*

22  
23 Maps (A Long Footnote)  
24

25 Several different maps of information have been put on the block for our inspection:  
26 frontier, castle, real estate, rhizome, hive, matrix, virus, network, plug-in your own,  
27 etc., Each map creates a different line of flight, a different form of security, and a dif-  
28 ferent pocket of resistance.  
29

30 Frontier

31  
32 A digiscape full of drifters, free roaming data cowboys, mail tribes, code ranchers and  
33 bandwidth barons. ISP justice decides the laws for their community. Those that go  
34 beyond the local enclave's limit are on their own in a lawless infinity. On the frontier  
35 the only security one has is that of a few trusted URL's, one's faithful machine, and  
36 keeping the VirusScan loaded and close by at all times. On the Frontier: It's every link  
37 for itself and Google against all.

38 Resistance on the Frontier: Banditos! We don't need no Stinkin' Badges!

39  
40 Castles

41  
42 This is a space of bunkers and transcendental hierarchies, with moats, high walls, and  
43 drawbridges. Movement between these bunkers is done by Knights, bearing the latest  
44 war gear, protecting the flow of messages and goods. The most important defense of A  
45 Castle is the amount of "Air" between the outside and the castle's core. For Castles it  
46 is the roads between them they fear. Anything could be lurking in the dark woods.

47 Resistance between Castles: Robin Hood! Steal from the Rich and Give to the  
48 Poor!

*Ricardo Dominguez*

1 Real Estate

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Rhizome

This is similar to where you are now, as you read or hear these words. Space is owned or rented by individual transnational-companies, and anything in-between. Lots of big signs selling things, gentrification of homes for senior citizens, the endless streams of the homeless. Everyone wants laws to protect the welfare of exchange under the sign of social control. They say they want to protect the children. In this space, only the commodity is protected.

Resistance under the For Sale Sign: Squat the Future! Burn the sign down!

Here Bodies without Organs schizflux between roots, pop-up flora, holes and machinic desire. Endless tendrils criss-cross space, some spaces become hard and never move again, some spaces become smooth and never crack, nothing escapes the virtual struggle between The State and The War Machine. Here, endless interconnectivity rules all possibility as an either/or line of flight-territorialize or de-territorialize, you have no choice.

Resistance at the root: Become a body with organs and smell the flowers.

The Hive

A wave-system so tightly bound that no difference resides among each segment of the wave. Each segment is part of a wave-mass, A SWARM. The Hive is able to absorb any change both within or without the SWARM. Each segment-wave functions as a SWARM, alone or apart from the other segments. Each element of a SWARM functions locally in parallel interdependence with the rest of the wave mass. The Hive and the SWARM act as one, but only in one direction. Each shift in the SWARM becomes a part of the HIVE at the same moment. Each segment of the SWARM is a part of the HIVE, but the HIVE is not a part of the SWARM. Each segment of SWARM needs the HIVE to be a part of a SWARM, but the HIVE does not need any specific segment of the wave-mass to be a SWARM.

Resistance among the SWARM: Use the SWAT! Act Alone.

Matrix

Weaving symbionts creating, moving, offering the permanent revolution of Pandora's code. The Matrix is disequilibrium as invention, aphanisis as informatic-quanta, soft accidents, and action as care. An alien politics of the body as hope. Still the Matrix is sweating in the labor pools of speed production. The matrices are held hostage as the base materialism of Late Captial. Wetware for the endless multi-tasking of chaotics. The Matrix is still looming.

Resistance in The Matrix: Have a Party! Go on Strike!

Virus

Bio-agents flow between complexity and containment, diversity and control, self and other. Cellular circuits know the difference between antigens and antibodies. Viral

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1 coagulation filters for non-self types in the Host in order to assemble possible defensive  
2 patterns. Bioagents fail the Host when it meets its other as self. It has no defense  
3 against itself, or what mimics its own messages. Bioinformatics understand the self and  
4 not the other as self.

5 Resistance within the cell: Make a Vaccine! Stick a needle in a meme!

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Network

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Borderless operables, hyper-redundancy, massive aggregate throughput built on endless backplanes bring bottlenecks down to 0. Decentralized bottom up architectures, mega-gigabit ethernet, and active response firewalls are the multiple nexus of this space. Intelligent infrastructures allow the emergence of total networks, micro-networks, and weak links. Network security is being exploited by the demand for open transnational e-commerce and intercontinental exchange routes. Exploit scripts scan vulnerabilities, replacement files wrap packet filters, stealth sniffers generate new holes: linsniff.c, sunkill.c, and latierra.c. Network gaps created by military-intelligence systems, trans-corporate movement, software developers, end users, providers, and the lack of centralized management clog the possibility of an effective and total security solution.<sup>5</sup>

Taylor & Francis  
Notes

- 1 Genosko, Gary. Felix Guattari: *An Aberrant Introduction* (2002), p. 227
- 2 Gibson, William. *Spook Country*. Berkley, 2009. p. 22.
- 3 Hemment, Drew. "The Locative Dystopia." nettime. January 9, 2004. Web: (<http://www.nettime.org/Lists-Archives/nettime-l-0401/msg00021.html>).
- 4 Agamben, Giorgio. "Identity without the Person". *Nudities*. Stanford University Press (2010).
- 5 Kroker, Arthur and Marilouise, eds. "Resistance on the Network! Take to the Streets." Available online at <http://www.ctheory.net/articles.aspx?id=203>. November 18, 1998.

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## 22

# THE AESTHETICS OF ALGORITHMIC EXPERIENCE

*Ned Rossiter and Soenke Zehle*

We did not need the NSA scandal as a reminder that the minute we decide to engage in technologically mediated relation we inscribe ourselves in matrices of control. In fact, one might even question the status of National Security Agency (NSA) surveillance as a scandal: the democratically legitimated laws authorizing such big data projects have been on the books for a long time. Less known are the algorithmic architectures that scrape, mine, store, cluster, sequence, combine and analyse data generated through our daily use of computational systems. Even more obscure is the extent to which an aesthetic dimension attends the multiple formats and structures that organize data as a dynamic object. To conjoin aesthetics with algorithmic cultures brings us to the centre of info-politics today: namely, the capture of experience within ‘integrated world capitalism’.<sup>1</sup>

We use the term algorithmic cultures not only as a reminder of the transculturality of computational aesthetic practices, recalling the Persian mathematician Muhammad ibn Musa al-Khwarizmi’s introduction of the concepts of algebra into European mathematics.<sup>2</sup> It is also a reminder of the epistemological equivalence of analogue and digital systems that has faded from memory in the wake of the cybernetic romanticization of the analogue. As ethnomathematician Ron Eglash contends, ‘[a]nalogue systems can achieve the same levels of recursive computations as digital systems’.<sup>3</sup> Recursivity multiplies across the digital and analogue, caring nothing for the borders of machines, economy, people and code. Think, for example, of computational systems where recursion is a function of procedures whose reiteration holds the potential to generate different outcomes, results or events.<sup>4</sup> Such processes can be found in the work of pollution, in the transformation of material properties and (in)organic life gathered around metal components found in electronic devices as they move across supply chains, economic cultures and ecological conditions as transactions in waste. Underscored by contingency and inconsistency, Luciana Parisi terms this the ‘entropic’ dimension special to algorithmic regimes of governance and control: ‘*Randomness* has become the condition of *programming culture*’.<sup>5</sup> We extend this dictum on computational systems to a broader inquiry into the relation between algorithmic architectures, aesthetics and the politics of experience.

The chapter identifies four positions central to the social implications and political stakes of what we are calling algorithmic experience. Integrating aesthetic and technological registers, algorithmic experience is the new terrain of extractive industries within contemporary capitalism whose structural logic is itself algorithmic. First, we see the rise of algorithmic

*The Aesthetics of Algorithmic Experience*

1 architectures as central to the capture of experience. Second, we seek to move beyond analyses of how social media are used and instead focus on the geopolitical dimension of logistical software and infrastructure. Third, we elaborate the critique of logistical software as an aesthetics of prediction associated with big data analytics. And finally, we address the politics of objects with reference to debates in speculative realism and object-oriented ontology (OOO). Our interest here is less to untangle epistemological debates and more to acknowledge the general uncertainty surrounding how to deal with experience-objects, using the term ‘algorithmic experience’ in the diagrammatic sense of a metamodel.<sup>6</sup> Fixating on the origins of agency, whether this resides with objects or subjects, is insufficient to the task of critiquing the force of algorithmic capitalism.

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12  
13 **1. Experience Capture**

14 If the power of art (and aesthetic experience) ‘belongs to the apprehension (not the acquisition) of an object that breaks with customary divisions of labor and places us in a state of contemplative bliss that belongs to everyone and no one’,<sup>7</sup> this bliss is now owned. The act of sensation, contemplation and more broadly experience becomes ownable as it is expressed (Massumi), grammatized (Stiegler) and captured (Agre).<sup>8</sup> We see a need to engage capture as the enclosure of aesthetic experience, not, however, from the perspective of the contemporary commercialization of the art world. As Jacques Rancière notes, the latter is ‘merely a distant effect of the revolution constituted by the very birth of museums’ and its display of princely predilections and looted treasures.<sup>9</sup> Instead, we focus on the immanence of the algorithmic to experience.<sup>10</sup>

24 For Rancière, the conditions of the emergence of art as an autonomous practice ‘cannot be deduced from a general concept of art or beauty founded on a global theory of man or the world, of the subject or being’ but depends ‘upon a transformation of the forms of sensible experience, of ways of perceiving and being affected’.<sup>11</sup> He explores the ‘sensible fabric of experience’ – the material conditions within which works of art are produced – through specific scenes, each of which ‘a little optical machine that shows us thought busy weaving together perceptions, affects, names and ideas, constituting the sensible community that these links create, and the intellectual community that makes such weaving thinkable’.<sup>12</sup> Scenes are not representations; instead, they map a network around aesthetic practices, inscribing them ‘into a moving constellation in which modes of perception and affect, and forms of interpretation defining a paradigm of art, take shape’.<sup>13</sup> Key for our argument is that Rancière here sketches a thought of *aisthesis* that can serve as point of departure for articulations of the actual (material) *mise en scène* of algorithmic experience.<sup>14</sup>

37 The integration of algorithmic architectures (social media, finance capital, big data, supply chain operations) with labour and life has further intensified the subsumption of value from the realm of experience. A shift is registered from economies of production predicated on regimes of scarcity and the governance of labour-power to economies of extraction immanent to bio-power and algorithmic agency. Far from some kind of instrumental takeover of the body and brain, algorithmic architectures are what Parisi terms ‘performing entities’, which is to say they ‘expose the internal inconsistencies of the rational system of governance, inconsistencies that correspond to the proliferation of increasingly random data within it’.<sup>15</sup> In analysing the material conditions that produce, modulate and ultimately capture experience as surplus value, we find critical (in fact paradigmatic) purchase in algorithmic architectures special to global logistics industries and a ‘supply chain capitalism’ that organizes the lifestream logistics of practices of relation and production.<sup>16</sup>

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## 2. Lifestream Logistics

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3 The agency Super Nature Design was commissioned to ‘design and create a series of low energy  
4 digital sculptures and light installation showcasing its operational efficiency, infrastructure system  
5 and live-feed data of the green energy consumption’ of the Nike China Logistics Center (CLC) in  
6 Taicang. The installation, ‘by the CLC’s conveyor system, infrastructure and the cubical cartons’  
7 and meant to reflect ‘the dynamic of the system’, captures the idea of logistics as an aesthetic  
8 experience: the incorporation of real-time energy data combines atmospheric media and lifestream  
9 logistics. In ‘+ City Runs’, YesYesNo visualized for in-store displays the user data uploaded via the  
10 Nike+ running app to Nike+ servers. The object (the user-object assemblage) continues to gen-  
11 erate data (metadata about where and how the object is used), extending the customer relation to  
12 cover the entire period of usage, documenting the logistical dimension of ‘smart’ objects.

13 With the rise of social media and ‘lifestream logistics’, software today drives the production of  
14 affect.<sup>17</sup> From the mathematical execution of algorithmic rules to user experiences of interface  
15 design, a recursive loop of action is derived from human affect and the operation of commercial  
16 tools. The parameters of these relations are finite and determined. The borders of parameters  
17 operate as a new universality within computational regimes. The ‘outside’, for all intents and  
18 purposes, no longer exists. There is only meaning within the horizon of parametric architectures.

19 The coupling of self-management with the operational efficiency of production, illustrating  
20 the processuality of competitive optimization, has been reflected upon within what might be  
21 called a literature of depression, calling attention to the mutual implication of consumerist  
22 practices with economies of affect in turn understood as engines of big data models of valor-  
23 ization.<sup>18</sup> The so-called internet of things (IoT), a network of ‘smart’ objects, turns out to be an  
24 internet of experiences as objects can now be (become) the subjects of experience. To attribute  
25 such reconsiderations of the distribution of subjectivity across (and beyond) the object/subject  
26 divide as occasioned or necessitated by the arrival of ‘smart’ objects is, of course, yet another  
27 instance of supreme technodeterminism radically contextualized (and historicized), for instance,  
28 in the recent resurgence of interest in the animist assumption of a shared relational frame of  
29 interaction between humans and non-humans.<sup>19</sup>

30 Not surprisingly, media theory has identified experience a key terrain of contestation. Follow-  
31 ing André Leroi-Gourhan, Bernard Stiegler has already affirmed that ‘the human and the tool  
32 invent each other’.<sup>20</sup> As we think of user-as-product paradigms and the lifestream logistics of the  
33 ever-expanding ethico-aesthetic supply chains manifest in and through social media, such a  
34 simultaneity of invention and constitution reminds us that use is not what we do but what we are.

35 Let us briefly return to the question of the common. For Casarino, ‘In communication,  
36 everything is common: its potentialities, its actualities, as well as the processes that continuously  
37 turn the former into the latter’. Casarino continues: ‘There is a privileged, essential relation  
38 between potentiality and the common, in the sense that if the common partakes both of actu-  
39 ality and potentiality, potentiality can only be shared and in common: potentiality constitutes  
40 our common substance. The common in its potential aspect today is nothing other than the  
41 assemblage of those capacities that do not belong to anyone and in which we all share: linguistic  
42 faculty, intellectual powers, as well as the capability to affect and to be affected’. In short, the  
43 capacity to experience. Importantly for Casarino, labour-power is the expression of the  
44 common whose potentiality arises within social cooperation.

45 Our claim is that it is precisely the realm of the common – of affect and social cooperation –  
46 that becomes the new site of exploitation due to its integration with algorithmic capitalism.  
47 This raises the critical question for politics – where to find resources that hold a degree of  
48 relative autonomy within such a techno-scientific conjuncture? Or do we involuntarily retreat



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1 into the indifferent machines of capital whose first move is capture? Can we subtract experience  
2 from algorithmic capture? Or do we get on with the job of collectively designing sustainable  
3 forms of ‘social interaction and organization’, as called for by Geert Lovink in response to  
4 Galloway, Thacker and Wark’s flight from media to mediation, communication to ‘excom-  
5 munication’?<sup>21</sup> To be honest, we do not know. The current conjuncture is still one of dis-  
6 orientation as we (finally) assess the ‘end of the internet’ in the wake of Snowden’s exposure of  
7 the NSA surveillance machine. It is enough, for now, to return to the operating theatre and  
8 begin assembling the component parts that make up the apparatus of capture.  
9

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### 3. Predictive Aesthetics

12 German-based software developer SAP is one of the leading firms in developing ERP (enterprise  
13 resource planning) software that can be found across a wide range of industries – from ware-  
14 housing, education, transport, financial services and global logistics. Yet ask any self-respecting  
15 programmer what they think of SAP’s ERP software and they will quickly tell you it’s a dog. It is  
16 ugly and it is buggy. For all this, SAP declares that ‘63% of the world’s transaction revenue  
17 touches an SAP system’.<sup>22</sup> The design of real-time analytics technologies like SAP’s HANA  
18 platform links ‘big data’ to what SAP has come to refer to as ‘dark data’.<sup>23</sup>

19 Widely reported as a successful attempt to ‘score’ in the US, HANA technology now powers  
20 the National Basketball Association’s (NBA’s) statistics platform. Here is a reminder of the  
21 infrastructural dimension of professional sports, from one of the first chronicles of data-driven  
22 sports management in Michael Lewis’ *Moneyball* (generally understood as business rather than  
23 sports journalism) to Electric Art’s (EA’s) FIFA series, now with movement data collected in  
24 mobile motion capture studios that follow players across the world. These are the same players  
25 that play the game as a pastime whereby changes in movement are recorded and feed into the  
26 cloud-based game experience. A recursive loop is thus enacted, providing yet another example  
27 of the ‘playbourization’ of everyday life.<sup>24</sup> Such technologies demonstrate how data drives  
28 experience, integrating user-as-product paradigms and the machines of self-optimization.

29 In their survey of the stakes of the shift to big data paradigms, Viktor Mayer-Schoenberger and  
30 Kenneth Cukier ask: ‘What role is left for intuition, faith, uncertainty, acting in contradiction of  
31 the evidence, and learning by experience?’.<sup>25</sup> For Mayer-Schoenberger and Cukier, experience is  
32 displaced by the power of big data to exert a logic of correlation over causality. The predictive  
33 capacity of big data that ‘speaks for itself’ is based on algorithmic architectures organized around  
34 an ideology of ‘solutionism’.<sup>26</sup> The algorithmic coordination of supply chains is one obvious  
35 example of how pattern recognition is put to work in order to maximize the extraction of value  
36 from time and space. Amazon’s recent patent for ‘anticipatory package shipping’ is designed to  
37 predict customer orders before they are made, and thus minimize the time between purchasing an  
38 item and its delivery to a final destination.<sup>27</sup> By managing consignments through distribution hubs  
39 strategically located near markets defined by predictive modelling of demographics of consump-  
40 tion, Amazon competes for the ‘real-time’ desire for instant gratification by optimizing supply  
41 chain movements.<sup>28</sup>

42 Logistics always strives for ‘efficiency gains’ as a value-adding measure. Social media is a  
43 classic example here, in which the parameters of possibility hold enough variation coupled with  
44 low-level demands to prompt users to act and – most importantly – stay within the garden of  
45 compulsive communication. The rise of predictive prosumption is designed to give users limited  
46 forms of interaction in exchange for even more limited access to decisions over what it is we  
47 consume. One can only imagine the next step is 3D printing of purchased items – straight from  
48 the computer to the lounge room, making real that long-held techno-fantasy of ‘beaming’

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1 instantly from one place to another and thus reducing the arduous route of supply chains and  
2 their intermediaries to the invisible magic of circuit boards and software.

3 The present reality, however, is still some seconds off from these Trecky dreams. Far from the  
4 interoperable, seamless connectivity of supply chains and logistics, the movement of people,  
5 finance and things is underscored by friction, struggle and contingency. Whether this takes the  
6 form of labour disputes, software glitches, infrastructural breakdown or sabotage, the management  
7 science of logistics is an extraction machine that captures value even in moments of seeming  
8 assault. The volatility of spot and futures markets in the shipping of freight, for example, ensures  
9 that economic value is generated by the perpetuation of price variation from the moment com-  
10 modities and services are purchased to the time upon which they are received. As Randy Martin  
11 writes, 'Subjecting the world to the logic of derivatives means acting as if no transaction is final  
12 and there is always a globally realizable potential for improved performance'.<sup>29</sup>

13 This raises the question of politics and intervention. What constitutes political action when  
14 disruption is seemingly absorbed as a normative condition within systems of calculation and  
15 control? The power of logistical regimes suggests that resistance is futile. The revolutionary  
16 theatrics of Badiou and Zizek service logistical forms of enclosure when disruption is situated  
17 within the apparatus of predictive analytics. Counter-power is no longer sufficient as an alter-  
18 native to algorithmic capitalism. A key reason for the valorization of sociality, politics and affect  
19 rests with the valorization of expression as it is reduced to data whose hermeneutic key subsists  
20 in the logic of financialization. The political challenge, therefore, requires articulating data with  
21 territories of value robust enough to function as protocological conflicts that refuse translation  
22 into economies of depletion and despair.

23 The politics of parameters opens spaces for counter-design that contests the logics of extrac-  
24 tion and exploitation. One might think immediately of the small-scale artisan economies special  
25 to maker cultures, or the slow food movement, both of which illustrate the difficulty of  
26 matching an artisanal imagination with a scale-free mesh. At worst, such practices 'integrate the  
27 point of view of manual labour back into a sociomorphism derived entirely from non-manual  
28 understandings of labour activity'.<sup>30</sup> But perhaps they can be articulated beyond a contemplative  
29 materialism to bring back into view the 'activity of labour',<sup>31</sup> including the operation of global  
30 supply chains and the outsourcing or offshoring of labour in ways that obscure their enmesh-  
31 ment within networks of algorithmic capitalism.

32 How, then, to think labour processes outside relations of exploitation? This is the perennial  
33 leftist critique of capitalism, and this task lies beyond aesthetic interventions to affect a redistri-  
34 bution of the sensible.<sup>32</sup> For a while it seemed the free and open source software movement  
35 was one haven for escape. But with the help of post-*autonomia*, we understand these kind of  
36 'free labour' practices to function as part of the social production of value that also drives the  
37 data-mining economies of social media, calling for a reassessment of the political promise of a  
38 valorization of the withdrawal or subtraction of labour from the processes of capital accumula-  
39 tion promoted in the political thought of an earlier generation of Italian autonomists. No longer  
40 can we see such actions as techniques of sabotage or forces of acceleration that push the logic of  
41 capitalism closer to its end game. Bonded by the algorithmicized circuits of 'infinite debt', such  
42 possibilities for political action become stifled if not neutralized by the intrusion of financiali-  
43 zation into everyday life.<sup>33</sup>

#### 4. Autonomous Objects

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47 In his critical survey of OOO and speculative realism, Galloway draws a correlation with  
48 technologies of post-Fordist capitalism, whose 'object-oriented infrastructure skims off unpaid

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1 surplus-value from living networks'. Latour's so-called 'parliament of things' turns out instead to  
2 be an aesthetics of recursion that extracts value from the work of experience. The political –  
3 understood as the work of antagonistic encounters – is evacuated. Indeed, Galloway declares an  
4 end of the political: 'it does not exist in any place or situation'.<sup>34</sup>

5 We need a thought of algorithmic objecthood that not only registers the historicity of  
6 objects, but the historicity of sense – which is key to our understanding of 'algorithmic  
7 experience'. After software studies has told us to attend to the machinic agency of algorithms, it  
8 seems to have left us to explore the promise of a new positivism. Yet what we need to com-  
9 prehend is a sense of experience from within such a machinic horizon, as 'the fascination with  
10 the open and with the outside that erupts in the twentieth century within a history of sense that  
11 had always resisted the exterior and the open, is related to the history of machines and  
12 objects'.<sup>35</sup> Not to be overlooked is the coincidence between the desubjectification of the  
13 human and the interpenetration of machines with life. The economy of intensive extraction can  
14 proceed once the problem of the human and the monopoly of the subject is superseded by an  
15 ontology of things.

16 Still considered primarily in its role as a source of retreat and renewal in the mediated world  
17 of algorithmic capitalism, experience calls out to be better understood, as it is not simply avail-  
18 able for a retreat from theory (or media, or mediation, for that matter). As the algorithmic folds  
19 itself into experience, the latter can no longer serve as an outside. Passing through various  
20 material registers of the *mise en scène* of algorithmic experience, we hope to develop thought on  
21 the level of experience as a vantage point. That is, on (what has now become) the level of the  
22 work of affect as algorithmic agency. We end by posing the question of the algorithm as  
23 dynamic object, not quite comprehended by the objectal (but strangely static) horizontalism of  
24 object-oriented ontology. Still largely unknown, algorithmic architectures determine, direct and  
25 enable the experience of algorithmic cultures. Sketched as a metamodel, algorithmic experi-  
26 ences poses the question of modes of relation and constitution offered as well as enclosed and  
27 foreclosed by and in algorithmic cultures. It is precisely at the multiple points of tension striking  
28 the relation between experience and algorithm that one finds the instance of politics. And  
29 against its own image and infrastructures of capture, logistics provides a possible device of  
30 articulating political insurgency.

31  
32 **Notes**

- 33  
34 1 Félix Guattari, *The Three Ecologies*, trans. Ian Pindar and Paul Sutton, London: Athlone Press, 2000.  
35 2 Christopher Moore and Stephan Mertens, *The Nature of Computation*, Oxford: Oxford University Press,  
36 2011, 36.  
37 3 Ron Eglash, 'African Influences in Cybernetics', 1995, <http://www.haussite.net/haus.0/SCRIPT/txt2001/01/eglash.HTML>. See also Ron Eglash, *African Fractals: Modern Computing and Indigenous Design*, New Brunswick: Rutgers University Press, 1999.  
38 4 See Luciana Parisi, *Contagious Architecture: Computation, Aesthetics and Space*, Cambridge, Mass.: MIT  
39 Press, 2013, 104. See also Fuller and Goffey: 'recursion may be used to organize heterogeneous  
40 material into a singular pattern'. Matthew Fuller and Andrew Goffey, *Evil Media*, Cambridge, Mass:  
41 MIT Press, 2012, 75.  
42 5 Parisi, ix.  
43 6 See Gary Genosko and Andrew Murphie, 'Models, Metamodels and Contemporary Media', *Fibre-*  
44 *culture* 12 (2008), <http://twelve.fibrejournal.org>. 'Metamodeling de-links modeling with both  
45 its representational foundation and its mimetic reproduction. It softens signification by admitting a-  
46 signifying forces into a model's territory; that is, the centrality and stability of meaningfulness is  
47 displaced for the sake of singularity's unpredictability and indistinctness. Importantly, the diagram's  
48 productivity entails that metamodeling is productive of a new kind of reality; it functions; forces things  
together; doesn't need meaning, just the manufacture of it' (ibid.). See also Luciana Parisi and Stamati

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- 1 Portanova, 'Soft Thought (In Architecture and Choreography)', *Computational Culture* 1 (2011), [http://](http://computationalculture.net/article/soft-thought)  
2 [computationalculture.net/article/soft-thought](http://computationalculture.net/article/soft-thought): 'Metamodels alienate us by building complexity, instead  
3 of serving us by making it more accessible: for Guattari, as we have seen, their true value lies exactly in  
4 their capacity to do without their material counterpart, their factual origin or aim'.  
5 7 Joseph Tanke, 'What's New In Aesthetics?: Jacques Ranciere's "Aisthesis"', *Art in America*, 30 July  
6 2013, [http://www.artinamericamagazine.com/news-features/news/whats-new-in-aesthetics-jacques-](http://www.artinamericamagazine.com/news-features/news/whats-new-in-aesthetics-jacques-rancieres-aisthesis)  
7 [rancieres-aisthesis](http://www.artinamericamagazine.com/news-features/news/whats-new-in-aesthetics-jacques-rancieres-aisthesis).  
8 8 See Philip E. Agre, 'Surveillance and Capture: Two Models of Privacy', in Noah Wardrip-Fruin and  
9 Nick Montfort (eds), *The New Media Reader*, Cambridge: MIT Press, 2003, 737–60: 'the capture model  
10 employs linguistic metaphors by means of various grammars of action; describes the readily apparent  
11 instrumentation that entails the reorganization of existing activities; portrays captured activities as being  
12 constructed in real-time from a set of institutionally standardized parts specified by the captured ontology;  
13 emphasizes the locally organized nature of contests over the capture process and their structuring within  
14 particular institutional contexts; takes as its prototype the quasiphilosophical project of ontological  
15 reconstruction undertaken by computer professionals in private organizations' (ibid. 756).  
16 9 Jacques Rancière, *Aisthesis: Scenes from the Aesthetic Regime of Art*, trans. Zakir Paul, New York: Verso,  
17 2013, x.  
18 10 We use 'enclosure' in relation to the status of (aesthetic) experience as common. On the common as  
19 that which is im-proper, that which cannot be owned (according to the OED: 'improper: not truly or  
20 strictly belonging to the thing under consideration'), also see Cesare Casarino, 'Universalism of the  
21 Common', *diacritics* 39.4 (2009): 162–76: 'What is destructive and self-destructive is to produce surplus  
22 and to experience being as valuable rather than as common, to produce and to experience one's own  
23 surplus, one's own share in being, precisely as one's to own – and hence as always liable to being  
24 captured, being dispossessed of itself, and being (dis)owned by others – rather than producing it and  
25 experiencing it instead as that which must not be disowned at any cost and indeed cannot be owned  
26 by anyone at all' (163).  
27 11 Rancière, *Aisthesis*, ix.  
28 12 Ibid., x.  
29 13 Ibid., xi.  
30 14 See Parisi and Portanova, who conclude their brief discussion of enactive cognition (Varela and  
31 Thompson) with the following: 'cognition is not equivalent to a form of information processing that is  
32 able to run on any system, but emerges out of the performing activities of being in the world'. Then  
33 turn to the extended functionalism of Clark: 'extended cognition posits the primary function of  
34 thought in terms of a minimal Cartesianism, according to which the mind exists before the body' by  
35 affirming that 'computation, or the formal architecture of algorithms, only remains limited to a closed  
36 formalism if one does not take into consideration how algorithms themselves tend towards abstraction,  
37 infinity, or the reality of the incomputable' (ibid.). A thought of algorithmic experience must  
38 acknowledge the possibility 'that it is the very capacity of software as first of all a prehension of abstract  
39 mathematical ideas to be not only ubiquitous but also able to articulate different spatio-temporal con-  
40 figurations in a bodily movement or a whole city' (ibid.).  
41 15 Parisi, *Contagious Architecture*, ix.  
42 16 Anna Tsing, 'Supply Chains and the Human Condition', *Rethinking Marxism* 21.2 (2009): 148–76.  
43 17 See Soenke Zehle, 'The Autonomy of Gesture: of Lifestream Logistics and Playful Profanations', *Dis-*  
44 *tinktion: Scandinavian Journal of Social Theory* 13.3 (2012): 341–43.  
45 18 Of the contributors to this multidisciplinary body of research, we have been most interested in the  
46 perspectives of Franco 'Bifo' Berardi, Alain Ehrenberg, Michel Foucault and Bernard Stiegler.  
47 19 See Anselm Franke (ed.), *Animism*, Berlin: Sternberg Press, 2010.  
48 20 See André Leroi-Gourhan, *Gesture and Speech*, trans. Anna Bostock Berger, MIT Press, 1993; Bernard  
Stiegler, *Technics and Time, 1: The Fault of Epimetheus*, trans. Richard Beardsworth and George Collins,  
Stanford: Stanford University Press, 1998, 175.  
21 Geert Lovink, 'Hermes on the Hudson: Notes on Media Theory after Snowdon', *E-Flux* (forth-  
coming), <http://www.e-flux.com/journals/>. And Alexander R. Galloway, Eugene Thacker and  
McKenzie Wark, *Excommunication: Three Inquiries in Media and Mediation*, Chicago: University of Chi-  
cago Press, 2014.  
22 SAP, *Helping the World Run Better*, 2012 Annual Report, 4.  
23 SAP Analytics, 'The Rise of Dark Data: A Journey To The Network Of Truth', 2013, a comic-style  
call to join an (all-male) team of data visualization 'superheroes'. <http://www.sap-com/datageek>.

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- 1 Although certainly a popular visual idiom, superheroism's uneasy relationship to politics seems symp-  
2 tomatic both of a state of exception (and ultimately the disappearance of the political as sovereign  
3 decision passes on to the anti-democratic figure of the superhero) and a contemporary form of the  
4 'social relevance' (DC Comics) movement in popular culture in which (now) data analysts are assumed  
5 to be key political actors.
- 6 24 See Julian Kücklich, 'Precarious Playbour: Modders and the Digital Games Industry', *Fibreculture Journal*  
7 5 (2005), [http://five.fibreculturejournal.org/fcj-025-precarius-playbour-modders-and-the-digital-](http://five.fibreculturejournal.org/fcj-025-precarius-playbour-modders-and-the-digital-games-industry/)  
8 [games-industry/](http://five.fibreculturejournal.org/fcj-025-precarius-playbour-modders-and-the-digital-games-industry/). See also Trebor Scholz (ed.), *Digital Labor: The Internet as Playground and Factory*, New  
9 York, Routledge, 2013.
- 10 25 Viktor Mayer-Schoenberger and Kenneth Cukier, *Big Data: A Revolution That Will Transform How We*  
11 *Live, Work, and Think*, New York: Eamon Dolan / Houghton Mifflin Harcourt, 2013.
- 12 26 Evgeny Morozov, *To Save Everything Click Here: The Folly of Technological Solutionism*, New York:  
13 Public Affairs, 2013.
- 14 27 See Lance Ulanoff, 'Amazon Knows What You Want Before You Buy It', *Mashable*, 22 January 2014,  
15 <http://mashable.com/2014/01/21/amazon-anticipatory-shipping-patent/>
- 16 28 See also Amazon's combination of 'random' and 'directed' storage of products as a technique for both  
17 labour management and inventory optimization in Clare Lyster, 'The Logistical Figure', *Cabinet: A*  
18 *Quarterly of Art and Culture* 47 (Fall, 2012): 56.
- 19 29 Randy Martin, 'After Economy? Social Logics of the Derivative', *Social Text* 31.1 (Spring, 2013): 90.
- 20 30 See McKenzie Wark, 'A More Lovingly Made World', *Cultural Studies Review* 19.1 (2013): 302.  
21 Available at: <http://epress.lib.uts.edu.au/journals/index.php/csrj/index>
- 22 31 Ibid., 303.
- 23 32 See Joseph J. Tanke, *Jacques Rancière: An Introduction. Philosophy Politics, Aesthetics*, London: Con-  
24 tinuum, 2011, 150: 'How, given the overwhelming tendency of the world to naturalize its distinctions,  
25 distributions, silences, and prejudices, do people manage to conceive the world otherwise?' The sense  
26 that the assumption that art can and will redistribute the sensible is not an effective way of engaging  
27 the enclosure of experience is widely shared among critics of Rancière. See, for example, Hal Foster,  
28 'What's the Problem with Critical Art?', *London Review of Books* 35.19 (10/10/2013), 14–15, [http://](http://www.lrb.co.uk/v35/n19/hal-foster/whats-the-problem-with-critical-art/)  
29 [www.lrb.co.uk/v35/n19/hal-foster/whats-the-problem-with-critical-art/](http://www.lrb.co.uk/v35/n19/hal-foster/whats-the-problem-with-critical-art/): 'certainly art is no match for  
30 the image and information industries that control and concentrate "the sensible" with such ease and  
31 efficiency' (ibid.).
- 32 33 Maurizio Lazzarato, *The Making of Indebted Man*, trans. Joshua David Jordan, Los Angeles: Semiotext(e),  
33 2012, 71. See also Randy Martin, *Financialization of Daily Life*, Philadelphia, PA: Temple University  
34 Press, 2002.
- 35 34 Alexander R. Galloway, *The Interface Effect*, Cambridge: Polity, 2012, 139. Also see Tatiana Bazzichelli,  
36 *Rethinking Oppositions in Art, Hactivism and the Business of Social Networking*, Aarhus: Aarhus University  
37 Digital Aesthetics Research Center, 2013, <http://disruptiv.biz>, for another example of the search for  
38 non-antagonistic concepts of the political at a time when disruption has become a paradigm of com-  
39 mercial innovation (and the artisanal maker cultures surveyed by Chris Anderson or Cory Doctorow  
40 not only mirror the start-up cultures of the previous decade but take the infrastructures of a global  
41 venture capital scene, ranging from small crowdfunding to major investors, as a given).
- 42 35 Erich Hörl, 'The Artificial Intelligence of Sense: The History of Sense and Technology after Jean-Luc  
43 Nancy (by way of Gilbert Simondon)', trans. Arne De Boever, *Parrhesia* 17 (2013): 11–24, 12, [http://](http://www.parrhesiajournal.org/parrhesia17/parrhesia17_horl.pdf)  
44 [www.parrhesiajournal.org/parrhesia17/parrhesia17\\_horl.pdf](http://www.parrhesiajournal.org/parrhesia17/parrhesia17_horl.pdf).
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## 23

# COMPUTATIONAL AESTHETICS IN THE PRACTICES OF ART AS POLITICS

*Patricia Ticiento Clough*

The practices of art as politics are perhaps most challenged today by the interrelated expansion of digital technologies and the intensified commodification of human processes. In what follows I want to address this challenge by focusing on the recent turn to ontology by philosophers who are reevaluating the potentiality of objects. I want to propose that the ontological turn—whether it be elaborated in object-oriented ontologies or in process-oriented ontologies, is registering the trauma of the development of the capacities of digital technology and the ongoing commodification of human processes: that is, the trauma of realizing that potentiality is not, or not only, a matter of human consciousness, human cognition, or human agency. The philosophical assumption that there is a primordial rapport between human and world, or that there is a correlation between knowing and being, has been unsettled with traumatic effects.

Philosophy, however, is not only registering the trauma, it also is responding to it by rethinking the potentiality of the object. There is ongoing debate as to whether potentiality is appropriated by objects through relations or processes between objects such that objects are reducible to the relations that constitute them or whether potentiality is immanent to objects and they therefore are irreducible to relations or other objects, including human subjects. On both sides of this debate, however, objects no longer are to be understood as the objects of our commonsense; rather the debate is a philosophical speculation on potentiality that is other than human: the potentiality of the object. It is not so surprising then that the ontological turn is accompanied by a return to aesthetics as a way to recognize the object's potentiality, its agency or its affective capacity without these being correlated exclusively to human cognition, consciousness, or agency.

The return to aesthetics, however, is not a return to the sublime, where there is the experience of the overwhelming disjuncture between imagination and understanding, along with a conscious recognition of this failure of human comprehension. Rather it is about objects having the capacity to affect and to be affected by each other such that through their affective interchange, objects can be “slightly or massively changed, caused to become different things” (Shaviro, 2010:10). It is the aesthetic of the beautiful where “what is regarded as beautiful is not experienced as a passive thing or as something that merely produces an effect in us but rather as inviting or requiring something from us, a response that may be owed to it ... , as if the beautiful thing had an independent life of its own ... ” (Moran, 2012: 213). The return to aesthetics however is no mere return of the object to a naïve empiricism or scientific

1 positivism. Instead, the philosophers presently concerned with aesthetics are elaborating an *aes-*  
2 *thetic causality*; they are delivering causality from those forms of causality that for some time have  
3 given humans a sense of control over life, over matter, over each other and have shaped the  
4 practices of art as politics.  
5

### 6 **The Ontological Turn, Art, and Commodities**

7

8 Surely the practices of art as politics are challenged by the interrelated expansion of the capacities  
9 of digital technology and the commodification of human processes as these undermine art’s  
10 autonomy from the market and its singular claim to aesthetics. After all if art has distinguished  
11 itself as art, it often has been in terms of its relative freedom to simulate reality, to offer a supra-  
12 empirical sensibility and in that be able to give a critical perspective on human reality. However,  
13 there is a growing

14  
15 lack of faith both in the intrinsic value of art as a de-alienating human endeavor (since  
16 art today is so intertwined with market systems globally) and in democratic political  
17 processes (in whose name so many injustices and barbarities are conducted).

(Bishop, 2012: 45)

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20 Not surprisingly art today claims its political and critical mission often in terms of participation  
21 that recognizes the alienating and divisive effects of capitalism. Claire Bishop reproduces the  
22 argument artists make: “given the market’s near total saturation of our image repertoire—so  
23 the argument goes—artistic practice can no longer revolve around the construction of objects to  
24 be consumed by a passive bystander” (35).

25 Bishop goes further to propose that while these artists value their work for being opposed to  
26 individualism and the commodity object, they often do not recognize “that so many other  
27 aspects of this art practice dovetail even more perfectly with neoliberalism’s recent forms (net-  
28 work, mobility, project work, affect)” (39). While Bishop is pointing specifically to practitioners  
29 of participatory art, it is clear that the nature of the object in the current context of the capitalist  
30 mode of consumption is central to rethinking art as politics generally, as is the ubiquity of digital  
31 technology in neo-liberalism’s forms. If we were to evaluate Bishop’s conclusion that what is  
32 needed is a “reassertion of art’s inventive forms of negation that are valuable in their own right”  
33 (45), then we need first to rethink the object and commodification; we need to rethink neo-  
34 liberalism’s forms in terms of the developments of digital technology.

35 After all, commodities for some time now have been something very different than discrete  
36 goods to be consumed and in their consumption produce surplus value.

37 Christine Harold (2009) points to the way commodities now are designed as objects that can  
38 stir affect, promising a transformative experience in the object’s use rather than in the mere  
39 possession of it. Modeling a user’s future manipulation of it, the commodity is designed to  
40 sensually transmit what Bill Brown (2001) has called a ‘creative juice’ which will be transfor-  
41 mative for its user, bringing a not-yet lived future into the present. The aura and the value  
42 of the commodity are in its transmission of affect, where affect refers not to emotion but to  
43 a bodily capacity, a bodily readiness, a trigger to action, including the action of feeling an  
44 emotion. While emotions are commensurate with a subject, affect is an immeasurable, non-  
45 conscious, a-subjective capacity.

46 Nigel Thrift goes further arguing that the commodity now points to a process that is  
47 ‘intended’ to produce nothing but more process as its surplus value and specifically to orient  
48 surplus toward inventiveness; or what he describes as “commodifying the push of will with the

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1 aim of producing enhanced ‘invention power’” (2012: 142). For Thrift, this not only involves  
2 what is saleable but increasingly what can be appropriated for selling, or more likely renting,  
3 since now consumers often pay to use a commodity or rather participate in a process for a given  
4 amount of time. Commodification, as Thrift sees it, is no longer alienating; rather “it requires  
5 buy-in, literally and metaphorically ... ” (143). The distinctions between consumption, pro-  
6 duction and distribution collapse into circulation through what Thrift calls “an expressive  
7 infrastructure” or what I have called “an affective background” (2012) to suggest that sociality is  
8 an ongoing effect of a market circulation of affect. In this sense affect is not only an immea-  
9 sureable, a-subjective nonconscious capacity, it also is irreducible to a biological and physical  
10 immediacy in that affect is a technical artifact as well.

11 In other words, affect is a capacity that raises questions about calculation or measure linked as  
12 affect is to the digital that can make what is a-subjective, nonconscious, and immeasurable, felt  
13 or experience-able. Given this growing awareness of affect as a technical artifact, there also is a  
14 shift from conceiving the social only as an expressive infrastructure, or an affective background,  
15 to conceiving the social also as a “calculative ambience.” Calculative ambience is Jordan  
16 Crandell’s term for a sociality where “calculation, action and materiality intertwine” such that  
17 “gestures, objects and environments can ‘speak,’ however seductively or violently, in ways that  
18 are not always addressed to humans or known by them” (2010: 71). Crandell goes further  
19 suggesting that through “a mathematical seeing, patterns come into view that previously could  
20 not be seen by the naked eye, in ways that augment, or occlude, traditional observational  
21 expertise and human intuition” (75).

22 Following Crandell, Mark Hansen has begun to rethink the body in terms of a calculative  
23 ambience. In contrast to his earlier work, Hansen now proposes that we can no longer “take up  
24 embodiment as a site where diffuse data is processed to yield images or experiences ... ; rather, in  
25 the face of technical incursions that render the body directly ‘readable’ by machines, we must  
26 embrace a notion of the body as a society of microsensibilities themselves atomically suscep-  
27 tible to technical capture” (2013). Rethinking the body also involves rethinking thought and  
28 consciousness, since consciousness, as Hanson sees it, is after the fact of the presentation of data;  
29 there is no possible *subjectification* of what today we call big data or ubiquitous calculation (2013).<sup>1</sup>

30 From a different perspective on data, bodies, and thought, Luciana Parisi argues that the  
31 algorithmic capacity to synthetically design bodies and thoughts is not merely simulation of  
32 what exists but rather a data manipulation that shows what biology or matter have been doing  
33 at the atomic level all along (2013, 33–51). Whereas, for Hanson data is coming at conscious-  
34 ness from the outside, for Parisi data are and always have been working in biology and matter;  
35 nonetheless, both Parisi and Hansen are drawn to engage critically with algorithmic archi-  
36 tectures that are parsing—collecting and distributing—big data. Both also are seeking insight in  
37 current philosophical discussions about ontology and aesthetics that I will further explore in the  
38 discussion following about the relationship of aesthetics, ontology, and the calculative ambience  
39 of big data. Surely art, its objects and practices, are implicated in this discussion, as is a politics of  
40 commodification and the market.

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### Object-oriented Ontology and Ubiquitous Calculation

44 I have argued elsewhere that object-oriented ontology, although differing from ontologies of  
45 becoming, can play a part in adjusting the latter to the fact that processes of becoming already are  
46 engaged fully in commodification and the market including the market in big data (Clough, 2012).  
47 I first made this argument in relationship to nanotechnology and the nanodesign of artificial  
48 atoms or “programmable matter,” in order to point out that nanotechnology and object-oriented



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1 ontology both are refocusing attention on the primary and secondary qualities of objects. In her  
2 writing on programmable matter, Parisi (2012: 38) argues that in its being able to place

3  
4 each atom ... in a selected position to become an active or structural component of a  
5 living system that is being redesigned, nanotechnology is neutralizing the distinction  
6 between the physical composition of materials—atoms, photons, protons, electrons—  
7 and their properties, such as colour, shape, smoothness, brightness, and so on.

8  
9 All qualities, primary and secondary, are changeable as programmable matter promises that:  
10 “material can change its substance instantaneously as in the design and debugging of software” (38).  
11 Programmable matter “promises an architecture of instantaneous realization of potentialities” (38).

12 Parisi’s treatment of nanotechnology directed me to the philosophical distinction of the pri-  
13 mary and secondary qualities of objects that are the focus of object-oriented ontologies, espe-  
14 cially Graham Harman’s work. Harman’s (2009) particular brand of object-oriented ontology is  
15 both anti-correlationist and anti-relationist. As such Harman posits that there is nothing outside  
16 the object that contributes to its realness; there are no other agents that make an object real, or  
17 that are not of the real object itself. Perhaps with misleading terms, Harman argues that the real  
18 object is *withdrawn* not only from human consciousness, an anti-correlationist position, but  
19 objects also are withdrawn from all other objects and from each object’s qualities, an anti-  
20 relationist position. The real object is distinct from the primary qualities needed for it to be  
21 what it is (in this sense a real object is something like an essence but not an eternal one); it also  
22 is distinct from the secondary qualities that make the object what it is for other objects includ-  
23 ing human subjects. Nonetheless, Harman argues that it is through qualities or in the translation  
24 of real objects through their qualities that relations between objects occur; it is also how change  
25 is made possible (135–148). In sum, change is immanent to real objects in that the object’s  
26 qualities are the object’s indeterminate internal complexity. All qualities of objects might be  
27 thought of as secondary and changeable in that they are transformed and transforming in the  
28 relations objects have with each other. Not only is the privilege of human consciousness dis-  
29 placed (or profoundly opened to interrogation), but the ontology of the object finally becomes  
30 accessible to criticism in the aftermath of the deconstruction of the epistemological subject.

31 Whatever else might be said about object-oriented ontology, the enduring reality ascribed to  
32 objects by Harman has seemed to me to offer a philosophical support for criticism when even  
33 primary qualities at all scales of matter are seen as a changeable, dynamic processes and  
34 when dynamic processes generally are subject to the value of market circulation, including the  
35 circulation of big data as commodity. Or to put it another way, a turn to object-oriented  
36 ontology might support embracing the displacement of the primacy of the phenomenology  
37 of human agency while philosophically granting complexity to all entities. The experience of  
38 this displacement through digital technicity may well be our only way to recognize and engage  
39 the sensibility or the affect of all objects including our own sensibility or affect as a matter of art  
40 as politics.

41 More recently Parisi also has taken up Harman’s object-oriented ontology and has found it  
42 relevant for approaching digital technology especially the algorithmic architectures that parse big  
43 data. For Parisi, algorithmic architectures can no longer be thought as exclusively aiming to  
44 predict or calculate probabilities for an optimal solution. Rather they are to be understood as  
45 real objects, spatiotemporal data structures, where calculation is “not equivalent to the linear  
46 succession of data sets” (2013: 9). Instead “each set of instructions is conditioned by what  
47 cannot be calculated: the incomputable algorithms that disclose the holes, gaps, irregularities,  
48 and anomalies within the formal order of sequences”(9). Algorithmic architectures,

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1 ontologically speaking, are actual objects, or spatiotemporalities, where indeterminacy is  
2 immanent to them. It is in these terms that Harman’s object-oriented ontology is useful; it  
3 rejects both the imperative of connectionism, that is the philosophical assumption that all things  
4 are connected and it challenges systems theory or certain assumptions about how parts and  
5 wholes are related.

6 But, as already noted, Harman argues instead that all objects are indivisible and irreducible to  
7 other objects. Objects do not fuse into one another or into a whole; nor are they continuously  
8 changing in terms of a presumed relationality. However, for Harman, as Parisi notes, objects are  
9 “multi-mediatic,” where the qualities of objects are media spaces or media objects; they are not  
10 just channels or the links of the relations between objects (Harman, 2005: 48, 49, 70, 91–92).  
11 Objects relate to each other through these media spaces that are the object’s own indeterminate  
12 internal complexity. Another way to put it is that real withdrawing objects only relate “vicar-  
13 iously” or aesthetically; it is the qualities of objects that cause objects to relate and to change,  
14 what Harman refers to as “vicarious causality” (2009: 169–234, 2007). But in turning to what  
15 she calls a “computational aesthetics,” Parisi offers both a critique of Harman and a qualified  
16 object-oriented ontology of algorithms (2013: 10).

### 17 18 **Calculation, Indeterminacy, and Aesthetics** 19

20 Although Parisi draws on Harman to support her conception of algorithms as spatiotemporal  
21 objects rather than mere channels or links in the relations of objects, she also finds that his  
22 argument that objects relate and change only through their qualities to be mistaken. She insists that  
23 quantity must also be considered, since, from the perspective of algorithmic objects, the quantities  
24 involved are not merely a reduction of qualities, sensory or physical; nor are they immanent to  
25 qualities. They are quantities conditioned by their own indeterminacies since algorithmic objects  
26 are inseparable from incomputable data or incompressible information (2013: 52–53).

27 To further her discussion of quantities and objects, Parisi turns from Harman to Whitehead  
28 and describes algorithms as actual entities that are prehensive. Defining prehension in terms of  
29 incomputable probabilities, Parisi puts algorithms beyond probability and cybernetic control.  
30 Control no longer is intended as the calculation of the future by means of prediction, or  
31 the calculation of the unknown through preset probabilities; it is no longer only a matter of  
32 preemption. Instead post-probabilistic uncertainties or incomputable data are operating in  
33 algorithmic architectures to allow for the arrival of novelty (137). Again drawing on Whitehead,  
34 Parisi proposes that the arrival of novelty is “not something that depends on the subjective  
35 impressions of interactive users, but rather involves the parametric prehension of data, a pre-  
36 hension that derives its own regions and spatiotemporal extension from already programmed  
37 sequences” (137).

38 In other words, the arrival of novelty in algorithmic architectures means that past data is  
39 brought into the present through the transformation of that data by the ingression of incom-  
40 putable probabilities or what Whitehead called ‘eternal objects.’ The prehension of data from  
41 the past, as Parisi sees it, is not simply an inheritance but a computational transformation, where  
42 experience is infected with abstraction or where abstraction is a decisive factor in any actual  
43 occasion of experience (139). Here, the incomputable is always already valuable information  
44 since it allows for resetting parameters producing a change in relation to rules.

45 Calculative aesthetics both adds to the recent conceptualization of aesthetics offered by phi-  
46 losophers engaged in the ontological turn and adjusts aesthetics to ubiquitous calculation. What  
47 already has been claimed for the aesthetic in contemporary object-oriented philosophies is that  
48 “the aesthetic dimension is the causal dimension,” as Timothy Morton puts it (2012a: 206).

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1 Harman (2007: 221) too argues that “aesthetics is first philosophy,” and as such “causality is  
2 alluring”. Shaviro argues that aesthetics allows “feeling an object for its own sake,” beyond  
3 those aspects of it that can be understood or used (2010: 7). He goes a long way with Harman  
4 in arguing that: “It is only aesthetically, beyond understanding and will, that I can appreciate the  
5 actus of the thing being what it is, in what Harman calls ‘the sheer sincerity of existence’” (7).  
6 And what the thing is or why the object is alluring is in the object’s differing from itself. It is in  
7 this sense that Morton argues: “causality happens because this dance of nonidentity is taking  
8 place on the ontological inside of an object” (2012b) from which the forces of repulsion or  
9 attraction radiate and are a “lure to feeling,” as Whitehead puts it. But for Whitehead aesthetic  
10 causality is not only a matter of the qualities of object. For Whitehead, aesthetic causality refers  
11 to all entities in that they are sentient or experiential through and through. All entities or  
12 objects—not just humans—have purpose; as Whitehead sees it: they are drawn to novelty by a  
13 ‘final causality.’

14 Whitehead’s aesthetic causality draws on his distinction between “causal efficacy” and “pre-  
15 sentational immediacy” and between “final causation” and “efficient causation” (1978). While  
16 presentational immediacy refers to the sense perception of things as presented, causal efficacy  
17 refers to the reality of the data of the past and the passing into the future, or cause and effect. For  
18 Whitehead, however, final causation is about purpose, or potentiality immanent to each actual  
19 entity or object, which, although not actualized, nonetheless is real. Final causality thereby adds  
20 to efficient causality, the potentialities of eternal objects, or for Parisi, incomputable probabilities,  
21 ingressing into actuality as novelty. Furthermore, final causality is not teleological; and as Parisi  
22 sees it, this means that eternal objects are “immanent to and part and parcel of any actual enti-  
23 ties,” as the “forms of process and spatiotemporal structures of data” (2013: 63).

24 Turning the recent philosophical engagement with aesthetics toward an aesthetics of calcu-  
25 lation, Parisi counters Harman’s critique of Whitehead’s eternal objects; she insists that their  
26 potentiality is neither transcendent nor outside the object as Harman proposes. Not only does  
27 she go on to argue that algorithmic architectures are spatiotemporal objects infected with  
28 incomputable data or quantities; she also proposes that the quantitative is immanent to every  
29 object or entity. It is this that echoes my speculation that stipulating indeterminacy as immanent  
30 to calculation gives a philosophical ground for criticism in these times of big data and ubiquitous  
31 calculation. It also points to what constitutes the generalized trauma of development in digital  
32 technology: calculation and incomputable data become the necessary horizon for criticism.  
33 All that has stood, and so much has, as qualitative supplement to quantitative measure no longer  
34 holds a privileged position. The trauma of the digital then is in the displacement of the sup-  
35 plement of meaning and language, subject and self-reflection from their privileged position in  
36 epistemology and ontology. It is in terms of this displacement that the practices of art as politics  
37 must be rethought.  
38

**Conclusion: Art as Politics**

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41 The reevaluation of aesthetics as causality is occurring just when affective capacities such as  
42 inventiveness are globally circulated in the capitalist production of wealth. Not only does “art not  
43 simulate commerce so much as commerce simulates art,” as Thrift (2012) would put it. All works  
44 of knowledge production (and so much work is just that) now must be works of art or art work.  
45 In other words aesthetics is becoming pervasive and art is losing one of its domains of expertise as  
46 well as anything like a clear definition. What isn’t art if everything owes its force of being to  
47 aesthetics? Art will be part and parcel of everything just when everything, as I have been arguing,  
48 will be infected with incomputable data.

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1 This implies much more than a simple move or the next move beyond participatory art; it  
2 may mean that there is no hope that “the value of art’s inventive form of negation can be  
3 reasserted.” At least it is not clear what might be a form of negation when potentiality is con-  
4 ceived as immanent to calculation and the calculation of incomputable data immanent to all  
5 things. But it is precisely in stipulating the ontology of algorithmic architectures as objects that  
6 makes it possible to draw out the political effects of the digital engagement with the incom-  
7 putable; it also makes the need to do so clear and pressing. In responding to this need,  
8 the practices of art as politics may find themselves time and time again bundled with com-  
9 modities and market values and that it only is from within these bundlings that criticism needs  
10 be fashioned. It is the abundance or excess of these bundlings in that they are infected with  
11 incomputable quantities that make it possible and necessary for art as politics to be a positive  
12 practice rather than a negative one.

13 Erin Manning recently has proposed that: “Art can teach us again how to see in the before of  
14 form where we might still glimpse the relational force of an eternal object coursing through the  
15 actual” (2013: 178). This, what Manning refers to as the art work’s “technicity,” “foregrounds  
16 how the bringing to emergence of the work of art must always occur against the grain of pre-  
17 existent form” (179). Here Manning draws on Whitehead while drawing us back to the con-  
18 ception of art as making available to humans the experience of what is not easily experienced,  
19 what is not experience-able without technicity. But if today, the technicity of the work of art is  
20 digital’s engagement with the incomputable, with its productivity and its forms of expression,  
21 then this drive to make experience-able, as I have suggested, meets the drive of capitalism  
22 beyond systems theory, connectionism, probability, and cybernetic control—all of which  
23 depend on algorithmic architectures that are giving traumatic memories of the before of form. It  
24 must be noted therefore that this move beyond and before is neither utopian nor liberatory; it  
25 nevertheless is indicative of a new sociality including its yet unrealized possibilities, a sociality  
26 that Randy Martin has described as befitting a derivative economy (2013).

27 Extrapolating from its common perception as a mere financial instrument that bundles  
28 investments against potential risks, Martin points to changes in sociality informed by the deri-  
29 vative that also are indicated by the algorithmic architectures of big data: both undermine the  
30 conceit of the system or the taken for granted reduction of parts to the whole. For Martin, “as  
31 opposed to the fixed relation between part and whole that informs the system metaphysic, the  
32 derivative acts as movement between these polarities that are rendered unstable through its very  
33 contestation of accurate price and fundamental value ... ” (91). From the perspective of this  
34 sociality, the practices of art as politics are part of a bundling, the force of which is at least in  
35 part incomputable probabilities, all the possibilities between price and fundamental value that  
36 are unactualized but still real.

37 If we are to find hope in this, however, it is only with recognition that the movement  
38 between price and value is not a movement between structure and individual or part and  
39 system; it is not a move in which or about which art can clarify the political, can clarify  
40 something supposedly hidden, the in-depth subjugation of the individual or collectivity. Here  
41 art instead might follow critical theory in its turn to “postsymptomatic practices that do not aim  
42 at uncovering what is concealed” (Jane Elliott and Gillian Harkins 2013: 9). Instead practices are  
43 forms of play with objects, that is, with the mediatic spaces or the indeterminate, internal  
44 complexity of all objects or entities where incomputable probabilities are still real and present.  
45 The practices of art as politics are play that realizes other possibilities, all those other possibilities  
46 that are bundled with incomputable probabilities.

47 But to realize other possibilities, art as politics must necessarily engage in philosophy,  
48 mathematics, science, media, and technology; art as politics must be profoundly

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1 interdisciplinary, and beyond the disciplinary, in speculating with the real in practice and per-  
2 formance. This will require drawing together those others who will assist in realizing unac-  
3 tualized but real possibilities. It will require all sorts of groupings and alliances in making  
4 interdisciplinarity more than what it has been. It will recognize that interdisciplinarity can also  
5 be what Ian Bogost has described as a “carpentry” that “entails making things that explain how  
6 things make their world” (2012: 93). The practices of art as politics must lead the way,  
7 instructing us in how to play and with our play make the world anew.

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## 24

# TOWARD PARTICIPATORY AESTHETICS

## An Interview with Claire Bishop

*Claire Bishop interviewed by David Riff of the group Chto Delat,  
and curator/critic Ekaterina Degot*

Moscow, Russia. 15 January 15, 2010

**David Riff:** I've heard that you are working on a new book on "participatory aesthetics." I am curious to hear how do you define this topic, and how does it relate to your earlier work on "relational aesthetics." Could you tell us what you are working on? What is your book about?

**Claire Bishop:** In the beginning, I wrestled a lot with terminology. I wanted to do a book about the kind of work that has emerged in the wake of relational aesthetics and which tends to be called "socially engaged art." But the term is ambiguous: what art isn't socially engaged? Doesn't most art have its eyes open to the world and engage with it in some way? There are other terms for this kind of process-based practice: Grant Kester refers to it as "dialogical aesthetics"; Carlos Basualdo calls it "experimental communities". To me the term "Relational aesthetics" isn't useful for this work at all; it denotes a brief period in the 1990s when a few artists from Italy and France and Britain were making work that engaged with social networks and the interactions between different media (for example, reconsidering the exhibition as a film). As such, I don't 'think relational' is such a useful term to describe the work produced later and often in reaction to Bourriaud's theory. Lygia Clark also used the word "relational", but in a completely different way. So the term has a heritage that is imprecise on the one hand, and historically confusing on the other.

As with all these things, you need to start deploying a new word to clear the ground and declare what you're talking about. Recently, I've come to use "participatory". I want to distinguish the participatory from the "interactive", by which I refer to work from the Sixties and Seventies based on a one-to-one relationship between the viewer and technology (eg pushing a button, or trying on a piece of clothing). For me, "participatory" connotes the idea of several people; more than one person producing the work, and people being the medium of the work. If you think back to relational aesthetics, only Rirkrit Tiravanija is participatory in that sense. The other artists make situations, objects, experiences that set in motion a train of relationships, expanding

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1 the logic of the exhibition along a spatio-temporal spectrum, but they're not really  
2 using people in this way. So, to summarise, I'm advocating two connotations to the  
3 word participation: involving lots of people, and people being the medium of the  
4 work. This can be seen visually when you look at photographs of these projects (I am  
5 interested in documents and not just in the process): what you have is an archive of an  
6 incredible number of photographs of people doing things, but on the whole you're  
7 not quite sure what they're doing. You have to rely on text, descriptions and other  
8 forms of supplementary knowledge to work out what is being proven by these endless  
9 photographs of people on the street, eating or drinking, sitting around a table or  
10 having a discussion.

11 **DR:** So what is the scope of your research?

12 **CB:** I began this work in 2004, and it's become very long-winded. I wanted to make a his-  
13 tory and theory of participatory art, which (at the moment) is not at all canonical,  
14 and has no history that we can easily fit together. The book begins with the historic  
15 avantgarde – Futurism, Paris Dada, and Russian experiments in the 1920s – as ways to  
16 think about spectatorship and public space. It picks up in the 1960s with four case studies  
17 looking at the participatory impulse as manifest under very different ideological condi-  
18 tions. The first is Paris in the 1960s: the *Situationist International* journal responding  
19 to consumer capitalism by rejecting art in favour of heightened experiences of everyday  
20 life ('situations'); I'm also looking at their relationship to Lebel's happenings, on the one  
21 hand, and the work of GRAV (Groupe Recherche d'Art Visuel) on the other. All are  
22 interested in activating viewers as participants, but strongly believe there is a wrong and a  
23 right way to be doing this. The next case study is Argentine conceptualism in the 1960s:  
24 aggressive forms of social performance produced in response to an increasingly repressive  
25 military dictatorship. Here I'm interested in the theorist Oscar Masotta and his influence  
26 on artists at that time.

27 My third case study is socially-oriented art under socialism, mainly focusing on  
28 actions and happenings produced in Czechoslovakia in the late 60s and 70s. This  
29 period I find fascinating: what does it mean to produce art collectively, when col-  
30 lectivism is ostensibly the state norm and requirement? This work requires a complete  
31 shift in our Western understanding of public and private space. What is notable in  
32 this work is the way in which artists relocate their work away from the streets and  
33 out to the countryside, making art with and for a small group of trusted friends.  
34 Collective Actions Group, here in Moscow, are a good example of this tendency.  
35 I am particularly interested in Monastyrsky's cerebral approach to participation:  
36 rather than emphasising pure presence and immediacy, he encourages a subjective,  
37 literary, and above all delayed response to the situation that participants thought they  
38 had experienced.

39 My final example concerns a pendant of cases from the UK in the 1970s: Artists  
40 Placement Group (set up by Barbara Steveni and John Latham) and the Community  
41 Arts Movement. These represent two different ways of working with society in the  
42 wake of 1968. In the latter, the artist becomes the facilitator of other people's crea-  
43 tivity; APG, by contrast, sought to install artists in business and government, in the  
44 hope that they would have a long term impact on these organizations. The book ends  
45 with a handful of polemics about contemporary art since the 1990s: delegated per-  
46 formance art, art as education, and so on.

47 **DR:** What makes it necessary to undertake this kind of massive rethinking today? Why is it  
48 necessary to search for an art historical geneology of participatory art now?

*Claire Bishop, David Riff and Ekaterina Degot*

- 1       **CB:** For me this question is urgent because I don't agree with the framework through which  
2       the art of social participation is presently discussed. This framework is grounded in a  
3       discourse of immediate social goals, political correctness, and a blinkered relationship to  
4       the present that lacks a historical perspective. It is also overridingly ethical: the dominant  
5       criteria for discussing participatory work is that if it has good intentions, it's good art. This  
6       has arisen largely because the discussion around participation derives from curators, who  
7       in general have a much better overview of a given project than critics. But their tendency  
8       is always to defend the work morally rather than artistically. This is very dubious, because  
9       when you operate in these terms you already know your position toward a work of art. I  
10       absolutely resist this pre-judgment. It gives rise to knee-jerk reactions to some important  
11       art (for example that of Sierra or Zmijewski). These artists, to my mind, are reflecting on  
12       ethics, rather than producing work to be judged ethically; they are thinking artistically  
13       (ie through images and performance) about how we construct ethical frameworks.  
14       I believe you need to engage with a work of art on its own terms, and not have your  
15       mind made up before you see or experience it.
- 16       **DR:** So it's time for an aesthetic rethinking of participatory practices? What would the aesthetic  
17       criteria be to look at participatory art?
- 18       **CB:** Well here we have to be really careful to use the word "aesthetic." In recent years  
19       I've been operating with Rancière's definition of aesthetics, but today I'm more  
20       aware of its limitations; maybe we should just talk about artistic criteria. What I  
21       would like to keep from Rancière is his insistence on an affective response to art, an  
22       appreciation of its unintelligibility, rather than a rational approval founded on other  
23       (eg social, ethical) criteria. The projects I like best are the ones that prompt in me an  
24       affective response, rather than a rational sense of "that's worthy" or "what a good  
25       solution to that problem".  
26       This is not a question of visual pleasure but of there needing to be some kind of  
27       punctum (rather than just a studium), to use Barthes' terms.
- 28       **DR:** What is this affect based upon? Is it the affect of watching people turn into objects and  
29       becoming the material of the art work? Or is it a vicarious pleasure from watching  
30       people participate in some social process?
- 31       **CB:** I don't think it's either of those. I think it's more about the total meaning of the work,  
32       and in this regard it doesn't matter if I'm looking at something live in front of me or a  
33       document from the past. It's a matter of what the whole thing (gesture, context, doc-  
34       umentation) amounts to, and whether the idea and its realisation somehow moves  
35       me. I want to get away from focusing on the work's functional outcome. We can leave  
36       that approach to the sociologists; what is important artistically is that something happens  
37       in a certain time and place.
- 38       **Ekaterina Degot:** So does it matter if a social gesture is effective or not? What about  
39       Thomas Hirschhorn's work? Does it matter that it fails to do what it promises as a social  
40       gesture?
- 41       **CB:** If it's working as a work of art, then something is probably working on a social level too.  
42       In other words, for the project even to get realised means that his collaborators have  
43       agreed to do something.
- 44       **ED:** But what if a project failed, like Hirschhorn's Musée Précaire in Paris? Or do you think  
45       he was really able to teach them about Duchamp?
- 46       **CB:** Why do you say that Musée Précaire failed? For me it's one of his most successful pro-  
47       jects. What you have to recognise in Hirschhorn is that the educational outcome is  
48       not important; that's a red herring. He's not a teacher or a social worker; in fact his work



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1 is a critique of artists adopting that role, which is why he bends the stick the other way  
2 and goes on about art's autonomy.

3 **ED:** So it could be a simulation of a social project that fails but that is a work of art.

4 **CB:** Yes, possibly. But I also want to get away from the functionalist fallacy, ie that something  
5 is a work of art because it fails, that art is art because it lacks any other demonstrable  
6 function. Some good projects can have a function; Tania Bruguera has taught me this  
7 with her concept of arte util ('useful art'). The fact that people are present and partici-  
8 pating in a Hirschhorn project of their own accord means that something is happening to  
9 shift social relations, that the project has its acquired its own momentum.

10 For example, last summer I visited his Biljmer-Spinoza Festival, an installation in the  
11 dead space between several housing estates on the outskirts in Amsterdam. Rather like his  
12 monument to Bataille in Documenta 11, this was a monument to Spinoza: it contained  
13 an information center, a library, a computer room, a bar, and children's workshops every  
14 afternoon where they were taught to reenact 70s performance art.

15 The educational component was carried through to the adults too: every day at 5pm  
16 there was a philosophy lecture by Marcus Steinweg and at 7pm a performance (a play  
17 written by Steinweg and directed by Hirschhorn). With the latter, you never knew how  
18 many people would show up to perform; it was completely unpredictable. But the fact  
19 that some people did show up to hear the lecture, to attend the workshops and to per-  
20 form the play, every single day, was both funny (in its chaotic inexplicability) but also  
21 really moving.

22 To continue your point about education: with the Biljmer-Spinoza Festival it was in  
23 fact impossible to be educated about Spinoza, because the lectures weren't really struc-  
24 tured to be informational, but were more like a stream of philosophical consciousness.  
25 And although the performance was about Spinoza's life, it was also incomprehensibly  
26 avantgarde and really rather Dadaist: there were no characters, no action, no plot in the  
27 text that these kids were reading as they worked out on exercise machines. On one day I  
28 attended there was torrential rain, but rather than postponing the production, everyone  
29 moved under a plastic sheeted roof into a tiny crowded space. There were as many  
30 audiences as performers, who continued reading their lines from sopping wet scripts.

31 For me, the insanity and persistence of the project was its success, the collective will to  
32 keep this eccentric piece going every day. That was beautiful.

33 **DR:** But this is a collective experience something you saw as a witness, as an external observer.  
34 You were watching others participate.

35 **CB:** Yes, but the lines were so blurred; as in the Bataille Monument, there were two bodies of  
36 people producing the work: local residents and visitors. But rather than the slightly  
37 awkward stand-off that was produced in Kassel, in Amsterdam everyone was integrated,  
38 in part due to the formal compression of the installation's structure, which was one entity  
39 and much less sprawling than in Kassel. In between each activity you went to the bar,  
40 you talked to people.

41 In general I like to talk about a first and second audience: the first audience are the  
42 participants, the second audience are those of us who look at these projects afterwards,  
43 who try and decipher these experiences through images and descriptions. I like the way  
44 Hirschhorn is always trying to complicate these two entities; he always finds a way to  
45 transmit the complexity to subsequent audiences, usually in the form of a book.

46 **DR:** So the work's documentation is important?

47 **CB:** Yes, especially when documentation is factored into the piece. Another work that dealt  
48 with this problem intelligently was Tania Bruguera's action at last year's Havana Biennial,

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1 called Tatlin's Whisper #6. At the center of a large colonial courtyard, she placed a large  
2 brown curtain with a podium and many microphones. Cubans were invited to come and  
3 exercise one minute of free speech. Symbolically, something else was integrated too.  
4 Each speaker found themselves flanked by two people in army uniform, and who bun-  
5 dled them off stage if they didn't finish speaking after one minute.

6 And while each person was speaking, they placed a white dove on his/her shoulder, a  
7 live bird, as a reference to a famously charged moment during a speech by Fidel Castro in  
8 1959 when a dove landed on his shoulder. So Bruguera is condensing two things: she  
9 triggers a historical memory but also provides a functional arena, giving people free  
10 speech in a country that doesn't permit it. To get back to the context of our discussion,  
11 what's important is how she dealt with documentation. She didn't arrange to have pic-  
12 tures taken of the performance, but instead issued 200 disposable cameras to the audience.  
13 Artistically, this was fantastic because every time someone went onto the podium you  
14 had 200 yellow boxes being lifted and flashing, creating the impression of a press con-  
15 ference or media environment. This means that there are 200 x 36 photographs of this  
16 performance distributed all over Havana. In addition, people filmed the event and put  
17 the videos onto YouTube, where it has had a massive circulation. I like it very much  
18 when the principle of documentation is factored into the work, when it's in keeping  
19 with the spirit of the work itself.

20 **DR:** In how far is it important that today, collectivity and collaboration are desired com-  
21 modities? What I mean is that one could say: the desire for community affect is  
22 behind all the Facebook subcultures we see today, a desire used to promote certain  
23 models of cultural consumerism. You are shown an image of successful collaboration,  
24 and you buy into whatever model or technology is on sale, because of the image of  
25 people sharing the affect of a community experience. But that image is a fake a lot of  
26 the time. How important is it for participatory art to rest upon genuine collective  
27 moments, on genuine collaboration?

28 **CB:** Part of my critique of participatory art today is seen is that many people still operate with  
29 the old 60s (Situationist) paradigm of false consciousness versus authentic participation. It's  
30 as if mediation signals the death of authenticity. For me, the most interesting projects are  
31 those that take the binaries of mediated and spontaneous, false and genuine and  
32 do something interesting with these paradoxes, to show that participation doesn't only  
33 connote the desire for collective experience. Today, participation is not the radical alter-  
34 native to privatised individualism that it once was.

35 Today, participation also means reality television. It means Flickr and YouTube. It also  
36 means management consultants engineering collective events to make their staff feel more  
37 loyal and committed to a company. For neoliberal governments, participation is partici-  
38 pation in consumer society.

39 So the question of contrived and authentic is much more complicated than a simple  
40 denigration of the participatory artist who makes a video or photograph that also circu-  
41 lates on the market, or a performance that can be bought and sold. Even those artists who  
42 place a premium on immediacy and refuse documentation, such as Tino Sehgal, end up  
43 subjecting us to experiences of extreme artificiality. I like very much some of Phil Col-  
44 lins' video installations, because he reflects on the construction of identity through medi-  
45 ation; his work seems to meditate on how an "authentic" subjectivity can emerge in a  
46 highly mediated, constructed situation; often he uses the conventions of reality television  
47 to achieve this, but the results are painfully funny, poignant and lyrical. Another artist  
48 is Artur Zmijewski, who also produces highly constructed situations for video. But

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1 Zmijewski is more narrative, and is a ruthless editor. Take, for example, *Them* (2007),  
2 shown at Documenta 12. I was at its first screening in Warsaw, for which many of the  
3 participants were present. After the screening was a discussion, and most of them were  
4 livid that he hadn't made a truthful document. Zmijewski is an artist who wants to tell a  
5 complex narrative; the truth embedded in the total meaning of this story is what's  
6 important to him, not the production of a truthful (accurate) documentation. His work  
7 uses people to speak about modes of collective identification and the role of images in  
8 forming and perpetuating these identifications.

9 **DR:** So participation does not equal collaboration? And participatory art still privileges the  
10 figure of the contemporary artists in the background always pulling the strings?

11 **CB:** Well, it could equally be a collective authorship orchestrating the work. There's a lot of  
12 utopian rhetoric about equal collaboration, but the work of art as we understand it today  
13 always comes back to the sovereign space of the artist who initiates and creates it. This is  
14 true even with collectives, most of whom are led by one or two central thinkers. It's  
15 also true for Community Art – which until recently I had believed to be the most de-  
16 hierarchized and de-authored form of collective practice, not least because it circulates  
17 outside the art world and the market. After doing some research into Community Arts,  
18 I now realize that even this depends on the charismatic leadership of its main instigator.

19 **ED:** At Frieze Art Fair, I just saw a work by Katerina Šedá who made a participatory project  
20 with the inhabitants of a small village close to Brno, in which they collectively made  
21 drawings. But these drawings were later sold at Frieze. What interests me here is: who  
22 gets the money in the end? Certainly not the members of the community.

23 **DR:** That kind of participation is often just another name for unpaid or poorly paid labor.

24 **CB:** Again, I think that's an ethical judgement. The fact that you think about that question  
25 could also be an indicator that the work itself is insufficiently interesting. In general,  
26 though, I am reluctant to engage in questions about money because it turns into a bot-  
27 tomless pit of moral queasiness: who funded the project? Public or private? Is there such a  
28 thing as 'clean' money? Even public funding comes with huge strings attached. And why  
29 stop there, why not think about us critics who talk about the work and profit from this  
30 participation? Unless economics is the subject of the work, these kinds of questions are  
31 for me secondary.

32 **DR:** Would you say that participatory art is trying to comment on a changing situation in  
33 overall labor relations, where "creative" consumption and "creative" community affect  
34 are instrumentalized as unpaid labor? We could add to the work of the artist other  
35 "works": the work of art-related service industries (which run on unpaid labor of interns),  
36 the work of the audience. The more massive contemporary art become as an industry,  
37 the more important these other "works" become, and we really need a labor-theory of  
38 culture to talk about all these "works" that create a certain representation instrumenta-  
39 lized by new and old elites to show how wonderfully collaborative everything has  
40 become.

41 **CB:** If you want to talk about instrumentalization, the whole point of departure of this book  
42 for me is the British context and how New Labour has advocated participatory art in  
43 order to reinforce the social inclusion policy. Art is asked to assist in the improvement of  
44 public health, race relations, education, welfare to work programmes and economic  
45 development. It is used as a way to create the impression of reinforcing the social bond,  
46 of producing 'community' in the inner cities and deprived provincial towns. However,  
47 this solution is entirely homeopathic and does nothing to address the structural inequal-  
48 ities that bring about this alienation and division in the first place. As to whether

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1 participatory art comments on this situation, I find it hard to see direct evidence of this  
2 self-awareness. For me, the two tendencies run hand in hand, as concurrent symptoms  
3 rather than in a causal relationship.

4 **DR:** Can participatory art move beyond this double bind by entering into more radical social  
5 movements? Can participatory art anticipate a future beyond capitalism, where real  
6 collaboration is possible?

7 **CB:** I do doubt whether art is the entirely wrong domain to be experimenting with social  
8 movements. There is so much talk today of art as the free space for social experimenta-  
9 tion, as the ideal arena in which to produce new social models and prototypes, but his-  
10 torically this has not been the case. The modern construction of the artist is one of a  
11 singular individual who creates their sovereign domain through the work of art. So I'm  
12 unconvinced that moments of social change are to be forged in art.

13 Art can lend its competencies to social movements, as critic and theorist Brian Holmes  
14 has argued, but you're not going find the social movement starting in art.

15 Art is in fact incredibly vague when it comes to advocating change, even with groups  
16 that call themselves 'activists' like The Yes Men. They are like a PR company: they go  
17 for actions – the big visual stunt – rather than the long hard slow work of campaigning  
18 for specific goals. It's interesting that Paul Chan, an artist who also has a track record  
19 of activism, makes a clear separation between art and activism in projects like *Waiting*  
20 for *Godot* in New Orleans (2007). The site-specific production of Beckett's play was  
21 conceived as separate to the work of raising money to leave behind in the wake of the  
22 project. He has argued that his methodology was taken from his observation of activist  
23 campaigns, and it's interesting that what resulted from this was an absolute separation of  
24 art and activism, rather than its blurring.

25 In general, however, I am opposed to the idea of art as a model, as a good example  
26 that can be copied and replicated in society.

27 **ED:** That's exactly what happens under contemporary capitalism. Contemporary capitalism is  
28 constantly replicating art into life. The contemporary artist is a kind of model for the  
29 businessman.

30 **CB:** Exactly. This is the argument that Andrew Ross calls the 'industrialisation of bohemia' in  
31 *No Collar*: the mentality of artists became too valuable to be left to artists themselves, as  
32 their flexibility and sacrificial work ethic fitted all the requirements of 'no collar' knowl-  
33 edge worker in the new economy. At the same time, in the UK, artists in receipt of  
34 public funding are asked to be model citizens or entrepreneurial social workers, as if arts  
35 activities have to show a 'good return on investment'. Another text that has helped me  
36 understand the broader social impetus towards participation is Boltanski and Chiapello's  
37 *New Spirit of Capitalism*. They provide a broad historical framework for understanding  
38 the emergence of the creative industries as an internalisation of what they call the 'artistic  
39 critique' of the '68 generation. In these and many other accounts, we find the flexible,  
40 creative lifestyle of the artist becoming the fantasy model for freelance and short-term  
41 contract labour whose precariousness reaps no public benefits.

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## 25

# THE POLITICS OF POPULAR ART IN INDIA

*Swati Chattopadhyay*

Not all art is overtly political, and yet all art is potentially so. Absence of an explicit political statement may mean support of the status quo, which is in itself a political stance, and the way art is (re)used may give it a political punch never intended by the artist. In this the visual characteristics of an art form, and especially the venue of its appearance is crucial to a work's political reading. This chapter explores three important but poorly understood genres of overtly political art in India: editorial cartoons, nationalist posters, political graffiti, or wall-writing. All three have been vulnerable to censorship, not purely because of their content, but because censors fear that the sites of their appearance have the potential for creating dangerous publics. Let us consider two recent cases from India, the first concerning political wall-writing, and the second, political cartoons.

### Scene 1

In 2006 the Indian Election Commission (2007) decided to exercise a 1992 law prohibiting political graffiti, or wall-writing, a popular practice in Indian cities (Election Commission, Model Code of Conduct). Describing political wall-writing as visual pollution, the Election Commission observed that it has "received numerous complaints from the public" that "workers of political parties and candidates indulge in defacement of walls of public and private buildings" by pasting election posters, writing slogans, painting election symbols, etc. All this is done, the authorities argued "without the permission of the owners of the buildings, much to their annoyance, which gives an ugly look not only to the buildings but also to the whole city." The Election Commission also noted that the law was meant to create an election environment "free of tension and violence" which usually resulted from "wall capturing" by rival political parties (*Frontline*, December 1, 2006). Recognizing the territorial implications of wall-writing, the Election Commission effectively refused the kind of political subjectivity it produced.

The prohibition raised a short-lived protest from political parties and intellectuals. Political theorist Partha Chatterjee argued that the Election Commission's directive was intended to drive politics from the street to the drawing room, an attempt to privatize the city and its politics (Chatterjee, 2006). Supporters of the law, rejoicing at the prospect of "clean walls" asked, why shouldn't voting be the private act of the private citizen? (Ghosh, 2006).

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## Scene 2

In 2012, following a controversy over the inclusion of political cartoons in political science textbooks, the National Council of Education Research and Training (NCERT) recommended the deletion of several cartoons that were considered offensive to religious and caste groups and disrespectful to political leaders. In response, cartoonists had a field day lampooning politicians who suddenly wished to curb the “excess” of the political.

Satish Acharya drew a cartoon that depicted the ruling political party chief Sonia Gandhi holding a NCERT textbook from which a diminutive and obliging soon-to-be president Pranab Mukherjee is snipping off offensive cartoons into a wastepaper basket—“Too many cartoons on Nehru & Gandhis!”<sup>1</sup> The context is delineated with a mountain of files of government-sponsored projects and sites in the national capital carrying the names of the Nehru–Gandhi political dynasty. Acharya’s cartoon mocks the state’s visual censorship and the absurdity of selective cleansing of the public sphere of all things considered “politically offensive.”

Censorship of political cartoons, posters, and political wall-writing in India is not new. There is a long history of ban on political journalism and propaganda—newspapers, pamphlets, handbills, posters—that began during the decades of anti-colonial nationalism, and continued through the post-independence era. During the Emergency (1975&–77) declared by then Prime Minister Indira Gandhi that suspended the constitution, political cartoons were censored as part of press censorship, and the first law prohibiting political wall-writing was enacted in 1976. Unsuccessful in stopping the practice, the law was resurrected in 1992 at the time of market liberalization to make Indian cities adhere to global norms of urbanity.

In terms of content, wall-writing borrowed from cartoons and posters to create a distinct political venue. While political cartoons in India have been popular since the mid-nineteenth century and nationalist posters came into circulation in the first decades of the twentieth century, political wall-writing flourished during the second half of the twentieth century. I highlight the critical function of these political art forms in relation to the contexts of their reading, and in view of the long twentieth-century history of visual practice and reading competence that are embedded in them.

## Between Colonialism and Nationalism

Art in modern India has been shaped by the twin exigencies of British colonialism and Indian nationalism. In the eighteenth century, British colonialism launched its justification through the visual arts, through landscape paintings that commanded territory, history paintings, and depictions of military campaigns that convinced viewers of political ascendancy, and portraiture that conveyed superior morals, education, and just governance (Tobin, 1998; Chattopadhyay, 2005). Political power as control over territories and peoples was reiterated through numerous visual ethnographies and display of objects and peoples in colonial exhibitions, each time rehearsing imperial superiority and the necessity of British rule for a people deemed not yet fit for governance (Pinney, 1990; Chattopadhyay, 1997; Mathur, 2007).

The institutionalization of art in India in the nineteenth century under the aegis of the British colonial state facilitated the production and propagation of imperial ideology. Colonial art schools taught students the “correct” techniques of naturalistic representation to presumably improve the artistic taste of Indian subjects. The introduction of new printing techniques and photography, as well as the changing pattern of patronage eroded the traditional base of Indian artists, who were by the nineteenth century either encouraged to work for the new colonial masters or found themselves adopting new pictorial techniques, mediums, and coloring

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1 to suit changing popular fashions. They migrated from older princely courts and villages to new  
2 centers of trade and administration and their response to changing taste, patronage, and market  
3 generated entirely new styles of painting. Examples of this include *pat* (scrolls) and chromo-  
4 lithographs both of which had a distinctly popular bent (Mitter, 1994; Guha-Thakurta, 1994).

5 By the early twentieth century, as Indian nationalism gained momentum, elite Indians  
6 responded to these colonial institutions by refusing to follow the colonizer's aesthetic dictates:  
7 colonial art schools, Indian critiques argued, stifled imagination. Not satisfied with producing  
8 Indian themes in western-style oil paintings, such as those by Ravi Varma (initially applauded as  
9 great achievements), artists associated with the Bengal School sought other, indigenous terms of  
10 engagement. Inspired by East Asian painterly techniques and Indian history for the choice of  
11 themes and techniques, artists strove to give form to the imagined community of the nation. By  
12 the 1920s this project had gathered institutional momentum in the founding of new art schools  
13 and the presentation of artworks by prominent artists in literary magazines and exhibitions.

14 Nationalist visual culture took two major forms. An early example of the elite version was  
15 Abanindranath Tagore's painting, *Banga Mata* (Mother Bengal, 1905), later renamed *Bharat Mata*  
16 (Mother India). Produced during the *swadeshi* (indigenous self-sufficiency) movement against  
17 the 1905 Partition of Bengal, it presented the nation's mother as a young haloed female figure  
18 draped as an ascetic and carrying in her four arms the sustenance of the nation: the symbols of  
19 knowledge, clothing, food, and faith. The image combined the Hindu goddess's attribute of  
20 four arms with the realist representation of a Bengali mother, and situated her in an ethereal no-  
21 place. Its later counterparts were the posters by Nandalal Bose and his students for the 1938  
22 Haripura Congress that drew upon an entirely different vocabulary of *pat* (scroll) paintings.  
23 Executed at the behest of Mahatma Gandhi, the boldly colored dynamic figures of the posters  
24 represented the ordinary people of India, ennobling the vernacular, and the dormant genius of  
25 the much-maligned Indian village community (Mitter, 2007).

26 The other version, the nationalist art of the marketplace, consisted of chromolithographs that  
27 drew upon Hindu religious iconography and was inspired by the techniques of western realism.  
28 Printed on inexpensive paper and often as calendar art, these art works depicted the motherland  
29 as a goddess and paid homage to the martyrs to the nationalist cause (Pinney, 2004; Jain, 2007;  
30 Neumayer and Schelberger, 2008; Ramaswamy, 2010). Typically, the goddess Durga, in her  
31 many incarnations, would be surrounded by figures representing nationalist leaders—Gandhi,  
32 Subhash Bose, Bhagat Singh, Jawaharlal Nehru, Balgangadhar Tilak, Vallabhbhai Patel, and  
33 occasionally female leaders such as Rani Lakshmi Bai of Jhansi, to create a visual vernacular that  
34 celebrated sacrifice to the motherland. Mother India, as a warrior goddess, was depicted  
35 destroying the evil enemy of the nation or calling upon the nation's warriors to lead the charge  
36 against the enemy. The martyr offering his own decapitated head to the goddess on a sacrificial  
37 platter was a popular mode of conveying the necessity of bloody sacrifice. Often Mother India's  
38 figure would be organized along the outlines of the nation's map, directly attaching territory to  
39 the idea of the nation. In some instances the male leaders of the nation were cast on Mother  
40 India's lap, presumably to reinforce the idea of the nation-mother as a protector and nurturer,  
41 but paradoxically produced an infantile image of national leadership. No irony was intended in  
42 such size manipulation. The visual parameters of nationalist ideology in such posters were fairly  
43 capacious, ready to absorb new themes of the modern nation into its visual language.

44 Political cartoons and social caricatures developed alongside these nationalist representations,  
45 as pictorial journalism flourished and a bevy of illustrated books and magazines became the  
46 cultural staple of the literate classes. In Bengal, social criticism as an art form, mastered by the  
47 Kalighat painters who settled in nineteenth-century Calcutta, formed a source of inspiration for  
48 the elite, at a time when the hand-painted Kalighat *pat* was losing its share of the market to

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1 chromolithographs. Gaganendranath Tagore, Jatin Sen, Benoy Ghosh, and Sukumar Ray, each  
2 developed his unique style of caricature, that carried the humorous spirit of Kalighat and styl-  
3 istically differed from the cartoons popularized by the numerous Indian *Punch* magazines of the  
4 nineteenth century (Mitter, 1994; Hasan, 2007; Hasan 2013; Harder and Mittler, 2013).<sup>2</sup> The  
5 caricature-illustrations of Jatin Sen, Benoy Ghosh, and Sukumar Ray were an indispensable part  
6 of the texts they accompanied, primarily satire-based short stories and “non-sensical” verse.  
7 Gaganendranath’s cartoons published as short collections, *Abbhut Lok* (Realm of the Absurd,  
8 1915), *Naba Hullod* (Reform Screams, 1921), and *Birup Bajra* (Play of Opposites, 1917), were  
9 exceptional for their graphic composition—bold black lines and flat surfaces, and sharp criticism  
10 of contemporary Indian society. A few tackled explicitly political subjects such as the “The  
11 Terribly Sympathetic” that presented the British Governor of Bengal as a grotesque figure  
12 stepping on fleeing Indian nationalists in 1917 (Freedman, 2009: 131–132). As Partha Mitter  
13 notes, “If he drew with the economy of Kalighat, his ferocity also bore an uncanny similarity  
14 with expressionist cartoons published in *Simplicissimus*, the German paper founded in 1896”  
15 (Mitter, 1994: 171).

16 The critical transformation in Indian art occurred in the 1930s and 1940s when nationalist  
17 and leftist politics brought artists out of their comfort zone of academic realism taught in the  
18 government art schools and the historical soul-searching initiated by Abanindranath and his  
19 colleagues. Chittaprosad Bhattacharya, Somnath Hore, Govardhan Ash, Gopal Ghose, and  
20 others encountered the social in a radical form during the nationalist movement and the 1943  
21 Bengal famine: the subject of art became political protest, communal riots, famine, the social  
22 suffering of migration, and the partition of the country on the eve of independence from  
23 Britain. The failure of the independent nation-state to realize its promise of freedom and self-  
24 sufficiency became the focus of artistic critique. A 1947 political cartoon by Chittaprosad shows  
25 a bedraggled mother clutching an infant and attempting to distance herself from the 1943  
26 Bengal Famine, denoted by a pile of human skulls, while her small boy asks: “Didn’t Pt. Nehru  
27 say hoarder-profiters must be hanged,—what happened then mother?” A spectre—the deathly  
28 nation as the mother’s double—looming over the figures remarks that “history must repeat,”  
29 that is, a new political leadership notwithstanding (Mallik, 2009).

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### 32 Nationalist Posters and Anti-colonial Dissent

33 The most important visual culture of dissent against British colonialism in India came in the form  
34 of revolutionary posters—leaflets, bulletins, handbills, and hand-drawn notices that were pasted  
35 on walls, trees, and notice boards (Chattopadhyay, 2012). Adopted as a mode of communication  
36 to fellow agitators and as threats to the colonial administration, they formed an indispensable  
37 organ of revolutionary politics and ranked among a long list of artifacts considered seditious by  
38 the colonial government.<sup>3</sup>

39 Censorship of the written word is a prohibition of the act of communication and an assertion  
40 of the state’s monopoly of the word: the law and the word become the same. It seeks to frag-  
41 ment the power of community, that is the ability of the people to come together as a body  
42 through communication. In an environment of state censorship, the texts circulated by the state  
43 as propaganda combine the powers of physical and symbolic violence. Nationalist posters were a  
44 challenge to the colonial state’s monopoly on modes and spaces of communication. The police  
45 noted with alarm the appearance of revolutionary leaflets on public buildings: school, college,  
46 the public library, court house, town hall, bar library, and post office where they could reach a  
47 wide reading public and would make the dare of these “secret” political associations visible to  
48 public authorities.<sup>4</sup> The removal of these posters from their pasted location sought to remove

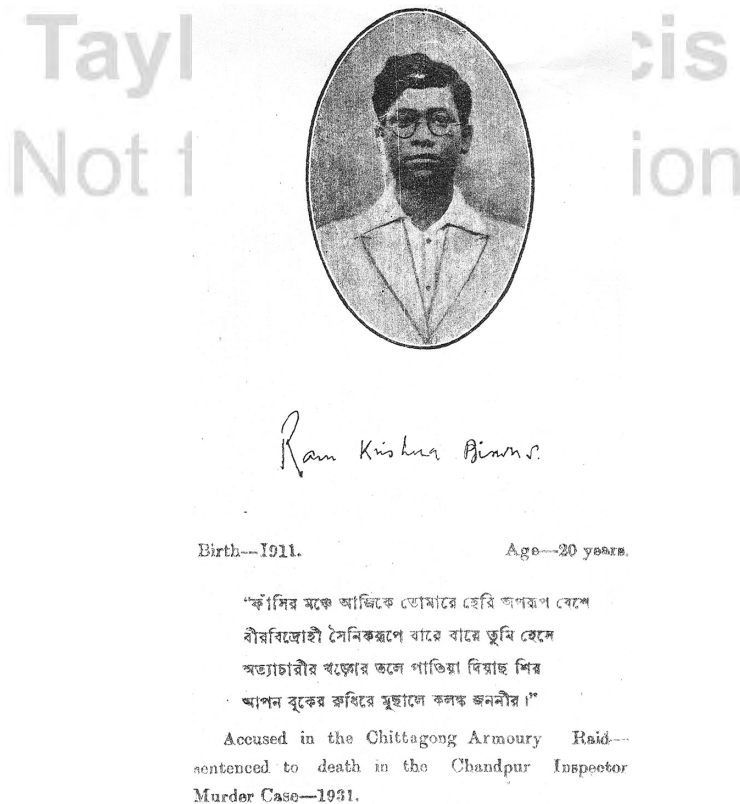


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1 these seditious writings and images from public space, thus restoring the impress of colonial  
2 authority; as visible signs of an underground movement they also served as evidence and clue.<sup>5</sup>  
3 The state became the “collector” of these ephemera, hoping to read in the material traces of  
4 these fragile documents the specificities of insurgent authorship, to trace back the public texts to  
5 their authors, producers, and distributors, to punishable individual bodies.

6 The small format of these posters (as small as 5' \xD7 7'), often handwritten one-liners, made  
7 them easily accessible and carried without invoking suspicion. They encouraged replication and  
8 links: “Please reprint, read, and pass on.” It mattered less that they were not readable unless up-  
9 close, and very few could be posted at a time; they served as insinuation for revolutionary  
10 activities and to signify the reach of the revolutionary groups.

11 Posters gathered new meaning as they moved on, changed hands, and created a new com-  
12 munity of readers. The most carefully designed ones, memorializing the death of nationalist  
13 heroes, included half-tone photographs in oval frames. The same photographs used by the  
14 police for “wanted” posters and notices in the Criminal Gazette, were used by revolutionaries  
15 to publicize the sacrifice of individuals and as a counter-warning to the police (Figure 25.1).  
16 The framing changed the connotation of the image. The texts next to the image—often a  
17 verse—emphasized the affect of the message as memorialization: it made the switch from the  
18 familial to the national, from a singular familial tragedy to a popular commemorative moment.  
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Figure 25.1 Nationalist poster with Ramkrishna Biswas’s family-style portrait. Courtesy of West Bengal State Archives, Kolkata.

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1 The relation between posters and the sites of their emergence were mutually supportive in  
2 producing an insurgent landscape. The posters attributed significance to the sites on which they  
3 were pasted in excess of their normal expressive capacity. Ordinary, everyday elements of the  
4 landscape—walls, trees, lampposts—suddenly became conspicuous within the optical field of  
5 nationalism. They changed the materiality of the wall, and its claim to obdurate permanence, by  
6 showing up its susceptibility to re-inscription and transformation. A poster fluttering on the gate  
7 of the District Magistrate’s bungalow was a citation—“the day has come;” it was also a gesture  
8 of usurping the materiality of the state.<sup>6</sup> The producers of the posters imagined a sympathetic  
9 readership, and their appearance in places marked by the authority of the state spoke of invisible  
10 links that constituted the body politic.

### 11 **Post-independence Cartoons and Contexts**

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14 It is also in these decades of nationalist agitation for independence and between the two world  
15 wars that the famous Indian press cartoonists, K. Shankar Pillai, Abu Abraham, P.K.S. Kutty,  
16 and R.K. Laxman, working for major newspapers and magazines in Madras, Bombay, Delhi, and  
17 Calcutta formulated their characteristic styles of editorial cartoons. These cartoonists had a  
18 pan-Indian popularity while there were scores who worked for regional dailies, and developed  
19 their distinctive flair for linking the nuance of the regional vernacular with caricatures (Das-  
20 gupta, 2010).

21 In 1948, Shankar started editing the cartoon magazine *Shankar’s Weekly*, with the support of  
22 Jawaharlal Nehru.<sup>7</sup> Shankar’s style initially owed much to David Low’s cartoons of the 1930s,  
23 but it is in the caricature of Indian politicians of the post-independence period that Shankar’s  
24 cartoons garnered their distinction. Indira Gandhi’s long nose was a boon for cartoonists, but  
25 Shankar’s Indira Gandhi figures use her gestures, particularly her raised chin and stubborn  
26 countenance, admirably to carry his political point. Shankar’s cartoons had the quality of  
27 appearing without malice—merely as a depiction of the political scene—even when they were  
28 strident criticisms of policy.

29 The cartoon controversy that erupted in May 2012 in the Indian Parliament (described  
30 as Scene 2 above) was supposedly caused by a 1949 cartoon by Shankar that showed a rotund  
31 B.R. Ambedkar, principle architect of the Indian Constitution, riding the Constitution snail  
32 with a whip, while the first Prime Minister of India, Jawaharlal Nehru, whip in hand, pre-  
33 sumably goading along the newly formed slow creature (Figure 25.2). Although the cartoon  
34 raised no political hackles when it was originally published, when included in schoolbooks  
35 seven decades later, it was considered by some members of Parliament to be offensive to  
36 Ambedkar and by extension to *dalits* (depressed castes). Critics were quick to point out that  
37 both Nehru and Indira Gandhi had on occasion approved of political cartoons, including those  
38 that lampooned them, while others condemned the suppression of free speech and pointed out  
39 the inappropriateness of the nation’s politicians focusing on such “minor” issues.

40 The decision to profusely illustrate six political science textbooks with images, 470 of which  
41 were cartoons, was in accordance with the NCERT’s broad goals of fostering critical pedagogy  
42 in terms of “creative and critical thinking,” and help link the children’s experience in school  
43 with their life outside the school (NCERT Report, 2012: 11–12). The illustration program was  
44 remarkable, and speaks of the importance and popularity of cartoons as a visual form in India.  
45 The advisors to the Committee set up to review the textbooks noted that the cartoons “do  
46 different things at different points in the text: entertain or engage the readers, invite them to  
47 return to the text to a new range of questions or help them achieve critical distance vis-à-vis  
48 received wisdom, including that of the textbook itself.” It added that the visuals, including

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1 cartoons and newspaper clippings, “aim at situating the abstract point in the context of the  
2 actual processes” (22). The Committee recommended deletion of several cartoons, either  
3 because they portrayed politicians and bureaucrats in a negative light (showing them as animals  
4 or criminals obstructing the law), or because they ostensibly hurt religious sensibility or a par-  
5 ticular caste community. Under general recommendations, it also noted that there are too many  
6 cartoons of Indira Gandhi (32).

7 In a dissenting opinion, historian and member of the reviewing committee, M.S.S. Pandian,  
8 pointed out that the textbooks provide a positive message of democracy and satisfy the stated  
9 objective of “inculcating creativity and initiative.” They treat “children as participants in learn-  
10 ing, not receivers of a fixed body of knowledge,” explicitly urging them to seek knowledge  
11 outside the textbook, and to “think on their own.” Pandian emphasized that “the visual  
12 materials in the textbooks do not merely illustrate the text, but engage with it in critical dialo-  
13 gue, opening up spaces for the learner to enquire, question, and interpret. only in the mutuality  
14 of the text and the visuals, these textbooks realize their pedagogical intent.” He concluded that  
15 “what is often being perceived as ‘politically incorrect’ need not be educationally inappropriate”  
16 (Pandian, 2012).

17 The rift between those who support political cartoons in textbooks and those who do not  
18 stems as much from the content of these cartoons, as from their understanding of reading  
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47 *Figure 25.2* K. Shankar Pillai, Cartoon of B. S. Ambedkar and Jawaharlal Nehru, *Shankar's Weekly*, 1948.  
48 Courtesy of Children's Book Trust, New Delhi.

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1 practices. Political cartoons are meant to grab attention and seek the engagement of the reader  
2 on the issue portrayed through humor. The formal exaggerations and distortions, meant to  
3 bypass details and focus on the essence, are aids in character recognition and prompt conveyance  
4 of the message. Cartoons depend on producing a shared reading experience and the habit of  
5 making quick connections between character, subject, and critique. The readers get accustomed  
6 to a particular cartoonist's formal repertoire and cast of characters; familiarity breeds the visual  
7 competence of putting together disparate elements of popular culture and facilitates a critical  
8 view. The idea of reading political cartoons "out-of-context," that is outside its original home  
9 of newspaper and magazines, therefore raises an important point about the transformation of  
10 meaning when the context of "reading" the visual is altered. The impulse behind the reaction  
11 of lawmakers seem to be the potential danger that students, learning from an early age to read  
12 their lessons critically via the cartoons, would indeed be trained to place received nationalist  
13 ideologies within new knowledge frames, and in relation to the past and present follies of the  
14 nation and its leadership.

### Walls and Texts

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18 The visual economy of political cartoons and its sharp topical humor, and the textual strategies of  
19 revolutionary posters were carried over to political wall-writings in Calcutta in the late 1950s. By  
20 the late 1960s it had been turned into a sharp instrument of political critique by the Naxalbari  
21 movement, a mode soon adopted by the mainstream political parties.<sup>8</sup> In terms of both content  
22 and style, political wall-writing made connections with other forms of visual culture, and political  
23 and artistic phenomenon in other parts of the globe and to other historical moments. Indeed  
24 these writings assumed of the reader a certain awareness of political cartoons and commentary in  
25 newspapers and magazines and played off the visual possibilities pertaining to these forms of print  
26 culture. The difference that ensued from the enlarged scale of wall-writing, however, invoked a  
27 different viewing response than that of the small format of newspapers and magazines.

28 Unlike revolutionary posters discussed earlier, political wall-writing was openly confrontational  
29 with large handwritten letters. Their artistry and authority were apparent in the tone and  
30 humor to command attention. They set the stage of political dialogue, and were designed to  
31 persuade and propagate each party's vision of the body politic. Highly localized, wall-writing  
32 configured itself to the site, emphasizing particular spectator effects. The wall-writing of the  
33 Naxalbari generation focused attention on the failure of nationalism to deliver the promised  
34 freedom and mounted a critique of the parliamentary system itself. The critiques were pithy,  
35 they stuck in people's mind: "*parliament shuorer khnowar*" (the Parliament is a pig sty). Humor  
36 was a tool of critique as well as self-reflexivity. The tongue-in-cheek playfulness and rhyming  
37 made them easy to be cited and recited. Even when the goal of building solidarity was unambiguous—  
38 "*tomar nam amar nam Vietnam*" (your name, my name is Vietnam)—the rhythmic call  
39 for identification with a distant cause touched a popular chord.

40 While all forms of political critique were smothered when Indira Gandhi imposed the state's  
41 emergency powers to curb dissent, political wall-writing despite the 1976 prohibition, flourished,  
42 and was used by all parties, including Congress (I), the party named after Indira Gandhi  
43 herself. In some ways, political wall-writing made up for the absence of political cartoons in the  
44 media during the Emergency. The undeclared authorship of wall-writing, as opposed to political  
45 cartoons, made it more difficult to curb, and its "authors" more difficult to track.

46 The wall-writings of the opposition critiquing Indira Gandhi constitute an impressive corpus  
47 among the political wall-writings in the late 1970s and early 1980s. One shows her riding an  
48 armored tank towards the Parliament Building with her son Sanjay marching ahead with an

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1 automatic weapon. In others she is depicted as a vicious creature—a crazed witch, a vulture, a  
2 dragon—that kills the opposition in a bloody mayhem. Dismembered arms of the opposition—  
3 representing the dismemberment of the nation, still carrying the hammer and sickle, show up as  
4 the menacing doubles of the hand of her own party’s symbol. Her dictatorial role and her  
5 party’s conflation of a leader with the nation were explicitly compared with that of Adolf Hitler  
6 and fascism. In one such example a long stretch of a wall is used to convey the problem. The  
7 visual is anchored on the left with a vertical composition, mimicking Nazi banners with Hitler’s  
8 image on top and at the bottom is written: “Hitler is Germany, Germany is Hitler.” Out of that  
9 composition looms a frowning Indira Gandhi with the inscription: “one party, one nation, one  
10 leader”; “India is Indira, Indira is India.” The rest of the long wall is utilized to convey in large  
11 block letters a call for popular protest against dictatorship, interspersed with blocks of images  
12 that describe the many atrocities of Indira’s regime. The wall-writing here is both a political and  
13 territorial claim on the public space of the city.

14 In contrast, Congress (I) attempted to portray Indira Gandhi, by reference to her as the  
15 mother figure, and used sobriquets such as “Asia’s Muktisurya” (Asia’s Freedom Sun), a refer-  
16 ence to Indira’s role in the Bangladesh war, and “Bharat-mata” (the nationalist goddess being  
17 replaced by Indira’s likeness). Congress (I) election campaigns either presented “portraiture”  
18 style representations of Indira Gandhi, or slogans with the “hand” symbol of the party. For  
19 election campaigns, often Indira’s image—her smiling visage—would stand for the party and in  
20 lieu of the local candidate contesting the election for Congress (I). In one such example, Indira’s  
21 “realist” portrait surrounded by a frame, simulating a mounted picture, occupies the prominent  
22 space, with the hand symbol of the party next to it (Figure 25.3). At the bottom of the portrait  
23 the text announces: “To retain the tradition and respect for the nation in the world, stand next  
24 to Indira.” In a vertical arrangement of letters on the right is the necessary election information:  
25 “vote for Ajit Panja,” the party candidate.



Figure 25.3 Wall-writing in Calcutta; Election campaign by Congress (I). Courtesy of Chitrabani.

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1 The practice of painting the portrait of a leader for election campaigning that commenced  
2 with emergency propaganda demonstrated a shift in the structure of party politics. The latter  
3 was becoming increasingly centralized and authoritarian, and depended on projecting a larger-  
4 than-life charisma of a particular leader to attract votes.<sup>9</sup> Such images, however, did not reside  
5 alone in the city's public spaces. The Indira Gandhi image discussed above vied with Hindi  
6 films posters on adjacent walls and posters of the opposing Communist Party fluttering along  
7 the strings in the foreground. The photographer clearly intended to catch the multiple visual  
8 resonances between the "realist" fiction of the film posters that actresses face on the *Amar Deep*  
9 advertisement, the romance scenes of the films, against the dilapidated edifice that constitute the  
10 immediate visual context of "India's [political] tradition." Such a depiction demonstrates that  
11 political wall-writing's power resides not merely in its artistry, nor even in the attitude of  
12 claiming territory: its most important role is in creating unforeseen connections and making the  
13 viewer see the visual logic by which public space may be appropriated to bring forth new  
14 intentions, readership, and political agency that is not easily governed.

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7 **Notes**

- 8  
9 1 <http://cartoonistsatish.blogspot.com/2012/07/cartoons-on-nehru-gandhis-will-be.html>.  
10 2 The first, *The Parsee Punch*, was published in 1854. While most of these magazines such as *The Avadh Punch* and *Indian Charivari* were owned by Britons, the latter being particularly hostile in their representation of Indians, those like *The Hindi Punch*, and *Basantak* that were owned by Indians were more likely to be critical of colonial policy. But the characteristic of the latter was criticism of Indian society itself.  
11  
12 3 For example, The Government of India’s Ordinance No. VI of 1930 noted that an instigation against the government could include any word, “written or spoken” or any signs or “visible representation.”  
13 4 Instances are numerous. See for example, I.B. File No. 20/30; I.B. File No. 149/28; I.B. File No. 225–40.  
14 5 Most of these artifacts were referred to as “leaflets” by the colonial government, and were seen interchangeable with posters.  
15  
16 6 Ibid.  
17 7 The magazine was shut down in 1975 because of the Emergency proclaimed by Prime Minister Indira Gandhi.  
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19 8 The Naxalbari movement began in 1967 as an armed struggle against landlord–moneylender–police oppression in rural Bengal and derives its name from the small village in north Bengal, Naxalbari. The movement broke with the Communist Party of India (Marxist) and formed the Communist Party of India (Marxist–Leninist) in 1969.  
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21 9 This has a somewhat different history in Tamilnadu and Andhra Pradesh where large portraits had become the norm of political campaigning.  
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## PART IV

# Making Publics

### Introduction

Comprehensive movements for social change take as their aim nothing less than the reformulation of who and what can count as the public. That public formation is a sense-making endeavor aligns it closely with esthetic activity. Diana Taylor’s “Living Politics: The Zapatistas Celebrate their Twentieth Anniversary” makes these interweavings legible in perhaps the quintessential counter-globalization movement launched by the Chiapas-based self-organizing communities on New Year’s Day 1994. As director of the Hemispheric Institute on Performance and Politics she has herself been engaged in a long-standing project of this sort that ranges across the Americas drawing together artists-activists and scholars from various locations and situations. The Zapatistas’ hold an extensive portfolio of resistance strategies from armed insurrection, to negotiation with the national government, to the formation of local autonomous administrative centers (Caracoles), and schools open to international solidarity communities where the strategies of cultural formation can be consolidated and disseminated. Part of this translation entails entering into a sense of time and space divergent from the immediacy of international travel, where waiting is a means of absorbing the immediate conditions of solidarity to assemble for a collective dance celebration. This event is a composite of an emergent indigeneity and a transnational affinity occasioned by and augmenting it.

Suspended between languages of critique and possibility, politics aimed at changing the world must negotiate the gravity of what makes so many suffer against the embodied public voicing of what could levitate the seemingly immutable. Robert Stam’s “Carnival, Radical Humor, and Media Politics” insists that such levity must be part of any artistic politics that passes through popular culture on its way toward giving form to a body politics. Jokes, he assures us, distill social wisdom and resistance in risible form that can give bodily form to a reconfigured popular imagination. This leads him to a consideration of the contemporary powers of the carnivalesque which inverts the established order of beauty with one that is convulsive and rebellious and that emits the latent appeal of the vulgar. In the danced carnival of direct action like “Reclaim the Streets” drifting through urban spaces and repurposing them as open spaces of public pleasures. He looks at current purveyors of carnivalesque humor such as Stephen Colbert and Michael Moore who take on the tragic seriousness of current affairs with a jocular jesting that plays on the powerful to loosen their grip. Fleshing

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1 out this full repertoire of voicings and tropes from the satiric to the tragic affords a wide  
2 palette of publicly mediated engagements.

3 The evident default position of Western aesthetics is to constitute a passive viewer through  
4 recognition of the stationary, concrete, and monumental art object. Yet, when this stasis of  
5 viewer and viewed is removed a deeper interactivity becomes available that activates a crea-  
6 tive public. Wafaa Bilal’s “Dynamic Encounters and the Benjaminian Aura: Reflections on  
7 the New Media, Next Media, and Connectivity” imagines an interactivity that is at once  
8 open-ended, unscripted, and unpredictable as to where it leads in a dynamic encounter that  
9 gains energy and motion from active participation. The auratic potential of an encounter of  
10 this sort opens in the dynamic and indeterminate gap between viewer and object. He then  
11 examines these principles through his own next media practice and those of some of his  
12 collaborators has been to alter his own body as a node of mediation to house the aura in  
13 experience, leaving behind the static body as object. These remnants of the body and the  
14 physical sites of given objects leave an opening that can be opened but never completely  
15 filled this auratic vibration.

16 It is tempting to imagine all art and public engagement taking place in spaces of urban cos-  
17 mopolitanism, but the rural and place and space still looms large across large swathes of  
18 the landscape. The rural has not stayed still, the sources of basic resources from food to fuel,  
19 these areas have seen their own material resources depleted, nowhere more than in places like  
20 Appalachia where King Coal that dominated the region for a century suddenly departed taking  
21 what stood as the built-in economy with it. This is where Dudley Cocke, founding director of  
22 Roadside Theater nearly forty years ago takes as his frame for “Seeking a Theater of Libera-  
23 tion.” Aligned with Appalshop in the coalfields of Eastern Kentucky, Roadside has long been  
24 engaged in educating, convening, and performing the deep stories of the populations with which  
25 it works. The locational specificity of the theater became a feature of its collaborations with and  
26 traveling performances to communities across the country and around the world to find a  
27 means of supporting diverse audiences to maintain a voice in their community’s arts program-  
28 ming and cultural development. This project was shared by other performing groups that  
29 undertook deep collaborations with Roadside such as Junebug Productions in New Orleans,  
30 Pregones in the Bronx, and Urban Bush Women. Roadside, founded with support from the  
31 programs of the War on Poverty, is one of the last surviving community-based arts organiza-  
32 tions, though its persistence may augur a revival as the crushing inequality of that era returns  
33 and with it a renewed attention to how it might be mitigated.

34 In another long view that covers that same forty years of practice, Jan Cohen-Cruz’ “By Any  
35 Means Necessary” revisits three modes of activist performance in which she has been  
36 involved—street performance, Theatre of the Oppressed, and community-based theatre. This  
37 formative pluralism gives weight to her multi-modal approach to use the fullest range of prac-  
38 tices to assure that political art has an efficacious public impact. Again, in bringing theater out of  
39 its conventional enclosure apart from what were considered non-theatrical spaces, it could  
40 actively pursue and form publics rather than simply anoint them as it had been doing since the  
41 landholding male polis gathered in the Greek amphitheater. Taking it to the streets also meant  
42 that performance could be separated from the literary form of the play, and improvisational  
43 techniques could create interlocution between those in search of themselves as performers and  
44 those perhaps still uncertain of being hailed as an audience when the terms of access have been  
45 opened. Augusto Boal with whom Cohen-Cruz had both a practical and scholarly affiliation (as  
46 an editor of volumes about his work in crafting a Theater of the Oppressed) detailed aesthetic  
47 space as bringing close what is far and making big what is small; transforming reality such that  
48 time becomes multi-directional; simultaneously doing and witnessing an action, becoming a

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1 spect-actor. The integration of art with other spaces and publics entails a novel approach to  
2 eco-systems in which this re-negotiation becomes possible.

3 Another role for those engaged in making publics into agencies of social transformation is  
4 that of the cultural organizer, which Caron Atlas explores and explains in “If you Really Care  
5 about Change, why Devote your Life to Arts and Culture? Reflections of a Cultural Organi-  
6 zer.” The sense of being both central and marginal to large-scale social change is part of the  
7 paradox she wants to dwell upon in her own reflection of thirty years’ work. Here, the con-  
8 viction that another world is possible, a supremely creative act gives a central place to art while  
9 recognizing that art cannot undertake that task alone but involves mixing vision and agency to  
10 figure our own connection between a committed part and a complex whole. This long arc  
11 includes an appreciation of even longer historical trajectories of both institutions and move-  
12 ments from civil rights and a stint as a New York Appalachian at Appalshop to more recent  
13 activisms such as her organizing of the national coalition, The Arts and Democracy Project. This  
14 is a kind of grassroots cultural policy initiative in a land with notoriously thin cultural policy  
15 that entails bringing those most impacted into an active role in shaping what the policy will be  
16 in a manner that is mutually sustainable for organizers and participants. This has entailed taking  
17 advantage of certain grassroots initiatives such as participatory budgeting to make sure that arts  
18 and culture, which can be relatively inexpensive in terms of relative outlays, are part of the  
19 budget picture. She has extended these initiatives to the organizing of Naturally Occurring  
20 Cultural Districts which provide a locational counterpoint to the dull homogenizing of creative  
21 cities’ approaches that are indifferent to claims for inclusion and social justice. The fluency of  
22 participation does not need to come at the expense of meticulously and attentively crafted  
23 community ties.

24 The pedagogical operations and impacts of art, the opportunities for teaching, learning, and  
25 convening spaces of critical reflection that are attuned to specific questions of what people need  
26 to know, certainly extend beyond the educational turn of the art world. Suzanne Lacy, among  
27 the key figures of feminist public art over the past four decades, has not only opened the  
28 aperture of where art can occur, but also of what it means to treat site-specific collaboration as a  
29 particular kind of learning place. Her “Pedagogies in the Oakland Projects” assembles and  
30 explores the edges between community, youth leadership, and public policy from the perspec-  
31 tives of making an artwork, addressing a large public and projecting an educational mission so as  
32 to achieve a simultaneity between pedagogical and esthetic impacts. Critical pedagogy with its  
33 emphasis on the terms of reciprocity in learning environments enables an opening of the eva-  
34 luative criteria through which social practice in the arts are conventionally attended to. Doing  
35 so implicates research as an art practice and not simply the marginalia of creative environments.  
36 An expanded pedagogy of this order that fortifies the public claims on living spaces links local  
37 media, formal curricula, youth development, advocacy-driven informal pedagogy, and perfor-  
38 mances and installations for mass audiences.

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## 26

# LIVING POLITICS

## The Zapatistas Celebrate their Twentieth Anniversary

*Diana Taylor*

Avanzo un metro, se aleja un metro  
Avanzo dos metros, se aleja dos metros  
Avanzo diez metros, se aleja diez metros  
Sé que nunca lo alcanzaré  
Sé que una utopía  
Que es un sueño  
Entonces ...  
¿Para qué sirven los sueños, las utopías?  
Para avanzar!  
[I move forward a meter and it moves away a meter  
I move forward two meters, and it moves away two meters.  
I move forward ten meters, and it moves away ten meters  
I know I will never catch up  
I know it's a utopia  
That it's a dream  
So  
What good are dreams? Utopias?  
To keep us moving forward!]

(Painted on the wall in Oventic, Chiapas)

On August 9–11, 2013, a few months before the twentieth anniversary of their uprising against the Mexican government on January 1, 1994, the Zapatistas decided to throw a party. Subcomandante insurgente Moisés sent out word to “quienes se hayan sentido convocados” (those who feel summoned) to celebrate the 10-year anniversary of the creation of the five Zapatista five ‘caracoles’ (Autonomous Municipalities), each with its own governing structure or ‘Council of Good Government’ (Junta del Buen Gobierno, or JBG).<sup>1</sup> The caracoles were set up to organize and provide health care, education, and basic services to the various autonomous communities who receive nothing but trouble from the Mexican government. As opposed to that ‘mal’ or bad government, the five or so men and women of the JBG who serve on a rotating basis are voted in by the community and have to obey community mandates. The party was part of a major re-direction in the Zapatistas’ *camino largo*, or long road, towards autonomy. The Zapatistas were

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1 beginning to open themselves up, once again, to civil society. In addition to the party, the  
2 Zapatistas had organized the first session of the *escuelita*, or little school, for those who wanted to  
3 stay with the Zapatistas for a week and learn about their ways of living politics.

4 San Cristobal de las Casas, situated in the Mayan highlands in southern Mexico, was alive  
5 with visitors and independent journalists from all over the world. One thousand, seven hundred  
6 people had been admitted to the *escuelita* this time, including major figures in human rights and  
7 education.<sup>2</sup> Another such number attended via video conferencing from CIDECI (Centro  
8 indigena de capacitacion integral or the Indigenous center for holistic training), a local ‘Zapa-  
9 tista’-inspired university. For the celebration of the *caracoles*, vans, trucks, and cars were lined up  
10 far along the road that goes past Oventic, the *caracol* (literally snail shell) closest to San Cristobal  
11 de las Casas, Chiapas, and thus, the most visited. A sign on the road said:

13 ESTA USTED EN TERRITORIO

14 ZAPATISTA EN REBELDIA

15 “Aquí manda el pueblo  
16 y el gobierno obedece”

17 [“YOU ARE IN ZAPATISTA REBEL TERRITORY:  
18 Here the people decide and the government obeys”]

19

20 Over the unimposing metal gates that separate Oventic from the rest of Mexico, a large flower-  
21 covered arch invited visitors in. It was about 8 p.m. when we arrived on the Friday. Though dark  
22 and pouring rain, people lined up to enter. We shuffled in under the large plastic tarps, all forty of  
23 us who were in San Cristobal participating in the *Art & Resistance* course that I was co-teaching  
24 with Mexican artist/activist Jesusa Rodríguez for the third time in Chiapas.<sup>3</sup> We crowded  
25 together, waiting, as a masked Zapatista asked to see our IDs. We provided the list of us from all  
26 over the Americas—Venezuela, Colombia, Argentina, Chile, Peru, Brazil, Mexico, the US, and  
27 Canada. One participant from Uganda, two from Spain, and another one from Australia.

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Figure 26.1 Junta del Buen Gobierno, Oventic, 2009. Photo Lorie Novak.

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1 Three in our group were indigenous Mayan women who participated as artists in our program.  
2 The man looked at us, decided not to count, and went off with the list. Another came close to  
3 keep an eye of us. One of the women in our group said something to him and he smiled through  
4 his ski mask. He wanted to know where we were from and why we wanted to be there, a good  
5 question that I will come back to later. “To celebrate,” was all we said.

6 Chiapas provides a remarkable arena to study art and resistance for several reasons, most  
7 notable because the Zapatistas’ are the experts on resistance.<sup>4</sup> They have tried all sorts of strategies  
8 —from the initial armed warfare of early 1994, to negotiations with the ‘bad’ government  
9 that produced the San Andrés Accords<sup>5</sup> (1996) guaranteeing autonomy and rights to indigenous  
10 peoples, to the loss of faith in the Mexican government that failed to honor the agreements, to  
11 the formation of an alternative ‘good’ government and autonomous administrative centers in  
12 2003, to the national marches throughout the country that make visible the Zapatista claims to  
13 justice and dignity,<sup>6</sup> to closing the caracoles off from the world, to opening them to national  
14 and international supporters, and now the invitation to celebrate and attend their *escuelitas*.

15 Yet the Zapatistas’ vulnerability is undeniable—not only as predominantly indigenous peoples,  
16 but as people living in active opposition to the national government. But here, in this  
17 reflection, I will focus on vulnerability not as a condition or state of being, but rather as a doing  
18 and a relationship of power. The Zapatistas’ vulnerability has been structurally imposed and  
19 economically organized from colonial times until the present. NAFTA, the North American  
20 Free Trade Agreement, was simply the last straw. But they adapt, they say, “para no dejar de  
21 ser” (cease to be) historical beings.<sup>7</sup> The bottom line, using John Holloway’s terminology, is  
22 that indigenous communities’ *power to live*, work, and flourish, has been under constant attack  
23 by the government’s *power over* their life, work, and wellbeing. How can resistance counter this  
24 ‘making’ vulnerable? And what, to rephrase the Zapatista’s question to us, were we doing there?

25 Part of our being there, in the language of academe, had to do with ‘practice-based research.’  
26 For us that meant using embodied experience and practice as an entry point for learning and  
27 theorizing, and not just the other way around—applying our theories to practices to what we  
28 see or experience. In other words, our presence and interactions would produce new knowledge  
29 or ways of knowing differently than, say, findings by others we access through lectures or  
30 reading articles. Clearly, the process is complex and murky—we often act from a position of  
31 prior knowledge, and write about what we know. In this sense, therefore, we too were (and  
32 are, always) masked, hiding our preconceptions and sensibilities behind a visible willingness to  
33 transcend them.

34 This practice-based approach, however, affects the way that I am writing up these experiences  
35 and findings and transmitting them to you, the reader. Instead of resisting the urge to  
36 avoid descriptive passages, a style long abhorred by critical theorists including myself, here  
37 I need to outline the events to convey the basis for the critical reflections that follow. Yet, even  
38 by outlining events, it’s clear as I move through that what I see and feel is already the product  
39 of the social systems of which I am a part. In that sense, we can never experience what is  
40 ‘there’—but that too becomes part of the reflection.

41 So please bear with me.

42 We waited under the tarp outside the Che Guevara gift shop and snack bar that bridges the  
43 *caracol* and the highway. Families of indigenous peoples steadily came in and moved past us  
44 towards the party. While some people wore western type clothing—pants and sweatshirts,  
45 many of the Mayans were dressed in the native clothing from their various villages. The women  
46 from Chamula wore the thick black lambskin skirts and lovely embroidered tops from the area  
47 under thin acrylic sweaters in all colors against the cold and rain. Those from Zinacantán wore  
48 the beautiful blue and purple tops from their village, and there were many other patterns from

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1 other regions I could not identify.<sup>8</sup> To this day, the embroidery communicates meaning to  
2 other indigenous peoples capable of deciphering them, “hidden transcripts” as James C. Scott  
3 calls them, but in textiles.<sup>9</sup> Bodily practices and the aesthetics of the everyday, for the Zapatistas,  
4 are never removed from politics. The sartorial style, especially the ski mask and/or the *paleacate*,  
5 the red bandana they wear, defined all of them as Zapatista.

6 People moved through the gate beside us and proceeded to buy food or soft drinks at the  
7 entrance before heading down to the large congregation area. No alcohol is allowed in any  
8 Zapatista community as decreed by the Women’s Revolutionary Law of 1993.

9 Our group seemed content to wait, odd for people in their twenties and thirties who had  
10 enough social mobility to be in Chiapas. Odder still, given that we could not distract ourselves  
11 with any of our traditional pastimes, such as taking photographs or looking at our smart phones.  
12 Oventic does not have Internet access, and it’s prohibited to take photographs without per-  
13 mission. We just waited.

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**Reflection One: Waiting**

17 This was not the first time the Zapatistas had kept us waiting. Two days earlier we had visited  
18 Oventic during the daytime. I had asked for permission two months in advance accompanied by  
19 Xeroxes of everyone’s passports. When we arrived, two men and a woman received us at the  
20 gate. Each was wearing a ski mask on the hot August morning. I handed over a list with  
21 everyone’s name and country of origin, passports, and a photocopy. The woman began pains-  
22 takingly writing down every name on the list, inquiring about country of origin, and about our  
23 interest in the community. “Why copy everything down when they have the list?” someone  
24 from our group asked. Mayan technology, I thought. Every community needs to administer  
25 information in its own way. The process here moved through the body of this very small woman.  
26 Her inquiries were hard for me to understand and she would repeat them patiently. Spanish was  
27 not her first language. She probably spoke Tzotzil or Tzeltal, the two dominant linguistic groups  
28 in the region. Writing, too, required concentrated bodily effort judging from her focus in  
29 forming the words. Every once in a while one of the men would take the list down the hill to  
30 one of the buildings that lined both sides of the straight long road. From the gate, we could see  
31 the extraordinary murals painted on the wooden and cement buildings. After two and half hours,  
32 we were invited to enter. No one complained. We were there to try to understand resistance and  
33 the Zapatistas knew all about durational performance. Five hundred years and counting. While  
34 the presupposition is that resistance entails action, as importantly, we were learning, it entails  
35 waiting. We, who came racing from the realm of instantaneous time that characterizes globali-  
36 zation, stopped: do not always control the time, space, and conditions of our actions. Lesson one,  
37 from the Zapatistas.

38 Now, on that rainy night two days later, the wait seemed longer. I began to wonder if we  
39 would be refused entrance to this party. Every *caracol* has a *do not admit* list, but we knew from  
40 our earlier visit that no one in our group was on it. We’d get in, I reassured myself—we just  
41 had to wait. As before, we understood the politics of waiting, and we experienced, yet again,  
42 the reversal in terms of control and access. The Zapatistas have the authority; they control their  
43 entrances and exits; we await permission. This is their land; we are the visitors. For a population  
44 as subjugated as the Mayas have been in Chiapas, this was a notable reversal. Fifty years ago,  
45 indigenous people (who made up 25 percent of the state’s population) were not allowed to  
46 walk on the sidewalks of San Cristobal or enter the banks. Chiapas was the poorest state in the  
47 Mexico and had the highest level of illiteracy.<sup>10</sup> Women and children carried heavy bundles of  
48 wood on their backs, to spare the burros. Young girls could be sold or bartered away. All of this

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1 officially tolerated in the name of tradition. Comandanta Esther, the first indigenous woman to  
2 address the Mexican legislature said, “we know which are the good uses of ‘tradition’ and  
3 which the bad ...”<sup>11</sup> The Zapatistas’ mandated equality. Even standing at the entrance to the  
4 *caracol*, the comportment of Zapatista women entering the space made it clear that here women  
5 were treated as equal not only in principle but in fact.

6 After 15 minutes we were granted admission and started our way down the hill. The music  
7 reverberated from the loudspeakers. All the buildings that lined the road were open to serve the  
8 visitors. Plastic tarps outfitted with faint light bulbs lined the long road down. Wet wooden  
9 benches tottered close to the long tables covered with baskets of food. It was so dark I could  
10 barely see—I switched on the flashlight app on my *iPhone*. The heavy rains had washed out the  
11 road that just two days earlier had been so nicely packed with gravel. After the rains, the  
12 Zapatistas would start, once more, to fix it. Vendors nursed fires to heat enormous aluminum  
13 pots of water and grills to cook corn on the cob, which they sold topped with mayonnaise,  
14 grated cheese, and chili. Others were selling hot *atoles* and other nourishing drinks and stews.  
15 People crowded around small stands to buy tacos and tamales. Pyramids of soft drinks lined the  
16 outer perimeters of makeshift tables. The *caracol*, so empty two days before, now had thousands  
17 of people milling around in the dark and pouring rain. Only a few looked as if they could be  
18 the foreign visitors who had come to the *escuelitas*.

19 Our feet soaked with water and mud, we made our way towards the main basketball court, the  
20 scene of the assembly. I looked down, worried, at my shoes. Vicki, a Chamulan friend and col-  
21 league from FOMMA, a Mayan women’s theatre group I had worked with for 15 years, walked  
22 next to me. I looked down past her broad black lambskin skirt at the small black plastic sandals  
23 she was wearing. “Aren’t your feet getting soaked,” I asked her. “It doesn’t matter,” she smiled,  
24 “I wear these all the time.” I understood, for the first time, that she had a very different sense of  
25 the rain, not as a bother but as a natural part of life. Her feet had no problem getting wet. This  
26 was, simply, a part of her environment. Nothing to talk about. The rain muted the sound. Over  
27 the loudspeakers we could hear a soft male voice making announcements in the various indi-  
28 genous languages. Some words *bases de apoyo* (grass root supporters) and *bueno* kept cropping up in  
29 all languages. When it was time to speak in Spanish I realized he was inviting us all to gather in  
30 the ‘cancha’—the basketball court. The official part of the celebration was about to begin.

31 The *cancha* was lined on one side with a covered platform and an enormous Mexican flag  
32 tacked to the wall. A smaller, black flag with EZLN in red letters around the centered red star  
33 was tacked beside it. The flag of the Ejercito Zapatista de Liberación Nacional, like its real life  
34 counterpart, stood proudly and defiantly next to its mammoth neighbor. The wide expanse of  
35 space around the cancha was all water and mud as the rain continued to pour down. Everyone  
36 gathered quietly, expectantly. One of the first speakers to take the microphone joked: “We  
37 Zapatistas have to resist everything, even the weather.” But no one was leaving. Families shifted  
38 together under colored tarps to get a better view.

39 The official ceremony began when a long line of civic representatives from the various  
40 Zapatista communities walked onto the platform—about 30 or 40 men and women dressed in  
41 traditional indigenous dress. White and black sheepskin tunics for men; they wore their straw  
42 hats with colorful ribbons hanging from them over their ski masks. On their feet, huaraches, the  
43 leather, open-toed sandals with rubber bottoms made from worn-out tires. Women wore the  
44 skirts, the embroidered blouses, and the black plastic sandals. Then the many Zapatistas marched  
45 with the Mexican and EZLN flags around the courtyard and stood firmly in place. The opening  
46 ceremony emphasized the ‘armed struggle’ nature of the movement, though it had been nearly  
47 twenty years since the Zapatistas had taken up weapons. Yet the E of EZLN stands for *ejercito*,  
48 or army. I had overlooked that, focused as I had always been on the cultural aspects of



1 resistance. Here the *E* reminded us that those who refuse to recognize the power of the state  
2 need to be prepared to fight and even die. Following that, the national anthem came over the  
3 loudspeakers, and young Zapatistas raised their arms in military salute. They too are “mexicanos  
4 al grito de guerra” (Mexicans at the cry of war—Mexico’s belligerent national anthem). The  
5 open ceremony was all about military gestures as someone ordered them to stand at attention,  
6 *firmes*. But clearly, the battle wasn’t with Mexico—every act repeated their love for their  
7 country. Their fight was against the national government and political parties that had once and  
8 again broken treaties and betrayed indigenous rights.  
9

## 10 **Reflection Two: ‘Good’ and ‘Bad’ Governments**

11  
12 The entrance to the ‘rebel territory’ marks the line between two interconnected political systems;  
13 both performatic, both masked. The Zapatista’s political project, I saw for the first time, was not  
14 ‘indigenous’ in form or content—it was the age-old struggle for good government. On one side,  
15 the ‘bad’ neo-liberal government (I agree with the Zapatistas) characterized by violence, cor-  
16 ruption, and greed. The other ‘good’ in that it examines the basic mechanisms of existing power  
17 (not as a thing one has but a practice of social relations, i.e. power over) and asks: who exerts it?  
18 who decides? who gets left out? They then transform those practices and relationships into their  
19 core principles:

- 20  
21 a. participatory assemblies (“the people decide”);  
22 b. non-discrimination (Zapatismo is non-normative. Although long exploited as indígenas,  
23 their strategy refuses identity politics—be it ethnic, religious, gender, sexual, class, linguistic.  
24 This is not about being, in this sense, but again, about doing, joining the struggle for indi-  
25 genous rights);  
26 c. collaboration (“Para Todos, Todo. Para Nosotros, Nada”). Zapatismo values individual  
27 rights, but acknowledges that individuals cannot do it alone, and exist as part of a collective:  
28 SOLOS NO PODEMOS.  
29

30 But both are governments. Resistance here does not mean a rejection of government or a proposed  
31 ‘outside’ to the political. Resistance is, as I noted earlier, a durational performance, with its crises,  
32 doldrums, and eruptions, and the Zapatistas are masters of the genre. Instead, the Zapatistas refuse to  
33 cede the notion of government to the self-serving political parties. They will not be othered. They  
34 acknowledge the historical/political causes of their marginalization while managing the ‘effects’ and  
35 ‘affects.’ The imposed anonymity is performed through their powerful mask; their enforced  
36 silencing gets enacted through their massive silent marches. They call attention to their mask as one  
37 more in complex system of masking. Politicians disguise themselves and their deeds behind  
38 imperatives of the ‘state.’<sup>12</sup> When delegates from the Mexican government refused to negotiate  
39 with the Zapatistas unless they removed their masks, the Zapatistas answered: “But the state is  
40 always masked.”<sup>13</sup> At least, the Zapatistas said, they knew they were masked (op. cit., 246).

41 The performatic force of these gestures resonate nationally and internationally—the only  
42 reason most of them are alive today. Zapatistas have taken over the functions associated with  
43 ‘state-systems’ — health care, education, management of resources, its self-defense and control  
44 of its territory. To hell with the tactics of the weak! They claim the strategy, the ‘propre’, the  
45 proper, the space and time that belong to them, which as de Certeau puts it, “serves as the basis  
46 for generating relations with an exterior distinct from it.”<sup>14</sup> They decide who enters their ter-  
47 ritory, when, and under what circumstances. Having handed over our papers, we wait for  
48 permission to proceed. We entered into their time zone.

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### Reflection Three: Ethos

While the struggle to form a ‘good’ government is not ‘indigenous,’ the value system through which that struggle takes place is a pastiche of ancient and contemporary thought. The Zapatistas inhabit the Mayan’s age-old system of equivalences, deep-rooted connectivity, and mutual recognition. Humans, corn, snails, mountains, rain, etc. each have their “ch’ulel,” the animation and interconnectedness of all things, human and non-human. A Zapatista who met with me during those days put it this way: “‘ch’ulel’ refers to the life in everything. It’s the presence that constructs and completes everything that exists in the universe and that gives it its importance, its dignity and grandeur.” Mesoamericans started developing corn 10,000 years ago and they are, in turn, the people of corn. Monsanto wants to grow, not kill, corn, the transnational corporation claims; but it will kill corn’s ‘ch’ulel.’ GM corn will become one more dead thing in the capitalist production of dead things. Ya Basta! Enough! The challenge is “how to create a world based on mutual recognition of human dignity, on the formation of social relations which are not power relations,” writes Holloway (8), an important interlocutor for the Zapatistas. One way has been through the affirmation of an inclusive WE, a NOSOTROS that dialogues with other NOSOTROS, other groups of peoples able to represent themselves. In our meaning making systems we might imagine this as one group of Occupiers from say Occupy Wall Street discussing with other Occupy groups—other WEs that have been collectively and autonomously organized.

The *caracol*, as a social formation, enacts the system of equivalences. Snails carry their homes with them; their paintings and sayings encapsulate an entire worldview. Images of snails, often wearing humorous Zapatista masks, make their way into most of the murals, paintings, and textiles. Not only do the Zapatistas honor the slow and steady pace of the snail, the patience and expenditure required for all doing, but the shell serves as the design layout for their communal lands that spiral open from the tight administrative centers. The unassuming snail also represents war in the classical Mayan glyphs, the war the Mayans have long waged against colonial and imperialist masters and, now, their bankers (Chase Manhattan made the elimination of the Zapatistas a pre-condition for a bail out after the economic disaster precipitated by NAFTA in 1995).

### Reflection Four: WE

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At that point in the celebration, an unnamed woman, identified only as a member of the Junta del Buen Gobierno, addressed the crowd in Spanish: “Compañeras, compañeros, hermanas y hermanos de la sociedad civil, nacional e internacional.” Ever since the Zapatista uprising, as noted, gender parity has become central to the movement. This is reflected not only in all governing roles, official positions, and educational practices, but in the very language. No masculine ending word stands without its feminine counterpart, hermanas y hermanos. The *compañera* from the JBG spoke of the struggles the movement has endured over the years: “It hasn’t been easy,” she admitted, “these ten years of practice and building our autonomy . . . . It hasn’t been easy for many reasons, such as the lack of experience or lack of training in governing and self-governing.”<sup>15</sup> But the need for resistance continues, she makes clear, confronted as they are by a government that continues to deny them rights and liberty and that wants to take their lands. The Zapatistas, she says, continue to learn how to resist and work for democracy, though the fruits of the struggle will not be visible in their lifetime. The *compañera* asks people of good heart and goodwill that compose civil society to support their struggle.

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1 Is she referring to us?

2 After the compañera finished speaking another member of the JBG from another region took  
3 the microphone and delivered the same speech in Tzeltal. When he was done another delivered  
4 it in Tzotzil. The speeches seemed interminable to me in the downpour, and I looked down at  
5 my ruined shoes in dismay.

6 Soon the speeches were over and the flags were marched ceremoniously out of the central  
7 space. The next few minutes were all VIVAS! Long live the Escuelita Zapatista! Viva la sexta  
8 nacional e internacional! Viva la sociedad civil nacional e internacional! Viva! The vivas! got  
9 louder and louder as we reached the “Viva las bases de apoyo zapatistas! Viva el subcomandante  
10 insurgente Marcos! Viva el subcomandante insurgente Moisés! Viva el comite clandestino  
11 revolucionario indígena! Viva el Ejercito Zapatista de Liberación Nacional! Viva! Viva Chiapas!  
12 Viva México!” Joyous music starts up and there is loud clapping. Soon, all the representatives  
13 marched off the podium, a long line of women and men walking single file, one after another,  
14 in their fine indigenous clothing. They moved quickly, though formally, through the pouring  
15 rain up the long road to the entrance of the caracol. The music, very tinny and brassy *corridos* set  
16 to polka-type beats, sings of heroic opponents to bad governments.

17 Then the dancing started—the music came on over the speakers and an EMCEE called  
18 people onto the basketball court, now the dance floor. Couples came out with black plastic  
19 tarps over their heads, ski masks covering their faces, and moved slowly, rhythmically to the  
20 music. Members from our group joined in, dancing raucously and happily in the company.

21 So, to return to the Zapatista’s question: what are we doing there? Those receptive to  
22 Moises’ summons became a WE by attending. This performative gesture initiated a dialogue  
23 among these WE, one that protects the Zapatistas from extermination, but that animates us as  
24 well. Activists from de-colonial, anti-globalization, environmental and other movements con-  
25 tinue to be inspired by the Zapatistas. WE also serves as the vital third part of the apparent  
26 binary established by the good and bad governments, the civil society that in part determines  
27 who lives and who dies. Systems produce vulnerability, and other systems, and  
28 equivalencies can be mobilized to offset some of the debilitating effects and affects. I have come  
29 to “listen and learn” as Marcos good-naturedly asked of us, but I know too how much I have  
30 to unlearn in order to listen.<sup>16</sup>

31 The rain, the mud, the poverty does not seem to quell or challenge the pride or determi-  
32 nation of the Zapatistas. According to accounts they cite, Zapatista communities have  
33 achieved higher standards of health and education than other indigenous communities in  
34 Mexico. But Chiapas is still, 20 years later, one of the poorest states in the nation. It has more  
35 inequality now than then, and higher rates of illiteracy. Carlos Monsivais, writing as he  
36 accompanied the Zapatistas on their 2001 “march for dignity,” noted that given the dis-  
37 crimination in Mexico, the obvious and indisputable call for education, food, health, and land  
38 seems utopic.<sup>17</sup> [“reconocimiento de los derechos a la educación, la vivienda, la salud, la tierra  
39 (a fuerza de discriminación, lo obvio, lo indiscutible, se vuelvo lo utópico)” 34]. The more  
40 the Zapatistas move forward, the farther the ‘utopian’ ideals of social justice seem to get away  
41 from them. But they keep struggling. My guess, sitting there, was that the Zapatistas’ palpable  
42 sense of dignity offsets many hardships. As they had shown us, they make their own decisions  
43 and rules. Those who seek to interact with them need to abide by them. When they allow or  
44 invite us to enter their territory, they are hoping that we will act as witnesses and transmitters  
45 of their existence, their resistance, and their worldview. I say worldview rather than ideology  
46 because the Zapatistas are pragmatists, not ideologues. As the evening celebration shows, all  
47 indigenous peoples committed to resistance against the ‘bad’ government are welcome—  
48 regardless of the religious, linguistic, and regional tensions that often separate the groups.

Diana Taylor

1 Indigenous Catholics, Evangelicals, even Muslims who are fighting each other throughout the  
2 state are dancing together here.

3 And all night and throughout the week, the Mexican Air force buzzed the caracoles, just in  
4 case WE had forgotten that they could.

6 **Notes**

- 7
- 8 1 The five caracoles are: La Realidad, Roberto Barrios, La Garrucha, Oventic, and Morelia. [http://](http://enlacezapatista.ezln.org.mx/2013/03/17/fechas-y-otras-cosas-para-la-escuelita-zapatista/)  
9 [enlacezapatista.ezln.org.mx/2013/03/17/fechas-y-otras-cosas-para-la-escuelita-zapatista/](http://enlacezapatista.ezln.org.mx/2013/03/17/fechas-y-otras-cosas-para-la-escuelita-zapatista/)
- 10 2 Among the participants were Nora Cortiñas (President, Association of Mothers of the Disappeared  
11 (Linea Fundadora)) and Pablo González Casanova (former head of UNAM, Mexico's autonomous  
12 university),
- 13 3 Art and Resistance, "explores the many ways in which artists and activists use art (performance, mural  
14 paintings, graffiti, writing, music) to make a social intervention in the Americas. The theoretical part of  
15 the course, taught by Diana Taylor, remains in active conversation with the practice based research  
16 component of the course. Jesusa Rodríguez will lead an intensive one-week performance workshop  
17 that will culminate in a public action as part of the course. Jacques Servin of the Yes Men will also  
18 participate, offering a lecture and a lab, and Lorie Novak will lead the digital media component of the  
19 course. Performances, video screenings, guest lectures, and visits to FOMMA, Chiapas Media Project, a  
20 Zapatista community and other activist projects will provide an additional dimension to the questions  
21 raised by the theoretical readings and discussions. Students will be encouraged to explore possibilities  
22 for practice-based research, develop their own sites of investigation, and share their work in a final  
23 presentation."The future tense here is odd because it happened, but I understand it is a quote  
24 description. I am not sure if this should be addressed.
- 25 4 <http://hemisphericinstitute.org/hemi/en/summer-2013-mexico>
- 26 5 Among the other reasons that Chiapas is so crucial in understanding resistance is that the state's  
27 southern border is the scene of intense activity around migration—the thousands who cross from  
28 Central America trying to reach Mexico's northern border with the U.S. See Claudio Lomnitz'  
29 piece ...
- 30 6 [http://flag.blackened.net/revolt/mexico/ezln/san\\_andres.html](http://flag.blackened.net/revolt/mexico/ezln/san_andres.html)
- 31 7 See *El otro jugador: La caravana de la dignidad indígena*, Mexico: La Jornada, ediciones, 2001.
- 32 8 "Nosotros: Interview with a Zapatista." Diana Taylor and Jacques Servin, Chiapas, Mexico, August  
33 2013.
- 34 9 Walter (Chip) Morris, *A Textile Guide to the Highlands of Chiapas: Guía Textil de los Altos de Chiapas*,  
35 Independent Publishers Group, 2012.
- 36 10 James C. Scott, *Domination and the Arts of Resistance: Hidden Transcripts*. New Haven: Yale University  
37 Press, 1990, pp. 4–5.
- 38 11 Viridiana Ríos, "Chiapas, peor que ayer." *Nexos*, January 2014, p. 26.
- 39 12 Esther's speech is quoted in Carlos Monsivais, *EZLN: Documentos y comunicados, Vol. 5. "La marcha del*  
40 *color de la tierra"* 2 de diciembre de 2000/ 4 de abril 2001, Crónica de Carlos Monsivais. México:  
41 Ediciones Era, 2003, p. 47.
- 42 13 This echoes Abrams' observation that "The state is not the reality which stands behind the mask of poli-  
43 tical practice. It is itself the mask which prevents our seeing political practice for what it is" op. cit., 58.
- 44 14 In Michael Taussig, *Defacement: Public Secrecy and the Labor of the Negative*. Stanford: Stanford U.P.,  
45 1999, p. 239.
- 46 15 Michel de Certeau, *The Practice of Everyday Life*. Translated by Steven Randall. Berkeley: University of  
47 California Press, 1984, p. xix.
- 48 16 Translated by the author from a video of the event. The same speech is cited in "Una década de car-  
acoles" by José Gil and Isain Mandujano, *Proceso*, August 25, 2013, pp. 34–36.
- 17 Subcomandante Marcos, *Malas y No Tan Malas Noticias*, November, 2013. <http://enlacezapatista.ezln.org.mx/2013/11/03/malas-y-no-tan-malas-noticias/> last accessed December 30, 2013.
- 18 Carlos Monsivais, "reconocimiento de los derechos a la educación, la vivienda, la salud, la tierra (a fuerza de discriminación, lo obvio, lo indiscutible, se vuelvo lo utópico)." *EZLN: Documentos y comunicados*, Vol. 5, p. 34.

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## 27

# CARNIVAL, RADICAL HUMOR, AND MEDIA POLITICS

*Robert Stam*

Although cultural studies has at times exaggerated, in a kind of Madonna or Lady Gaga syndrome, the quantum of resistance in mass culture, it has also rightly detected utopian moments that suggest possibilities of social change. Cultural studies has demonstrated that contemporary politics necessarily passes through popular culture and the mass media. In this chapter, I will call attention to humor as an under-used resource for the left. An encounter between Bourdieu and German writer Gunter Grass, filmed by the TV Channel Arte (December 5, 1999), by revealing contrasting conceptualizations of culture, gives some sense of what is at stake. Grass praises Bourdieu's project *La Misere du Monde* as a critique of social oppression, but notes a missing element—humor. Bourdieu responds that suffering is not a laughing matter, to which Grass responds that works such as Voltaire's *Candide* show that satire and parody can expose frightful conditions. Intellectuals, Grass adds, must register suffering but also insist on the capacity of people to resist, including through humor. Bourdieu responds that "Globalization does not inspire laughter; our era is not amusing." Grass responds that he is not saying that globalization is funny, but only that the "infernal laughter" triggered by art can also be an indispensable arm in social struggle.

Although Bourdieu is undeniably a more incisive left social thinker than Grass, in this case Grass is right to suggest that we need the subversive tonic of laughter, especially in "unamusing" times. For Brecht, a sense of humor was indispensable in comprehending dialectical materialism, and in this sense, Bourdieu's dismissal of humor as a form of social agency is undialectical. In a kind of "genre mistake" it assumes that suffering-laden eras—and what era has *not* been suffering-laden?—cannot be treated in comic or satirical genres. When humor is used to address historical catastrophes or social oppression, a typical objection is: "How can you laugh when so many have died?" This common argument against the political use of laughter constitutes a kind of mimetic fallacy—the literary and rhetorical "rule" that mandates that style match theme—e.g. a painful subject must be treated in a "pained" manner," with what Tom Waugh calls "indexical sobriety."<sup>1</sup> But a contrary view would say that any theme can be susceptible to humorous or satiric treatment. The question is not whether jokes are a legitimate genre for treating certain subjects but rather: who is the butt of the joke, the powerful or the powerless. (The *purimspiel*, for example, makes fun of Haman, not of Esther.)

What matters, then, is the perspective, not the genre. Jokes, furthermore, can distill social wisdom and resistance in risible form. Told by a racist waiter that "we don't serve colored

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1 people,” Dick Gregory answered: “That’s all right, I don’t *eat* colored people.” Chris Rock  
2 explained the difference between slavery and discrimination: “Now we have trouble getting a  
3 taxi; back then, we *were* the taxi.” George Carlin skewers class system ideology in America:  
4 “Have you never noticed they always tell us that we have to give rich people everything or  
5 they won’t work, while we can’t give poor people anything because they won’t work?” Robin  
6 Williams, commenting on efforts to develop a post-invasion Iraqi constitution, quips: “They  
7 can have ours; we’re not using it.”

8 In the austere superegoish Bourdieu conception, only social scientists can accurately regis-  
9 ter, analyze, and combat social oppression. French media sociologist Eric Maigret sees in the  
10 Grass-Bourdieu exchange an opposition between two visions: one (Bourdieu’s) associates the  
11 mass of people with suffering, symbolic passivity and dispossession, while positing the intellec-  
12 tual as the designated spokesperson for the inexpressive masses; the other (Grass’s) discerns both  
13 suffering and popular resistance.<sup>2</sup> Although Bourdieu gives lip service to “agency,” he ulti-  
14 mately portrays common people as “cultural dupes” beset by symbolic privation. His project, in  
15 this sense, could benefit from a more dialogical vision of culture and agency, one that includes  
16 humor. Although Bourdieu expresses a quasi-Bakhtinian enthusiasm, in *Distinction*, for the car-  
17 navalesque parodies that “satisfy the taste for and sense of revelry, the plain speaking and hearty  
18 laughter which liberate by setting the social world head over heels, overturning conventions  
19 and priorities”<sup>3</sup> he ultimately flattens out Bakhtin’s carnival by suggesting in the “postscript”  
20 that for Bakhtin the “popular imagination can only *invert* the relationship which is the basis  
21 of the aesthetic sociodicy” (my emphasis).<sup>4</sup> If Bakhtin errs on the side of naïve utopianism,  
22 Bourdieu errs on the side of dystopian pessimism.

23 In this chapter, I would like to examine some radical uses of humor, parody, and carnival as  
24 festive-revolutionary practices. As theorized by Bakhtin, carnival embraces social inversion and a  
25 “grotesque realism” that turns conventional esthetics on its head in order to locate a new kind  
26 of convulsive, rebellious beauty, one that dares to reveal the grotesquerie of the powerful and  
27 the latent beauty of the “vulgar.”<sup>5</sup> Carnival is utopian in Marcuse’s sense of “opening up “a  
28 dimension inaccessible to other experience, a dimension in which human beings, nature, and  
29 other things no longer stand under the law of the established reality principle.”<sup>6</sup> Bakhtin’s  
30 notion of the *carnavalesque* opens up an infinitely rich repertoire of concepts and strategies for  
31 analyzing and even for creating art. Carnival evokes a deep social unconscious and collective  
32 desire for gregarious pleasure among equals.

33 Artists often practice carnivalesque strategies, and audiences enjoy them, without necessarily  
34 knowing their historical genealogy or conceptual basis. Carnival gives expression to “the peo-  
35 ple’s second life,” a sacred/profane time-out for imaginative play and alternative cosmovisions.  
36 Undoing the false association of wisdom with gravitas, Bakhtin saw carnival’s culture of laughter  
37 as penetratingly deep, and Rabelais as most profound when he was laughing the most heartily.  
38 The court echoing with derisive female laughter toward the sexist assumptions of the prose-  
39 cutor, in Marleen Gooris’ film *A Question of Silence*, calls up an anticipatory utopia imbued with  
40 laughter’s unifying force, its subversive refusal of ready-made definitions, its choral intimation of  
41 nascent collective “becomings.”

42 Carnival is the people’s self-pleasuring, a party the people offers to itself, a little miracle, as in  
43 love, of a sharing of social fantasies. But carnival is not only a living social practice but also a  
44 general, perennial fund of popular forms and festive rituals summed up in the term carnivalesque,  
45 or the transposition into art of the spirit of popular festivities. The carnivalesque promotes parti-  
46 cipatory spectacle, for Bakhtin a “pageant without footlights” erasing the boundaries between  
47 spectator and performer. As a kind of dress-rehearsal for utopia, carnival suspends hierarchical  
48 distinctions, barriers, and prohibitions, installing instead a qualitatively different communication

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1 based on “free and familiar contact” or transparent non-hierarchical communication within a  
2 community of equals, as what Barbara Ehrenreich calls an acknowledgement of the “miracle of  
3 our simultaneous existence.”<sup>7</sup> As a danced version of Habermas’ rather ponderously academic  
4 “ideal speech situation,” carnival fosters convivial relations between people, including with stran-  
5 gers, in an atmosphere free of paranoia and competition. In vertical terms, carnival turns the world  
6 upside down—or from another perspective “right side up.” The carnivalesque spirit thus sees  
7 social and political life as a perpetual “crowning and uncrowning” where the inevitability of  
8 change becomes a source of what Ernst Bloch called “the principle of hope.”<sup>8</sup>

9 Bakhtin’s conceptualization, which has deep affinities with Moylan’s “critical utopia”<sup>9</sup> and  
10 with Lefebvre’s “festival,” provides a touchstone for a particularly vibrant strand within sub-  
11 versive aesthetics. A 1966 situationist pamphlet asserted that “revolutions will be festivals or they  
12 will not be, for the life they herald will itself be created in festivity.”<sup>10</sup> Many of Bakhtin’s  
13 favored topoi—carnival, banquet imagery, marketplace speech, free and familiar contact—are  
14 indissociable from the festive takeover of public space. Claudia Orenstein speaks of “festive-  
15 revolutionary practices” as a perennial source of radical art. In many films, the giddy takeover of  
16 the streets becomes a metaphor for recovering the commons for popular purposes. Barbara  
17 Hammer’s carnivalesque *Superdyke* offers a militant Lesbian example of the trope. The film  
18 features feminist Superwomen sporting “Superdyke” tee-shirts and bearing cardboard shields  
19 emblazoned with the word “Amazons” rescuing women from various dangers while proudly  
20 coming out in the public sphere. Marching in time in battalion formation, their helmets carry  
21 the inscription: “Out of the closet, into the streets.”

22 The trope of animated dancing crowds taking over public space has deep appeal and pro-  
23 found social meaning. The well-known chant goes: “Whose streets? Our streets!,” and one  
24 direct action group dubs itself “Reclaim the Streets.” In a free-wheeling soft-peddling version  
25 of the situationist derive—ambulatory drifting through socially varied neighborhoods—“Critical  
26 Mass” bikeriders exercise ephemeral power by snaking through the streets of the metropolis.  
27 The demonstration that shut down the financial center of London in 1968 was dubbed “car-  
28 nival against capitalism.” Carnival-like activities figured in Seattle’s “Festival of Resistance,”  
29 while Occupy Wall Street protests often featured drum circles, which, as Mark Greif points out,  
30 have long been linked to Afro-diasporic culture (Congo Square Drum Circle), ultimately  
31 forming “partly imaginary, partly historic attempts to live out suppressed anti-colonial traditions,  
32 of Native American spirituality and survival, and the African diaspora in the Americas and  
33 Caribbean.”<sup>11</sup> What Greif calls “leaderless, spontaneously coordinated polyrhythmic and pluralist  
34 drum circles” manifest emerging forms of conviviality. The drums carnivalize protest, combin-  
35 ing primal feelings of oceanic celebration and ecstatic feelings of union not only between body  
36 and mind but also with other human beings. While democratic assembly depends on speech,  
37 drumming depends on “a kinetic and continual, unbroken out loud bodily manifestation of the  
38 rhythm, an experience of others’ moves within a generality of constant movement, sound, and  
39 rhythm” within a common space where “authority is not used to overrule anyone’s form of  
40 life-giving expression.”<sup>12</sup>

41  
42  
43 **Contemporary Fools**

44 In “Forms of Times and the Chronotope,” Bakhtin speaks of the “time-honored bluntness of  
45 fools,” who create their own special chronotope. The fool’s masks, for Bakhtin, “grant the right  
46 not to understand, the right to confuse, to tease, to hyperbolize life; the right to parody others  
47 while talking, the right to not be taken literally, not “to be oneself” ... and the right to rage at  
48 others with a primeval (almost cultic) rage ... ”<sup>13</sup> Bakhtin’s words perfectly describe Steven Colbert

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1 as a pre-eminent example of the contemporary fool. Colbert performs what Bakhtin called “deep  
2 parody” i.e. a form of parodic discourse that goes beyond a shallow mockery of manners—e.g. Will  
3 Ferrel mocking George Bush Jr.’s grammatical lapses—to create a profound ideological critique of  
4 right-wing thinking in general. Colbert’s style and discourse lampoon conservative ideology not  
5 only through voice and body language (partly modelled on the inane bluster of cable gasbag Bill  
6 O’Reilly) but also by satirically exaggerating right-wing doxa. By voicing in hyperbolically absurd  
7 terms the right-wing nostrums of: predatory Social Darwinism, blind market fundamentalism, rabid  
8 Anti-Communism, hysterical US exceptionalism, heartless trickle-down economics, visceral anti-  
9 intellectualism, “color-blind” racism, anti-Latino xenophobia and Islamophobia, all filtered through  
10 a suspectly homo-erotic form of homophobia. Colbert takes the right’s through-the-looking-glass  
11 logic to its absurd conclusions. Through his perspicacious mimicry of complete idiocy, he turns the  
12 powerful into his straight men. His putative belief in corporate personhood, for example, leads him  
13 to propose laws enabling corporations to marry, but not “gay marry,” he hastens to add, since  
14 “marriage is between Mary and John, and I wouldn’t like to see Johnson and Johnson messing  
15 around”. Colbert dramatizes Mitt Romney’s claim that “corporations are people,” through a mock  
16 political ad that claims that since Romney, as the head of Bain Capital, had snuffed out a number of  
17 other corporations, and since corporations are people, he was therefore a killer of people, and  
18 should be known as Mitt the Ripper.

19 Closely related to the figure of the fool is the *faux naïf*, a tradition going at least as far back as  
20 Don Quixote, who takes chivalric romances for gospel truth, and Voltaire’s philosophical fable  
21 *Candide*, where the titular character takes literally Leibniz’s notion that we live in “the best of all  
22 possible worlds.” As a *faux naïf* blinded by his ideological *idees fixes*, Colbert pretends not to  
23 realize that the audience is laughing at him! The laughter of Colbert’s left-inclined audience—  
24 whom Colbert allegorically addresses as “nation”—serves as an in-studio Greek chorus. Their  
25 laughter voices the tacit norms that regulate the performance, the truth that goes counter to  
26 Colbert’s sententious nonsense. Playing *episteme* (knowledge) to his *doxa* (opinion), Colbert’s  
27 interactions with congressional figures, meanwhile, display the fool’s capacity to confuse, to  
28 tease, to “hyperbolize life” and to “parody others while talking.” Through quick-witted soph-  
29 istry, Colbert “proves,” for example, that Eleanor Holmes Norton, as an official representative  
30 of Washington, DC, is not from the US, since Washington, DC is “not a state.”

31 Colbert’s skewering of President Bush at the April 2006 White House “Roast” cut even  
32 more deeply. The Roast, usually an innocuous ritual of merely apparent social inversion, where  
33 comedians make fun of a president’s mannerisms but not of his politics, became in this instance  
34 the scene of high-risk drama. As court jester in a warmongering time, Colbert spoke truth in  
35 the literal face of power, all in the guise of ironic praise for “my hero, George W. Bush.”  
36 Colbert ridiculed Bush’s penchant for strong assertions of belief by emptying them of all sub-  
37 stance. In a kind of imbecile’s profession of faith, Colbert declares: “I believe in America. I  
38 believe it exists. My gut tells me that I live there ... and I strongly believe it has 50 states.”  
39 Then Colbert mocked the public relations construction of Bush as a courageous man who  
40 “takes a stand” by playing with the word “stand” itself: “I stand by this man. I stand by this man  
41 because he stands for things. Not only for things, he stands *on* things. Things like aircraft carriers  
42 and rubble and recently flooded city squares.” But Colbert reserved his most cutting barbs for  
43 the media by suggesting that they should be even *more* servile to power:

44  
45 Let’s review the rules. Here’s how it works: the president makes the decisions. He’s  
46 the decider. The press secretary announces those decisions, and you people of the press  
47 type those decisions down ... Just put ‘em through a spell check and go home ...  
48 Write that novel you’ve got kicking around in your head. You know, the one about



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1 the intrepid Washington reporter with the courage to stand up to the administration.  
2 You know – fiction!

3  
4 It was all as if a digital camera had recorded a Shakespearean Fool in the act of mocking both the  
5 self-deluded King and his obsequious Courtiers. But while Elizabethan Fools were heard only by  
6 those present in the Court, Colbert’s performance, initially ignored by the very media whose  
7 cowardice he had mocked, subsequently went viral to become one of You-Tubes biggest hits, to  
8 the point that a website called “Thank You Stephen Colbert” logged tens of thousands of thank  
9 you’s. What was usually a hollow ritual became the site of edgy hilarity, a symbolic crowning and  
10 uncrowning of the powers that be, as Colbert cut through the heavy atmosphere of pious  
11 obeisance cultivated by the new monarchs.

12 The Renaissance of political satire on cable television typified by figures like Colbert and  
13 Jon Stewart ultimately traces its roots to a specific homegrown US form of the carnivalesque,  
14 variously known as “sick humor” or “black humor.” Incarnated by such figures as Lenny Bruce,  
15 Tom Lehrer, Shelley Berman, Stan Freeberg, Mel Brooks, Mike Nichols, and Elaine May, this  
16 tradition of sketch comedy probed such “touchy” topics as racism, anti-semitism, and nuclear war.  
17 In the tradition of carnival’s laughing at death, the humorist Tom Lehrer performed satirical songs  
18 about nuclear destruction, sung in a wierdly insouciant sing-along manner. The refrain of one  
19 such song consisted of variations on “We’ll all go together when we go/every Hottentot and  
20 every Eskimo.” Another song, delivered in a country and western hillbilly style, recounted the  
21 delights of watching atomic mushroom clouds rising over Nevada test sites: “Mid the yuccas and  
22 the thistles, we’ll watch the guided misseles, dropping bombs in the cool, desert air,” all climaxing  
23 with an ecstatic “Yahoo!” anticipatory of Slim Pickins’ yelp in *Doctor Strangelove* as he rides the  
24 nuclear warhead like a bucking branco. Within a refurbished Brechtian cabaret style, the bitterness  
25 of Lehrer’s lyrics conflicts with the hootenanny good cheer of the music. Indeed, Kubrick’s film  
26 borrows specific techniques as well as themes from “sick comedy.” Like the stand-up sketches of  
27 Shelley Berman and Nichols and May, many sequences in the Kubrick film involve single-voiced  
28 or double-voiced telephone conversations. At a time when military and communications tech-  
29 nologies were becoming symbiotically interlinked, *Dr. Strangelove* proliferates in scenes involving  
30 telephones, intercoms, public address systems, and other communication devices. Thus the abor-  
31 tive communications across diverse media become an uncannily apt metaphor for a situation  
32 where the slightest *miscommunication* could entail nuclear disaster.

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**Pedagogic Humor and Provocation**

36 Another major purveyor of carnivalesque humor is Michael Moore. A certain left both loves,  
37 and feels superior to Moore; he is often seen as “in excess,” as too much”—too slovenly, too  
38 working-class, too unsubtle, and too fat (like the obese Kings or “Rei Momos” of Brazil’s  
39 carnival). Although dismissed by some as “Jackass for Lefties,” Moore’s broad appeal to a  
40 mainstream audience partly derives from his unkempt, hamburger-eating, baseball-cap wearing  
41 Americanness. As the shuffling, potbellied quintessence Midwestern normalcy and the US  
42 working-class, he is the very antithesis of the right-wing bogeyman—the effete latte-sipping  
43 liberal. The standard complaints about Moore’s “narcissism” really constitute a kind of *genre*  
44 *mistake*, where the critic judges an artistic text according to generically inappropriate categories.  
45 The presence of Moore’s ungainly body in the frame is not a testament to vanity, but rather the  
46 index of a self-staging author (Cecilia Sayad) whose artfully fashioned persona (at least in some  
47 of his films), is that of the hapless everyperson seeking honest answers from the systematically  
48 mendacious. This clueless Quixote imagines that he can persuade a Nazi/Aryan/Klan

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1 encampment to abandon racism if only a multiracial cohort of balloon-wielding dancers will  
2 blow them kisses while singing “Stop in the Name of Love.”

3 As an artist and persona, Michael Moore is multiple: part *faux naïf*, part portly lord of misrule,  
4 part agit-prop provocateur, part moralist, part satirist. In his early films, Moore plays the role of  
5 an information-challenged bumpkin trying to get governments and corporations to stop abusing  
6 the populace. Moore’s ludic provocations are more than mere pranks, however. Apart from the  
7 fact that his pranks sometimes win concrete results, they also have a conceptual basis. Moore’s  
8 satiric vignettes cut through the corporate idolatry that passes for political wisdom in the US  
9 media, capturing what is wrong with global capitalism and with the comatose US political  
10 system. Moving beyond the usual defensive apologetics of the Democratic Party, Moore  
11 takes the offensive by turning everything upside down. Thus satirists like Moore rush into  
12 the vacuum left by mainstream liberals who shy away from challenging neo-liberal dogma  
13 because they are complicitous with it. Going against the grain of a certain left-wing rationalism,  
14 Moore at times makes an unabashed appeal to emotion, not in the name of sentimentality and  
15 facile affect but rather in hopes of touching on socially generated emotions of outrage and  
16 sympathy, anger, and love.

17 Just as Quixote gleefully accepted the romantic fictions of chivalric literature, Moore’s *faux*  
18 *naïf* of *Roger and Me* pretends to take capitalism’s self-advertising literally, really and truly  
19 believing that corporations are what the commercials say they are: warm and fuzzy, empathetic,  
20 virtually human social ensembles that “care about you.” Within the feudal logic of “if the King  
21 only knew” (about nobility’s outrageous abuse of the peasants) Moore’s naive persona, at least  
22 in early films like *Roger and Me*, pretends to believe that the contemporary nobility known as  
23 chief executive officers (CEOs) will stop abuses against workers once they are informed about  
24 them. Moore plays the putative ignoramus who thinks that he really can talk General Motors  
25 (GM) CEO Roger Smith into helping foreclosed former workers. He feigns surprise when  
26 corporate flacks refuse to let him film his exposés inside of corporate headquarters. The real  
27 point is not the naivete of the persona but rather the process of disalienation of the spectators  
28 themselves. Accuracy is subsumed under the larger goal of satiric didacticism.

29 For Jacques Rancière, radical politics calls for a new theatricality that refuses the existing  
30 distribution of roles and of the goods of the commons, within a new staging where new col-  
31 lective actors, performing on a redesigned public stage, recast their own role in order to have  
32 equal participation in the commons. In this sense, Moore’s stratagems can be seen as an attempt  
33 to forge an activist dramaturgy. Many episodes from Moore’s *The Awful Truth* and *TV Nation*  
34 model a mischievous politics that he calls slacktivism or lazy activism. *Slacktivism* again revives  
35 the spirit of Melville’s *Bartleby*, the scrivener who “prefers not to” collaborate with the boss’s  
36 demands, but moves it from passive resentment to active resistance. (Might a contemporary  
37 *Bartleby*, who after all worked on Wall Street, have joined the Occupy Movement?)

38 Unlike many sober left documentaries, Moore’s festive social entertainments combine raw and  
39 righteous anger at corporate or congressional malfeasance with the unbridled joy of choreo-  
40 graphed group performance. At the same time, Moore carnivalizes right-wing dominance while  
41 also proposing a counter-utopia in the name of a collective dream. One sketch features a band of  
42 “gay freedom riders”—a queer version of Ken Kesey’s “Merry Pranksters”—stalking the homo-  
43 phobic pastor Fred W. Phelps. The orgiastically pink “sodomobile” zigzags across the various  
44 states where homosexuality is illegal. As the bus bucks back and forth due to ardent sexual rocking  
45 and rolling, its side poster reads “Sodom is for lovers,” and “Buggery on Board.” Thus Moore  
46 literally mobilizes an activist citizenry in ways that invoke historical currents of solidarity. The very  
47 name “gay freedom riders” forges a clear link between the Civil Rights struggle and the gay lib-  
48 eration movement as a logical extension of the black liberation movement.

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1 Subversive art often plays with various forms of the counterfactual—the lucid counterfactual  
2 which exposes the lies of the right, the dystopian counterfactual which hyperbolizes the ills of  
3 the cynical social world promoted by global capitalism, and the utopian counterfactual which  
4 helps us imagine an alternative world. The activist performances of the “Yes Men,” in this  
5 sense, practice various permutations of the counterfactual. If corporations are people, then cer-  
6 tainly artists have the right to impersonate them. The “Yes Men”—the activist team and its  
7 network of supporters created by Jacques Servin and Igor Vamos—actually impersonate, if not  
8 corporations, at least their human avatars by becoming fictitious spokesmen for the World Trade  
9 Organization (WTO), McDonalds, and Dow Chemical.<sup>14</sup> Carrying subversion to dizzying and  
10 legally hazardous heights, the Yes Men create fake corporate websites in order to get themselves  
11 invited to appear in the media as CEOs. In their anti-corporate *purimspiels*, they don the robes  
12 of the oppressive contemporary Hamans, “infiltrating” what Rancière calls “the networks of  
13 domination.”<sup>15</sup> By reappropriating the dress codes, manners, and discourses of corporate “suits,”  
14 they deploy a non-canonical form of method acting in order to dramatize corporate villainy.  
15 Two films, *The Yes Men* and *The Yes Men Fix the World*, showcase Mike Bonanno and Andy  
16 Bichlbaum (invented names) as imposter-delegates who make outrageous (and even murderous)  
17 “modest proposals” at WTO meetings, proposals that, like Swift’s, are sometimes taken at face  
18 value. No idea, no matter how repellant—Big Macs made out of recycled human feces, or foul-  
19 smelling candles purportedly made from decaying human flesh (actually animal flesh)—strikes  
20 the businesspeople as out-of-bounds, as long as a profit is there for the taking.

21 In a Swiftian spoof on Ayn Randian survivalism and corporate individualism, the Yes Men  
22 modeled a bizarre hilarious-looking inflatable “Survivaball,” a self-contained personal living  
23 system for the post-apocalyptic businessman trying to survive global warming. Many in the cor-  
24 porate audience were intrigued, rather than horrified, at the idea. Their “vivoleum project,”  
25 meanwhile, promised to keep fuel flowing by transforming the corpses of those who would  
26 die from oil-based calamities into crude. In their most notorious prank, the corporate mimic  
27 Jacques Servin appeared on BBC News as “Finisterra” (etymologically “end of the earth”)—  
28 invited as an official representative of Union Carbide—to announce that the corporation,  
29 notorious for its agile dodging of responsibility for its own disasters, had decided to fully com-  
30 pensate the victims of the poisonous explosion at the (formerly Dow Chemical-owned) gas plant  
31 in Bhopal, India. The “news” sparked a dramatic downturn in the value of Union Carbide Stock  
32 and reminded the world of a disaster that the corporation had hoped everyone would forget.  
33 Eventually accused of lying, the Yes Men, in a nod to the Platonic ideal, protested that they had  
34 given a completely accurate representation of “what the corporation *should* have done.” Adres-  
35 sing dystopian abuses through utopian declarations, the Yes Men simply declare their utopias as  
36 established fact, as when they published and distributed perfect simulacral copies of the *New York*  
37 *Times* announcing all the (counterfactual) news “fit to print:” the end of the Iraq War, George  
38 Bush’s prosecution for treason, and the establishment of universal health care.

39 Within Brecht’s theory, alienation effects were closely tied to Marxist analyses of “aliena-  
40 tion,” the process by which human beings lose control of their labor power and institutions  
41 along with their critical consciousness about their real conditions of existence. The goal of  
42 alienation-effects was to reveal through shock-effects the ultimate strangeness and mutability  
43 of taken-for-granted social arrangements. An episode of *The Daily Show* (August 13, 2013),  
44 offered a vivid example of an alienation effect by dramatizing the left-wing axiom that the  
45 real social problem in the US is not the “crime in the streets” but “the crime in the suites.”  
46 Spoofing Mayor Bloomberg’s defense of his “Stop and Frisk” policy, *The Daily Show* had its  
47 black “correspondent” Jessica Williams surprise liberal guest host John Oliver with her ringing  
48 endorsement of “stop and frisk.” Picking up on Bloomberg’s comment that “the police go

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1 where the crime is” Williams reported direct from a “high-crime area”—Wall Street. Those  
2 most likely to commit corporate crime, she pointed out, usually fit a certain profile—white,  
3 well-dressed, affluent. “So if “you’re a white, upper-East Side billionaire with ties to  
4 the financial community, like Michael Bloomberg,” she warned, “you just have to expect to  
5 be roughed up once in a while.”

6 Michael Moore’s oeuvre provides a treasure trove of neo-Brechtian alienation effects, now  
7 filtered through US popular entertainment and standup comedy. First under the title “TV  
8 Nation,” and later “The Awful Truth,” Moore became what Doug Kellner calls a “high-profile  
9 critic of corporate capitalism, US military police, the US Health Industry, the Bush Adminis-  
10 tration, and the manifold injustices of US Society.”<sup>16</sup> The basic drift of Moore’s work has been  
11 to mock the US’s criminal corporatocracy and its profit-driven corporate media. Moore feigns  
12 naïvete in order to effect the “disalienation” or *deniement* (French “denaiving”) of US specta-  
13 tors who mechanically reiterate their blind exceptionalist faith in “the greatest country in the  
14 world.” *Sicko*, for example, “de-naives” the Americans who ritualistically praise the pathogenic  
15 US health system as “the best health care system in the world.” Moore does what cautious lib-  
16 eral commentators rarely do; he models alternatives by calling attention to other countries where  
17 health care is treated simply as a universal right. In so doing he struck the fear of God into  
18 insurance corporations which labored mightily to undermine the film. Through the mutual  
19 illumination of social systems, we learn that in Britain, cashiers *dispense* rather than receive  
20 cash, that Cubans (and even GITMO prisoners) enjoy better health care than the average  
21 American, and that insurance companies, far from “caring about you” as their lachrymose ads  
22 proclaim, spend inordinate energy to weed out unhealthy (i.e. unprofitable) customers.

23 Some of the topoi of Moore’s films make a cumulative point through repetition. One leitmotif  
24 is that of the breezily overconfident Moore trying to penetrate the inner sanctums of corporate  
25 capitalism. In a familiar routine, Moore is first received by the authorities with icy politesse,  
26 followed by veiled threats, and finally by physical force, accompanied by the assertion of a legal/  
27 philosophical principle: “You are on private property.” What becomes clear through the quasi-  
28 ritualistic repetition is that it is corporate enclosure and the reign of private property that prevent  
29 the solving of the most obvious problems. Moore tears the mask off corporate public relations  
30 propaganda, forcing the corporations to reveal the cruel visage behind the public-relations  
31 makeup. These comical *lehrstucke* have a mechanical quality since we always know how they will  
32 end—just as we always know that Don Quixote will get beat up—the suspense only concerns  
33 how long the beating will be postponed. But the inevitable progression from genteel hostility  
34 to threats of expulsion and the assertion of private property rights is a lesson in itself about a  
35 system that values property over life and health. The measure of Moore’s success lies less in the  
36 real-world effects of his intervention than in the pedagogic power of the example.

### 37 38 **Media Jujitsu**

39  
40 Media jujitsu refers to a kind of asymmetrical semiotic warfare, whereby media makers draw from  
41 the arsenal of domination in order to turn the power of the dominant against domination itself,  
42 turning strategic weakness into tactical strength. By reaccentuating pre-existing materials, media  
43 jujitsu rechannels energies in new directions, generating a space of critique outside the binaries of  
44 hegemony and resistance. In contexts of right-wing hegemony, media jujitsu becomes crucial,  
45 especially in an age where the new media technologies open up novel possibilities. We find an  
46 example in Alex Riveira’s one-and-a-half-minute low-budget digital “trailer” for his “forth-  
47 coming” blockbuster *Independence Day*, a Latino parody of the Roland Emmerich film which  
48 replaces the alien invasion of the original with a reconquest of North America by Mexicans.

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1 Instead of the American Independence Day on July 4 the piece is set on Mexican Independence  
2 Day (September 16). Symbolically reversing the US militarization of the border, the film sends  
3 nine animated air-borne sombreros flying over the US–Mexico border wall on a successful  
4 mission to vaporize Washington landmarks like the Congressional Building. “The next time you  
5 call them “aliens,” a final intertitle warns ominously, “might be your last.”

6 A contemporary master of media jiu-jitsu is Canadian filmmaker John Greyson, perhaps most  
7 notably in his satiric–activist music videos supporting the Palestinian-led BDS (Boycott,  
8 Divestment, Sanctions) movement which calls for artists to boycott Israel as a protest against the  
9 occupation of the West Bank and Gaza and what some have called Israeli apartheid. In two of  
10 the videos, Greyson deploys the charismatic force of a popular genre (music video) and a  
11 medium (video-sharing websites), together with the commodified charisma of some of the  
12 world’s most popular performers, as a form of support for BDS. While lauding those such as  
13 Bjork and Santana who have refused to perform in Israel, the videos use parodic humor to  
14 mercilessly shame those such as Diana Krall, Elton John, and Metallica who have ignored the  
15 boycott. *Hey Elton* (2010) directly addresses Elton John and pleads with him to respect BDS.  
16 A split screen juxtaposes the singer in concert with footage of the Israeli bombing of Gaza.  
17 Singer/composer David Wall skillfully mimicks the rather sentimental style of Elton John’s  
18 greatest hits, but injects new lyrics supporting the boycott: “Goodbye Yellow Brick Road”  
19 becomes “Good Bye Settlement Roads;” “Sorry Seems to be the Hardest Word” becomes  
20 “Boycott seems to be the hardest word;” and “I guess that’s why they call it the blues” becomes  
21 “I guess that’s why they call it apartheid.” *BDS Bieber* (2011) extends similar treatment to Justin  
22 Bieber, mingling atrocity footage with revised lyrics. *Vuvuzela* (2010), finally, offers an activist  
23 equivalent of the Monty Python routines treating philosophers as soccer players, by deploying  
24 World Cup Soccer images to address the decision of artists to respect or not respect the boycott.  
25

26 **Offside Cinema**  
27

28 Sports is often a trigger for carnival-like activities and what one sociologist of sport calls  
29 “Saturnalia-like occasions for the uninhibited expression of emotions which are tightly controlled  
30 in our ordinary lives.”<sup>17</sup> Ever since the 1979 Islamic Revolution in Iran, women have been  
31 forbidden to watch “the beautiful game” of soccer in Teheran’s Azadi (Freedom) Stadium. For  
32 sheer love of the game, Tehran’s female fans have corseted their bosoms, hidden their long  
33 flowing locks, and masqueraded as men in order to root for their favorite teams and players. In  
34 November 1997, Iran’s victory against Australia enabled it to advance to the World Cup for the  
35 first time since the Islamic Revolution. After the victory, the streets of Tehran became the site of  
36 carnivalesque revelry in the streets. In some neighborhoods, women threw off the *hijab* and  
37 partied in mixed company. When the team returned to Iran, thousands of women went to the  
38 Azadi stadium to join in the celebration. Refused admission, they chanted: “Aren’t we part of the  
39 nation? We want to celebrate too!”

40 Jafar Panahi’s 2006 film *Offside* crosses literal and imaginary lines, and in this sense constitutes  
41 an example of offside cinema, by analogy to the “offside” rules in soccer. The context of pro-  
42 duction of the film matched the situation portrayed in the film, in that Panahi, like the women  
43 in the film, also had to do an “end run” around the authorities. One of the most censored of  
44 Iranian directors, Panahi used strategic mendacity to get the film made, creating a decoy  
45 director and a fake synopsis to get past a maze of censorial entities. In a hybrid mix, Panahi used  
46 non-professionals as actors in a fictional story filmed during an actual soccer match (with Bah-  
47 rain in 2005). Partially inspired by his own daughter’s request to attend a soccer game, the film  
48 accompanies the female fans as they try to sneak into the stadium. Some are caught and placed

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1 in an open-air cell on the edges of the stadium, where they can hear the roars of the crowd but  
2 not see the game. The film sutures us into the women's viewpoint, not only by subjectivizing  
3 them through point of view shots, but also by leaving the spectators maddeningly unable to see  
4 the game because of the restrictions on the women. (There is not a single shot of the playing  
5 field in the entire film). Thus the laws penalizing women also penalize us as spectators by frus-  
6 trating our sports scopophilia.

7 In an inversion of stereotypes about the gendered hierarchies of cultural capital, these unruly  
8 women know more about soccer than the guards. One rather butch woman sports an army  
9 uniform, in indirect protest against sexual segregation in the armed forces. The female dialecti-  
10 cians repeatedly demolish their male guardians' arguments in defense of gender segregation.  
11 When the guard explains that women are barred from the matches to protect them from vulgar  
12 masculine speech, one woman retorts: "We hear that at home, We won't listen!" When a  
13 guard asks one of the women to cover her eyes in order not to see the graffiti, she promises  
14 "I won't look." In an aporia of masculinist chivalry, men are seen as moral lepers, as so filthy-  
15 minded that women have to be protected not only *by* men but also *from* men. As the women  
16 consistently outwit the men, sexual segregation is revealed as logically—and logistically—  
17 indefensible and even unenforcable. The prerogatives of Bakhtin's bodily lower stratum actually  
18 enable one of the women to evade the guards. Alleging urinary emergency, she insists on going  
19 to the male restroom, while hiding her identity as a woman behind a poster of the face of a  
20 soccer star. Once in the mens' room, she tricks her guard and slips into the crowd. The literally  
21 leaky body comes to metaphorize the porosity of social barriers in general. After the victory,  
22 the women, in a violation of patriarchal gender etiquette, join in the open-air celebrations in  
23 the streets. As a provisional, ephemeral, laughing communitas, they actively participate in the  
24 carnivalesque takeover of the public sphere.

25 The meanings of the title—*Offsides*—come to ripple outward from the initial literal denota-  
26 tion of transgressing an invisible yet consequential virtual soccer line to evoke the symbolic  
27 transgression of other lines, both visible and invisible, lines between law and desire, between  
28 etiquette and its disruption, between inside and outside, between men and women, and  
29 between documentary and fiction. Challenging one invisible line—for example in relation to  
30 gender—subtly impacts all the other lines. Social change along one axis of social stratification  
31 such as gender can thus lead to challenges along other axes, such as ethnicity or religion, chal-  
32 lenging the various codes that underwrite social hierarchy, which is why the authorities, aware,  
33 in their own way, of what Kimberley Crenshaw calls "*intersectionality*," take challenges on any  
34 axis seriously.

35 Once the film was made, the regime sabotaged its Oscar chances by postponing its Iran  
36 release, since Oscar nominees have to be released first in the home country. In December 2010,  
37 the Iranian regime accused Panahi of shooting without permission, of supporting the Green  
38 Revolution, and of making propaganda against the system. The director was banned from  
39 making films, from travelling abroad, and from giving interviews. Panahi's defiant answer to the  
40 ban, in the great tradition of architextual negation, as exemplified by Diderot ("Ceci n'est pas un  
41 conte") and Magritte ("This is not a pipe"), was a film entitled *This is not a Film*. Distributed in  
42 France by Kanibal Films, this no-budget celluloid-less digital home movie was technically not a  
43 film but rather a self-labeled "effort."

44 As in *Offside*, Panahi again blurred the borders between inside and outside by sending a home  
45 movie to Cannes and later to the New York Film Festival, famously smuggling the film out of  
46 Iran on a USB drive hidden in a cake. Confined to his own home, Panahi turned his own  
47 house arrest into a microcosmic national allegory. In the film, Panahi surfs the internet and turns  
48 his own home into a *cinemateque* exhibiting segments from his own films such as *Crimson Gold*

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1 and *The Circle*. Panahi's co-director Moyjaba Mirtahmash reads the film script that Panahi had  
2 been forbidden to shoot, a mise-en-abyme story about a girl locked up in her home by her  
3 parents. Carrying the idea of "art thrives on constraints" to a kind of paroxysm, Panahi offers  
4 an object lesson in iPhone cinema as a way of thwarting repression and taunting the censors.  
5 Ironically, the four-day shoot coincided with the fireworks marking the Iranian festival Cha-  
6 harshambe Suri that precedes Nouruz (Persian New Year). Panahi records the announcement  
7 on the news that Ahmedinejad has banned the fireworks and bonfires that usually form part of  
8 the festival. Declared "offsides" by the regime, Panahi had advanced beyond the line, just as  
9 the masquerading women were "too forward," as used to be said of women who were just a  
10 little too free.

11 In conclusion, the left needs a multi-generic radical art which would appreciate a wide gamut  
12 of genres: standup comedy for its irreverence, satire for its political bite, tragedy for its human  
13 wisdom, agitprop for its immediate efficacy, melodrama for its emotional impact, reflexivity  
14 for its cognitive purchase, realistic drama for its persuasive power, and avant-garde provocation  
15 for its gay relativity. The left must be attuned to the strains of both hegemony and resistance,  
16 ideology and utopia, critique and celebration, the hermeneutics of suspicion and the principle of  
17 hope. A subversive media aesthetics needs both what Ernst Bloch called "cold currents"—the  
18 disenchanted analysis of concentrated economic power and its perverse effects—and the "warm  
19 currents"—the intoxicating thrill of utopian hopes for egalitarian conviviality.<sup>18</sup>

21 **Notes**

- 22  
23 1 Tom Waugh, "Notes on Greyzone," in Brenda Longfellow et al., *The Perils of Pedagogy: The Works of*  
24 *John Greyson* (Montreal: MQUP, 2013), p. 31.  
25 2 See Eric Maigret, "Pierre Bourdieu, la culture populaire et le long remords de la sociologie de la  
26 distinction culturelle," in *Esprit* (March–April 2002).  
27 3 Pierre Bourdieu, *Distinction: A Social Critique of the Judgement of Taste*, Trans., Richard Nice  
28 (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1984), p. 34.  
29 4 *Ibid.*, 491.  
30 5 I first examined the political-mediatic implications of Bakhtin's theories in *Subversive Pleasures*  
31 (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 1989).  
32 6 Herbert Marcuse, *The Aesthetic Dimension: Toward a Critique of Marxist Aesthetics* (Boston: Beacon,  
33 1977), p. 72.  
34 7 Barbara Ehrenreich, *Dancing in the Streets* (New York: Henry Holt, 2006), p. 261.  
35 8 Ernst Bloch, *The Principle of Hope*, 3 vols (Oxford: Blackwell, 1986).  
36 9 See Tom Moylan's *Demand the Impossible: Science Fiction and the Utopian Imagination* (New York:  
37 Methuen, 1986).  
38 10 Lenora Champagne, *French Theatre Experiment since 1968* (Ann Arbor: University of Michigan, 1984,  
39 p. 6).  
40 11 Mark Greif, "Drum Circle History and Conflict, *Occupy* # 2, November 19, 2011.  
41 12 Mark Greif, "Drum Circle History and Conflict, *Occupy* # 2, November 19, 2011.  
42 13 Stam, *Subversive Pleasures*, p. 113.  
43 14 See Amber Day, *Satire and Dissent* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 2011), p. 7.  
44 15 See Jacques Rancière, *Le Spectateur Emancipe* (Paris: La Fabrique, 2008), p. 81.  
45 16 Kellner in Bernstein, ed *Michael Moore: Filmmaker, Newsmaker, Cultural Icon* (Ann Arbor: University of  
46 Michigan, 2012), p. 79.  
47 17 Allen *Guttman Sports Spectators* (New York: Columbia, 1986), quoted in Ehrenreich, op. cit., p. 225.  
48 18 Ernst Bloch, *The Principle of Hope*, 3 vols (Oxford: Blackwell, 1986).

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## 28

# DYNAMIC ENCOUNTERS AND THE BENJAMINIAN AURA

## Reflections on the New Media, Next Media, and Connectivity

*Wafaa Bilal*

Western aesthetics are designed around recognition of a static, concrete object, and based on a long tradition around the passive act of viewing. Not to be overlooked are stage plays, musical performances, and cinema where the viewer is held captive to the theatrical, constantly aware of their own position relative to the object on display. Such aesthetics imply a realized habit of interaction with the stationary, the concrete, and the monumental. Architecture, art, literature, and even motion-based works all occupy the space of the object-based and the immobile. As Simon Penny reminds us in his article *From A to D and back again*, these objects of the western world may be limited in their range of motion, but are endlessly persistent in the space they occupy.<sup>1</sup> As works of New Media join this traditional landscape and seek a platform, the very presence of New Media poses the question: How do we begin to form a basis for what such media entails—how do we perceive and process a call to real-time interaction? This type of subjective inclusion necessarily leads us back to Fried’s cry for a return to the absorptive (anti-theatrical) where a spectator can, without reservation, become absorbed by an aesthetic object. The twist here is that our object lacks precisely what is the basis for Fried’s argument in *Art and Objecthood*, that of the static aesthetic object.

In assessing the amount of interaction occurring between a viewer and a work, it might be argued that almost any art implies interactivity—a give and take, push and pull of information, and impression. Penny would argue against such a statement and prefers to define interactivity as “a machine system which reacts in the moment, by virtue of automated reasoning based on data from its sensory apparatus.” Furthermore, Penny defines an Interactive Artwork as “such a system which addresses artistic issues.”<sup>2</sup>

These definitions are greatly clarifying in the classification of a number of recent artworks that are often termed ‘interactive.’ Responsive works—those which are designed to react to input of the viewer—and works with a limited number of potential outcomes are certainly closer to ‘interactive’ than traditional static art, but contain less potential for the kinds of open-ended and far-reaching conversations characteristic of work that is truly interactive. Work that is truly interactive has no set end, no predicted resting place, and no established dialogue. In truly interactive work, the dialogue between the viewer and artwork is open because the viewer sets



*Dynamic Encounters and the Benjaminian Aura*

1 it into motion, and continues to form and re-form through impression and response. A dynamic  
2 encounter is just this: an open-ended work with flexible response and adaptability. A dynamic  
3 encounter is an interactive work that gains energy and motion from the participant—a work  
4 whose trajectory mirrors that of a conversation that can never be fully predicted.

5 In my work concerning interactive art, I return over and over to Walter Benjamin's article  
6 *The Task of the Translator*. Benjamin quotes Rudolf Pannwitz in remarking that it is a simple and  
7 common mistake on the part of the translator to preserve the state of his native language, rather  
8 than to allow it to be "powerfully affected by the foreign tongue."<sup>3</sup> Expanding this thought  
9 outward from the realm of the written word, it is clear that interactive art can contain a similar  
10 power if it finds a way to exist in a constant state of translation. The work itself, if it is suc-  
11 cessful, is capable not only of existing in a state of constant flux and continuous translation, but  
12 also it is this very adaptability that comprises its strong foundation.

13 Each encounter of an interactive work is subject to individual translation—to voluntary and  
14 involuntary associations that are the participant's own *memoire involontaire*<sup>4</sup>—that create our  
15 unique readings of the world around us. As Proust had it, certain encounters give rise to the  
16 memory's involuntary recollection—a sudden revelation of contents of the individual's past. It is  
17 this constant transmission of individualized impressions and recollections between the viewer  
18 and object of encounter that creates the rapport Walter Benjamin terms 'aura'.

19 The aura is, according to Benjamin, those associations which, at home in the *memoire invo-*  
20 *lontaire*, group themselves around the object of perception, growing from our empathic  
21 response, and finding a base and a direction in the stream of memories created.<sup>5</sup> It is akin to a  
22 conversation—one that is informed by the viewer, the viewer's history of experiences and  
23 opinions, and the work of art that is encountered. At this precise moment the aura is reconfi-  
24 gured in the state of dialectical transience. As Benjamin writes, "to perceive the aura of an  
25 object we look at means to invest it with the ability to look at us in return."<sup>6</sup> This aura is of  
26 great importance to the New Media artist, who seeks to create a work of art that is encounter-  
27 able, translatable, and speaks to viewers in a clear language.

28 In conceiving my project *Domestic Tension*, I bore these thoughts of the aura in mind. I  
29 wanted to create a New Media project that would serve to foster this kind of interaction—that  
30 could spark highly personal responses while also stimulating a great range of conversations and  
31 commentary. *Domestic Tension* was conceived as a project that would be largely immaterial; its  
32 minimal space consisted of a room, a bed, a chair, a lamp, a computer, a paintball gun, and a  
33 camera. The space was designed to serve much more as a platform than as an object of  
34 encounter. I lived for thirty days in this small room, my every movement recorded by a  
35 webcam attached to the top of a paintball gun. Viewers around the world could log on to a  
36 website and shoot me at any time of day, or could choose to direct the gun away. Participants  
37 could also interact with each other in an online chatroom. My intention was that the interac-  
38 tion with the viewer would begin with the space provided (the space-as-object) and that the  
39 encounter—the push and pull between work and participant—would quickly bell outward,  
40 grow richer in dialogue, and foster its own aura.

41 As the project took off, responses were strongly opinionated and varied widely. The project  
42 took on a life of its own as it reached across time zones and the boundaries of countries.  
43 The work was filtered through networks of individual impressions on war, video games, online  
44 interactions, and participatory media, and *Domestic Tension* mushroomed into an entity whose  
45 reaches were as deep as they were previously unknown.

46 Benjamin, in his article *On the Mimetic Faculty*, discusses the rhizomatic proliferation of asso-  
47 ciative potential that offshoots such a dynamic encounter.<sup>7</sup> Benjamin writes of the streams of  
48 meaning that are gleaned, appropriated, authored and re-authored through an individual

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1 experience or encounter with an object. In such an experience a cluster of associations form as  
2 multitudinous as the experiences of the viewer himself.

3 With *Domestic Tension* I sought to override the heavy reliance of experience on the object.  
4 Certainly, the space of the project itself allowed for the encounter, encouraged interaction, and  
5 furthered the progression of conversation. But the feedback created with *Domestic Tension*, the  
6 interweaving of my work and responses to it, removed weight from the object. The participa-  
7 tion itself became the object of the project. From the initial encounter, both my own work and  
8 the work of others contributing to the project entered into a participatory cycle. Each side  
9 became mutually constitutive—served not only to inform, but to author. The object itself  
10 became altered and directed by the very opinions it helped to shape.

11 Such an experiential space calls to mind further discussions of Benjamin, who discusses Surre-  
12 alism as a movement that also sought to locate itself in the participatory. Benjamin speaks of the  
13 Surrealists as a group whose writings were “concerned literally with experiences ...”<sup>8</sup> At one  
14 point, in a discussion on the work of Breton, Benjamin likens the city of Paris to a set of places  
15 where conversations and interactions appear and exit as though caught in a revolving door.<sup>9</sup>

16 The revolving door—the kaleidoscopic shift of arrivals and departures—is a worthwhile  
17 metaphor to consider in *Domestic Tension*. Such a revolving door is, as with its real-life coun-  
18 terpart, a momentary intersection where happenstance and chance collide, then disperse. The  
19 inspiration for the project occurred when I came upon a news broadcast of a US soldier in  
20 Colorado who was dropping bombs, remotely, over Iraq. This space seemed an obvious and  
21 certain removal of interaction—the *anti*-revolving door. The lack of interaction between this  
22 US soldier and the Iraqis being bombed is what allows such actions to continue. As I considered  
23 this, in light of my own losses of family and friends, it seemed that a project creating just this  
24 sort of revolving door was a project that could stand to spark motion and exchange between  
25 people who would otherwise never encounter each other.

26 The entrances and exits made over the course of thirty days of the project were fleeting, but  
27 marked by a great deal of conversation. Some participants became near-constant presences  
28 while others never re-entered the space. But the constant elements of the project—the fuzziness  
29 of the image, the removal, by internet, from the physical object—were exactly those that served  
30 to create a door that continued to revolve, forming a basis for interaction.

31 To discuss *Domestic Tension* as a simple and successful meeting place, to describe it as a  
32 meeting of minds is to neglect another side of the project: a perversity where the subjectivity of  
33 the work creates infinite complications. The sheer number of ways *Domestic Tension* was  
34 apprehended means, of course, that the project itself exemplifies both the comforts and the  
35 frustrations of communication. Vilem Flusser, in his article “What is Communication?”, breaks  
36 down the process of communication-based interaction as one that is, quite simply, artificial,  
37 leaning on invented tools and techniques. But the surface, the topography of our conversant  
38 interactions is, says Flusser, nonetheless an “artificial texture that enables us to forget our soli-  
39 tude, and it is thus a *humanity*.”<sup>10</sup>

40 The perversity, the contrariness of opinions, is a testament to the breadth of approaches that  
41 *Domestic Tension*, or any successful dynamic work, can encompass. Such platforms share  
42 elements of input and output, and the most successful are those that are as translatable as the  
43 participant may desire. These successful projects are also those that create auratic responses—  
44 through our own empathic response to a work that speaks to us, we are spoken to in return. It  
45 is here that the collective can come together in conversation.

46 Artists began, as early as the late 1950s, to explore the potential of dynamic encounters—  
47 these works whose trajectories are impossible to determine in advance. Allan Kaprow’s series of  
48 *Happening*—over 200 in all—began as scripted events for both audience and performers, but

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1 subsequent works became more undirected; in Kaprow's *Words*, two rooms in a gallery were  
2 designed for participants to access and rearrange words on a wall or stencil their own. Kaprow's  
3 *Happenings* are united in that each built a physical platform where the process of making was  
4 prioritized, and where there was also a democratization, an equal access, to both the processes of  
5 making and viewing.

6 In the 1970s, Chris Burden's *Shoot* created an encounter in which a friend shot him in the  
7 arm at close range; Marina Abramovic's *Rhythm 0* allowed an audience access to 72 objects,  
8 including a gun, scissors, and a whip—to be used on her as people desired. Such works created  
9 performance platforms with no predetermined end states, whose interactivity and open trajec-  
10 tory made a tremendous impression on audiences and the art world. These performances were  
11 controversial, often sparking debate about the sanity of the artists themselves, but Abramovic's  
12 remark after *Rhythm 0* approaches both openness and the danger at the heart of such a perfor-  
13 mance: "... if you leave the decision to the public, you can be killed."

14 It is this power to spark conversation that highlights the importance of interactive art. More  
15 recently, artists like Eduardo Kac and Ken Goldberg have explored telepresence work that use  
16 telecommunication technologies to create a virtual meeting place in lieu of a host environment.  
17 Kac's *Teleporting an Unknown State* creates a life-support system for a small plant using the  
18 internet to create a hospitable environment—individuals send light by participating online, and  
19 allow the plant to grow in a room that is otherwise fully dark. Goldberg's *Telegarden* connects  
20 internet users to a remote garden, where they can plant, water, and monitor seedlings by  
21 directing a robotic arm. Kac and Goldberg's works are most focused on the creation of the  
22 interaction itself—not with the physical platform of the object, or with an artificial elevation of  
23 the connection between two viewers that feedback loops might allow.

24 As the possibilities and technologies of telepresence art have broadened, reliance on the  
25 physical object continues to lessen. Simon Penny, in his project *Traces*, creates a single electronic  
26 space in which participants interact with swirls and traces of light—interactions Penny envisions  
27 as "... real-time collaborative sculpturing with light, created through dancing with telematic  
28 partners."<sup>11</sup> Where virtual reality is hindered by the unwieldiness of pixels or the unlikely  
29 representation, the interface here is gauzy; projects like *Traces* create, in their dispersion, a space  
30 where the inhibitions of body, interaction, and object representation are stripped away.

31 I believe such work points to the ultimate future of virtual reality—a reality that exists  
32 with no need for or basis in graphical representation. The first steps towards this reality  
33 begins with familiar technology—simple graphical representations of the body much like  
34 avatars in Second Life. Such graphical representations of the body will be pushed further  
35 until the avatar becomes a full engagement, connected cell by cell to allow for a sensory  
36 experience that retains real sensations of touch, feel, and movement. The sensory will  
37 become close kin to a world that we think of today, most clearly, as a dream world. A chip  
38 implant, connected to the brain, would serve to connect one brain to another, perhaps with  
39 the purpose of exchanging information. With such an implant, the network of connections  
40 would become a decentralized web, with a circulatory network that never needs to rely on a  
41 single hub. Such *NeuroSatellite* connectivity could work much in the manner of today's  
42 Bluetooth devices. In the resultant virtual space, people could escape fully into a new reality,  
43 driven by *CognitiveCommand*.

44 Now, you and I dream in our own worlds; interconnectivity would require hardware to link  
45 our bodies. In such a case, shutting down our physical senses by means of *CognitiveCommand*  
46 would enable us to interact with others on a virtual platform. As we gain flexibility in the use of  
47 *CognitiveCommand*, our experience of the virtual world will become increasingly vivid, to the  
48 point where it perfectly assimilates the real.

Wafaa Bilal

1 If reality is always a product of perception, it relies on distances and proximities. We always  
2 try to render reality by embedding the aura of an individual encounter with an object by which  
3 it may be represented. But my objective with *Domestic Tension*, and with the work I continue to  
4 create has been to house the aura in experience.

5 To think of such encounters of a nonphysical self begins to imply that the object itself can no  
6 longer be certified as an ideal. In our current state, desire prompts us to create a void that  
7 necessitates the object in order to be filled. Leaving the body behind removes both the being  
8 and the necessity.

9 Why would we want to go here? Why would we willingly choose to remove ourselves from  
10 the body and the object base and throw ourselves headlong into a realm of disembodiment and  
11 the virtual? Attempts to disembody the self are hardly new; human beings have long been fasci-  
12 nated with the illusory and refractive power of mirrors. The mirror, presenting an external image  
13 of the self, is even, according to Lacan, responsible for the psychic response that allows us to form  
14 our first conceptions of the self.<sup>12</sup> Furthermore, we have long become fixed on the thought of  
15 technology that promises to transport our own images, as with Edison's early telephonoscope—  
16 designed to transmit light as well as sound. We have, throughout the course of history, been  
17 willing to draw ourselves out over uncharted territories, with hopes that the result is a clearer  
18 picture of ourselves—our limits, our characteristics, and the fundamentals of our existence.

19 It need not be a disaster, a massive global shift in climate or the accessibility of goods and  
20 commodities, that drives us to the point where we are willing to live with less in the way of  
21 material objects. Central to many of the key notions of religion is the lack of concern with  
22 the concrete. In transcending to a higher spiritual place, whether through prayer or meditation,  
23 the strongest and most present object is thought itself. Such a dispersion of the body as tele-  
24 presence allows a state that not only removes the body from an object base, but one that thrusts  
25 us into a realm of multiple presences, intangibility, and expanded potential. This state of being  
26 is one that finds a clear home in the realm of the religious—our nearest approximation can  
27 be found in characteristics of the gods. To leave one world behind in favor of another is a motif  
28 that calls to mind ideas of an afterlife, and also one that speaks to us, quite simply, in the lan-  
29 guage of our tendencies towards the pleasures of escapism.

30 It would be impossible for us to envision today the ways in which continued advances in  
31 virtual reality and interactive media will affect our lives. But it is clear that as technologies  
32 continue to push our boundaries, widen the distances and spaces we populate, our very mental  
33 and physical topographies are bound to change. As communication and information surfaces  
34 stretch and broaden, our patterns of habitation strive to catch up. It seems to me that it is only a  
35 matter of time before meetings of the mind take place in a virtual realm where the constraints  
36 of body and physical space have been, if only temporarily, left behind.

### Notes

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## 29

# SEEKING A THEATER OF LIBERATION

*Dudley Cocke*

A lot of my youth was spent hunting, fishing, and trapping in the bays and marshes of eastern Virginia and northeastern North Carolina. Indoors meant listening to neighbors and kin tell stories. We didn't have a television, and radio couldn't compete. For a 12-year-old boy with his first shotgun, sitting close to gruff men warming themselves by a wood stove as they told stories about the vagaries of duck hunting seemed what life had been made for.

At sixteen, I started paying attention to the civil rights movement, and when the radio announced Medgar Evers had been assassinated, I felt hope just draining away and remember thinking it wouldn't be coming back any time soon. I became focused on how my white community was reacting to the black freedom struggle, and shortly found myself protesting my community's lack of a principled stand. I was most disappointed by the churches' dodging of the issue. By the mid-1960s, when I became involved in the Vietnam anti-war movement, I considered myself an activist.

In 1975, a friend asked me to help him write a play. By then I was living in Appalachia, and the play's subject was several killings and two hangings that had occurred in 1890–93 in southwestern Virginia. The period was a watershed moment in those mountains as frontier life suddenly gave way to banks and money, a new law and order, and the absentee ownership of the region's natural resources by national corporations. King Coal had stepped off the train and would try to dominate the people and the place for the next 100 years.

As my friend and I began researching the story that we were preparing to tell, we discovered two distinct narratives: one published by the industrialists and the other kept alive by the people. With little allowance for nuance, King Coal's version was about saving backward people from themselves. The people's version was about self-sufficiency, freedom, and maintaining a natural way of life. Since there had been two trials and two hangings, we hoped to find evidence supporting one version or the other. When we lucked on the original trial transcripts buried in piles of papers up in the old courthouse attic, we were surprised to find all the facts pointed to the people's version of the events. The play, *Red Fox/Second Hangin'*, brought together politics, storytelling, and history, and I set about establishing Roadside Theater to produce the play. I didn't know anything about the world of professional theater—and especially didn't understand how class-bound it was with 80 percent of its audience coming from the wealthiest 15 percent of the population. Class, race, and place would be abiding themes in Roadside's work for the ensuing 40 years.

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Figure 29.1 Roadside Theater performs *Red Fox/Second Hangin'* in a tent pitched in Pound, Virginia, 1981.

Roadside Theater was founded in the coalfields of central Appalachia in 1975 as part of Appalshop, which had begun six years earlier as a War on Poverty/Office of Economic Opportunity job training program in film for poor youth. From its inception, these young Appalachians saw Appalshop as the means to tell the region's story in the voices of the people living there. As part of this enthusiasm for celebrating local life, Roadside was welcomed into the Appalshop fold. We didn't have a theater, so we performed in churches, community centers, schools, and, in warm months, in a portable canvas revival tent we pitched up the hollows. People of all ages loved what Roadside was doing, because it was about them, which they made abundantly clear. They came to *Red Fox/Second Hangin'* in part to see if Roadside had uncovered any new information about the murders and hangings. The story of those occurrences was still important to local people, to how they saw themselves, so audience members thought nothing about interrupting the performance to tell something they knew. In this way, the script continued to develop for the first year or so.

The community ownership of Roadside's work often surprises people in the theater profession. Some years after the theater had been established, the arts program director of a national foundation came to evaluate Roadside's work. At the play's intermission, the foundation director was livid: "The woman to my right and the man to my left are both singing along to your original songs and sometimes completing a character's line. You've set me up, and this is decidedly not in your self-interest." "Please pick any seat you want for the second act," I said. When the play ended, the foundation program director came straight to me and apologized, saying the same thing had happened in her new seat and that she was moved beyond words by what she had experienced happening among 180 people.

As Roadside entered the world of professional theater, most of its artistic impulses seemed to fly in the face of established norms: all our performers learned their craft from their community of storytellers, singers, and preachers, not in arts school. As with an oft-told family story, Roadside actors knew by heart the entire script, not just their individual parts. If a performer

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Figure 29.2 Three generations listen as Roadside Theater performs in a tent in Pound, Virginia, 1981.

30 was inspired to riff with the audience (the auditorium lights were never so dark that the audi-  
31 ence couldn't see itself), members of the cast were ready to back her up—and then ensure that  
32 everyone landed back into the script at just the right time in the right key. In *Roadside*, there  
33 was no “fourth wall,” curtains, or elaborate sets to distance the audience from creating the play  
34 with the actors in some personal yet collective imaginary that was neither the stage nor the  
35 auditorium seating. This meant that the story, not the play in and of itself, was the thing. Actors  
36 were directed not to block access to the story but to perform in such a skillful way that the  
37 audience could see the story through them.

38 There's a story that illustrates this sensibility—whether it is factual, I can't say since I wasn't  
39 there, but, as an artist, I know it to be true. An internationally famous folk singer decided to  
40 travel to Appalachia to pay homage to the music that part of her fame rested on. The evening  
41 of her performance, the high school auditorium in the eastern Kentucky coal town was packed.  
42 A local string band opened the concert, and they say you could hear a pin drop as they played.  
43 The famous folksinger followed, with some success. Backstage after the concert, she con-  
44 gratulated the local band, noting how keenly the audience had been listening to their set.  
45 “What is that little something extra you guys had that I didn't?” she asked. Respectful of the  
46 fame of their guest, the band members shuffled their feet, and no one answered. Not taking  
47 silence as an answer, the spunky folksinger insisted teasingly, “Well boys, I'm not leaving this  
48 town until you tell me your secret!” Finally the fiddle player spoke up, “The only difference



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1 I could see, Miss Baez, is that you were playing out front of them old songs, and we were  
2 playing right behind ‘em.”

3 Roadside was having a great time performing with its community, but there just wasn’t  
4 enough local money to support the actors. The standard adult admission to an evening perfor-  
5 mance of *Red Fox/Second Hangin’* was four dollars. Kids and the elderly were admitted free.  
6 Since we were popular and a part of Appalshop, a nonprofit, we decided to apply for some  
7 taxpayer support. For two years running, the Kentucky Arts Council rejected Roadside’s  
8 application. Their attitude was no professional theater could possibly exist in such a backward  
9 part of the state. It was then that Roadside decided the shortest route to the Kentucky state  
10 capitol was through New York City.

11 As it turned out, we were correct. *Red Fox/Second Hangin’* was a hit, first downtown at the  
12 Theater for the New City, and then uptown at the Manhattan Theatre Club. The tone of  
13 the reviews explain the difference between the two locations: downtown in the West Village  
14 the play was hailed by the Village Voice as “a series of hard male pranks, akin to *Wisconsin Death*  
15 *Trip*,” while uptown the New York Times proclaimed it “as stirring to the audience for its  
16 historical detective work as for the vanishing art of frontier yarn spinning.” After *The Louisville*  
17 *Courier Journal* reported the play was “a part of this country’s past the entire nation can treas-  
18 ure,” Kentucky Arts Council staff flew north to see what in tarnation was going on—and  
19 in their next granting cycle the Council joined the National Endowment for the Arts in sup-  
20 porting Roadside’s work.

21 In New York City, Roadside became identified with the avant-garde ensembles like Mabou  
22 Mines and the Wooster Group. At home in the mountains if anyone took the trouble to  
23 categorize Roadside, it was as folk theater. In fact, Roadside was probably the only professional  
24 theater to receive support from the National Endowment for the Arts’ Folk Arts Program.

25 After the New York City experience, what had been a marginal enterprise became a non-  
26 profit business eventually capable of supporting as many as nine full-time ensemble members  
27 and half as many part-timers. Roadside had developed its own aesthetic and fresh content based  
28 on what its company members grew up with: storytelling, ballad singing, oral histories, and  
29 church. It had demonstrated that the local and specific, when rendered faithfully and imaginat-  
30 ively in the voices of the culture’s young people, could affect people anywhere. In sum,  
31 Roadside had brought to the stage some of the inherit genius of its Appalachian community.  
32 Now, the ensemble company set about writing and producing a cycle of plays that would span  
33 the time from the first European incursion (*Mountain Tales and Music*) to the present. Once the  
34 series was completed, it would be the first body of indigenous Appalachian drama and would  
35 present a radically different version of the region’s history than that published under the auspices  
36 of the coal corporations.

37 Performance fees from national touring became a significant part of Roadside’s economy,  
38 typically accounting for more than half of the theater’s annual income. These fees helped under-  
39 write the extensive performance work Roadside continued to do in its home region of eastern  
40 Kentucky, southern West Virginia, western North Carolina, southwestern Virginia, and upper  
41 east Tennessee, and by 1989, Roadside had crisscrossed the country, performing in 34 states.

42 Just as we were thinking that we were sitting on top of the world, something strange began  
43 to happen: on national tour performing for elite audiences (the only audience existing for  
44 touring professional theater), we were shocked to discover that these audiences were literally  
45 able to change the meaning of the plays. By responding to content they understood and liked,  
46 and remaining silent during the parts they did not understand or like, the audience began to  
47 direct the actors, who found themselves cutting short or even deleting text that wasn’t regis-  
48 tering. Roadside’s aesthetic, with its primary concern for audience members finding their own

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1 story in the play, encouraged this editing, and if enough people in the audience had pre-  
2 conceived ideas about poor and working-class people, the play could veer dangerously close to  
3 becoming a parody of its intentions. After one such performance, an actor remarked that despite  
4 the full exertion of her willpower she could feel herself becoming Elly May Clampett, the  
5 stereotypical hillbilly of “Beverly Hillbillies” fame.

6 Roadside saw no easy way to address the problem, so in 1989 it made the decision not to  
7 perform in communities that would not contractually agree to work with the company to bring  
8 together all parts of their community. Roadside created a promotional “tool” kit which inclu-  
9 ded carefully designed press releases, flyers, posters, prerecorded radio spots in working-class  
10 vernacular, a manual describing how best to use the material, and a three-month calendar that  
11 lined out the timing of the publicity campaign. On a regular schedule, a company member  
12 made friendly calls to each presenter to learn how the campaign was going and to help problem  
13 solve. The extra effort and expense paid off. Roadside was now touring to full houses of diverse  
14 audiences, and the actors (and consequently the plays) were back in their groove. Then a new  
15 problem appeared.

16 After months of working on promotion with the local presenter in a mid-sized Alabama  
17 town, a big crowd greeted Roadside. “This is twice as many people as show-up for our per-  
18 formances!” exclaimed the presenter. It was standing room only, and it was obvious the crowd  
19 was a cross-section of the city. The actors were excited, and the working-class people attending  
20 had a great time. In fact, they understood the Appalachian play better than those in their city  
21 who were from the more formally educated class. The nimble reactions of the working-class  
22 audience members helped lead the others through the drama. There was a prolonged standing  
23 ovation, some stormed the stage to take pictures of their families with the Roadside actors, and,  
24 most importantly, to share their own stories. Roadside left town thinking it surely would be  
25 invited back to continue such an inspired exchange.

26 Four months later, Roadside’s management called the presenter and said, “Haven’t heard  
27 from you. I guess you want us back next season. Good for the box office!” The presenter  
28 replied he couldn’t commit yet. Roadside called back nine months later and got the  
29 same answer. So, finally, on the third call, the company’s managing director said, “I can tell  
30 you’re not going to ask us to return. Why?” And the presenter said, “The play was really good.  
31 We never had such a big crowd before—or since. But our board of directors just didn’t like the  
32 way y’all talked.” Alabamans didn’t like the way Appalachians talked? So the Roadside mana-  
33 ging director said, “What do you mean?” The presenter said, “One board member said that if  
34 we keep having those people in our audience, they might want us to start programming  
35 country music, and we can’t have that!”

36 What had happened, of course, was that certain people just didn’t like sharing their evening  
37 with certain other people in the community who might even know more than they did about  
38 some parts of life. For such folks, the arts are akin to their country club, a chance to get away  
39 and be only with their own kind. Paradoxically, their tax-exempt status and public support was  
40 making their elite experience possible. Roadside’s new challenge became finding a way to  
41 support diverse audience members gaining an ongoing say in their local arts programs and a  
42 stake in the cultural development of their community.

43 Reflecting its founding during the War on Poverty, itself a program hastened by the civil  
44 rights movement, Roadside had regularly joined its brother and sister organizations of color to  
45 make inclusive multi-cultural festivals. In 1982, Roadside and Junebug Productions of New  
46 Orleans co-founded The American Festival Project, a national coalition that eventually included  
47 Pregones Theater, Urban Bush Women, El Teatro Campesino, A Traveling Jewish Theater,  
48 Carpetbag Theater, El Teatro Esperanza, Liz Lerman Dance Exchange, Robbie McCauley &

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Company, and others. Hearing in 1990 from our southern colleagues that racism was on the rise in their communities, Roadside and Junebug Productions, the successor to the SNCC-inspired Free Southern Theater, decided to create and tour a musical play about the historical relationship between black and white poor and working-class people in the South. We agreed the play would span the time from the slave trade and the first landing of indentured servants until the end of the Vietnam War. To build a foundation for the play, the two ensembles sat together in circles telling each other personal stories about their experience with race, place, and class. The circles helped us better hear each other and ourselves, and as we began to understand our differences, we were better able to see our history and current circumstances. After arriving at a script that we felt was real and testing it and revising it with our home audiences in Louisiana and Kentucky, we set about touring, our stock in trade.

We suggested potential sponsors of the new musical play, *Junebug/Jack*, ask themselves whether their community was ready to think about local race and class issues. If they felt ready or just wanted to take a chance, then we would bring the play. As we began traveling to communities across the South, the trick became how to get black and white working-class and poor people to attend. In the main, such folks don't hang out together, much less go to professional theater. We knew if we didn't get such folks in the house—no matter how popular the drama might be with others (and it was)—then we had failed.

After exhausting our array of aforementioned promotional strategies, including getting the word out to places like barbershops and bars where politics are discussed, we hit on an idea:



*Figure 29.3* Ron Short/Roadside Theater and John O'Neal/Junebug Productions perform *Junebug/Jack*, a play about the history of race and class in the American South.

*Dudley Cocke*

1 Every community wishing to present *Junebug/Jack* would have to agree to form an ecumenical  
2 community choir to perform in the show. Reflecting each community's diversity, this new  
3 choir might include singers from the black churches, choir members from the white churches,  
4 singers from the women's chorus, maybe others from the high school glee club. Several months  
5 before we arrived, each newly formed community chorus received the show's music and  
6 designated a chorus master to conduct evening rehearsals. A few days before the opening per-  
7 formance, as the director, I staged the chorus into the show.

8 A lot of things happened in the course of this process. For starters, the play's presenter had to  
9 begin thinking about the whole community while pulling the chorus together. The singers  
10 didn't volunteer to discuss race and class—they came together because they loved to sing, and  
11 this professional play looked like a good opportunity to shine. In the course of rehearsing  
12 the music, they naturally hit on a sound that had never been heard in the community,  
13 simply because all those different talents had never been joined before—and certainly not to  
14 sing beautifully crafted, down-to-earth songs about the cruelty, heartache, and paradoxes of  
15 400 years of race and class struggle. In this way, *Junebug/Jack* would swell from a professional  
16 cast of six to twenty or more. And I can assure you that the community's participation only  
17 raised the artistic quality of the production—how much local talent goes unappreciated for lack  
18 of a meaningful book and finely crafted musical score!

19 When the show opened, a cross-section of the entire community was present. It didn't hurt that  
20 all the churches had to come out in support of their people. Because the performances enabled  
21 everyone to feel confident about their own traditions, cultural chips fell off shoulders. All became  
22 eager to witness and to learn more about the "other" traditions: to experience how the black  
23 people sang, or how the white people sang, or what inflections young people brought to the song.

24 Performing *Junebug/Jack* in New Orleans in 1997 to launch a statewide tour, the ecumenical  
25 community choir was 32 strong. What a magnificent procession they made swaying down the  
26 church aisle in a converted bowling alley singing "This Little Light of Mine." At the conclusion  
27 of the performance, the church's powerful preacher asked the five hundred audience members  
28 to bow their heads as she led a prayer for our safekeeping. This was encouraging because earlier  
29 that week Klan leader David Duke had been stirring things up in the communities we were  
30 about to visit.

31 In the days after these community performances (and much like the two ensembles had done  
32 in creating the play), audience members were invited to join circles to tell personal stories about  
33 the dynamics of race and class in their community. With a newfound permission based on trust,  
34 they told each other stories that were typically complex, hard, and emotional—and untold  
35 before in "mixed" company. In *Junebug/Jack* the biggest catharsis didn't occur during the play  
36 but in the community's telling of its own stories.

37 Inspired by the effect of these stories on a community's sense of itself and its possibilities,  
38 Roadside began developing a community cultural development methodology built on active  
39 participation; partnerships and collaborations with an inclusive range of community organiza-  
40 tions; local leadership; knowing when to lead and when to follow; and engagement over  
41 the course of at least several years. In the best instances, local grassroots arts organizations  
42 became established as a result of such residencies, and Roadside found itself with new perfor-  
43 mance ensembles ready to collaborate. One of the best examples is the Zuni language theater  
44 Idiwanan An Chawe, with which Roadside continues to create and tour new plays.

45 In 1981, when the Reagan administration came into power, it understood that who controls  
46 the culture controls the story the nation tells itself, and that artists are powerful storytellers. The  
47 right wing's long-standing insistence on the primacy of the elite western European canon began  
48 to gain new traction. The administration's game plan was to quickly shut down the National

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Figure 29.4 Roadside Theater conducts a Story Circle with Imagining America.

Endowments for the Arts and Humanities and then the Corporation for Public Broadcasting. Because these federal agencies were so clearly funded by the people’s tax money, they were more sensitive to equal opportunity than private foundations, and as the largest annual sponsor of the nonprofit arts and humanities, they played a leadership role setting the nation’s *de facto* culture policy.

Closing those agencies turned out to be a tougher job than anticipated, but in 1995 the National Endowment for the Arts discontinued grants to individual performing artists. In 1997, it discontinued its discipline-based programs, including the civil rights-inspired Expansion Arts Program, a significant source of funding for rural, working-class, and non-white organizations. The impact of this 1997 decision remains generally unreported. Both were significant victories for the right wing, giving permission to private donors and arts presenters to turn away from the principle of inclusion and the ideal of cultural equity. The result was less resolve among artists to confront public issues, like race and class. Most problematically, without federal support national conversations about culture policy began to evaporate, and in the void nonprofits hunkered down to fight for their own. Divide and conquer appeared to have carried the day.

Most of the grassroots arts and humanities organizations of any size (one million dollar annual budgets or more) founded in the activist zeitgeist of the 1960s and 1970s no longer exist. Appalshop is one of the last, where once it stood beside and collaborated with the likes of the SNCC-inspired Free Southern Theater in New Orleans, Inner City Arts in Watts, CA, the Guadalupe Cultural Arts Center in San Antonio, and numerous others. The repercussions of this shift in culture policy soon were felt in the communities where artists work.

In 1998 as part of Arizona State University’s three-year “Untold Stories” project, Roadside created a performance that brought together two groups of Native American dancers (Zuni and Pima), a popular Chicano solo artist, and Roadside. The performance was in Scottsdale’s Kerr Cultural Center, which had been built as a private concert hall for Mrs. Kerr and was now owned by Arizona State University. Issues with comp tickets were the first warning sign. The box office was getting uptight, which was perplexing because there was going to be plenty of room for everyone. About an hour before the performance, we noticed there were 10 or so people waiting outside in the cold, and when we tried to invite them into the lobby, Kerr’s management said that was strictly forbidden for another 30 minutes. We recognized many of those waiting outside from the popular play we had made with Arizona State University’s “classified” employees—maintenance personnel, kitchen staff, secretaries, and receptionists.

Dudley Cocke

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Figure 29.5 Idiwanan An Chawe, of Zuni, New Mexico, and Roadside Theater Perform in Arizona State University's Untold Stories Festival, 1997–1999.

(The play was titled *Highly Classified* and was supported by the workers' union, which arranged with the university's administration for compensatory work time for its members to participate in its creation and performances.) Unsure of Kerr etiquette, the "highly classified" had arrived more than an hour early in case "adjustments" needed to be made. When the time came to open the doors, management refused until one of the performers tuning his banjo cleared the stage. Unconcerned with a fourth wall, Roadside often chooses to tune instruments and banter with the audience before the performance commences.

We next noticed that the foster care kids from the Boys and Girls Club, who had been part of the "Untold Stories" project from its inception and who arrived excited and all dressed up, were being directed to bleachers in the far back, furthest from the stage. Kerr management said this was a strategy to quickly eject them should they act-up. In Appalachian, Native American, and Chicano cultures, the elderly and the children are always given places of honor in the front, but at Kerr, the best seats were reserved for the patrons with the season tickets. They were down on floor level in an odd reversal of what would have been the pit in Shakespearean times. None of the other audience was allowed down there with them.

As the hour struck for the performance to begin, the theater was alive as the one hundred and twenty or so Latino, Native American, and other newcomers to the Kerr Cultural Arts Center hugged each other and exchanged news. It was indeed a happening. Five minutes after the appointed performance hour, a Kerr staff member ordered that the performance begin immediately, and when I replied that it already had, I could tell she thought I was making fun of her. And so the evening played itself out as a contest between the majority of the audience in league with the performers, and the patrons in league with Kerr management.

The performance ended with a traditional southwestern Native American "Split Circle" dance. As the boys and girls from the bleachers rushed down to participate and were joined by most everyone else, the Kerr patrons remained seated. The joyous dance swirled around them.

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1 With their refusal to join the fun, the patrons seemed to be saying, “We feel excluded, and we  
2 own this space and it is not right for us to feel excluded in our own home.” They didn’t  
3 comprehend they were in a public university’s public space and that the purpose of the “Untold  
4 Stories Festival” was to bring different people together to share their common humanity.

5 In fall 2013, I attended the fiftieth anniversary of the founding of the Free Southern Theater  
6 (FST), the progenitor of Junebug Productions. The celebration brought activists and artists of  
7 different ages and backgrounds together with civil rights veterans, who as young men and  
8 women in the 1960s put their lives on the line for freedom. Often described as the theater wing  
9 of the civil rights movement, the Free Southern Theater was founded in 1963 at Tougaloo  
10 College in Mississippi by Student Nonviolent Coordinating Committee members. Many  
11 people, especially younger people, presently want to learn about the role of art in the struggle  
12 for justice, and one of their barriers is inadequate access to the practice and theory of social  
13 justice-minded artists working in the last century and before. How do people learn from the  
14 work of rural grassroots theater in New York State from 1918–1960, and the national “Little  
15 Theater” movement it started? What inspiration lies undiscovered in the 40 years of touring  
16 beginning in 1900 to thousands of Hispanic communities across the US by Virginia Fabregas,  
17 her company, and a full orchestra? What example is there in the New York City African  
18 Company, formalized in 1821, producing Shakespeare’s *Macbeth* and *The Drama of King Shot-*  
19 *away*, which called for a US slave rebellion? And what lesson in New York City authorities  
20 declaring the company a public nuisance and closing it two years later? These examples, among  
21 countless that could be cited, raise the question: What would a strategy to reclaim the demo-  
22 cratic heritage of the US theater look like?

23 The FST anniversary reminded us that a new populist movement like that represented by the  
24 civil rights movement will have to span race and class in an authentic grassroots way and draw on  
25 the strengths of both classical conservative and liberal political philosophy. Such a movement will  
26 have to dodge being co-opted by any ideology that knocks out conversation across the lines that  
27 presently divide. For solidarity to emerge, we will need to have more patience with one another  
28 as we attempt to understand fundamental questions like what constitutes freedom of expression.

29 SNCC activists used to say, “When people don’t have anything to do, they do each other.”  
30 As we reel from 30 years of unrelenting anti-democratic pressure to silence all but the messages  
31 of powerful elites, there’s been a lot of “doing each other” in the nonprofit arts sector, in our  
32 social justice field, and in our networks and organizations. We’ve painted ourselves into many  
33 separate corners, and it will be messy getting out of them. But that’s what we need to do, and  
34 what can help us is the rekindling of critical discourse. First among ourselves, we need to face  
35 unresolved issues and animosities and settle them based on principles we agree to share. In 1960,  
36 the enemy, Jim Crow, was known. To effectively move forward, we must come to understand  
37 who the enemy is now. I think we can only understand that collectively, through an iterative,  
38 dialogical process committed to building and sharpening each other.

39 In spring 1964, President Lyndon Johnson launched the War on Poverty from the front porch  
40 of the Fletcher family in eastern Kentucky. Today in some Appalachian counties 40 percent  
41 of residents live below the poverty line. Despite more than a century of persistent economic  
42 poverty, Appalachian people have kept their complex cultural traditions alive. To stay for dec-  
43 ades on the cultural battlefield, one has to remember that culture—the intellectual, emotional,  
44 spiritual, and material traditions and features of a people—is the crucible in which our individual  
45 and collective Being is formed. In this way culture is more powerful than money or politics.  
46 Art is fabricated from culture and has only the moral compass with which artists and audiences  
47 imbue it.

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## BY ANY MEANS NECESSARY

*Jan Cohen-Cruz*

I take the occasion of this collection on art and politics to revisit and contextualize three modes of activist performance that held sway over me at different points in the past 40 years—street performance, Theatre of the Oppressed, and community-based theatre. All three are participatory, partaking in a politics of pro-activation, each in its own way spring-boarding from what we can imagine to what action we can take to change an entrenched power dynamic. All three are art in Barbara Kirshenblatt-Gimblett’s sense:

If you take my approach, which has to do with giving value form, that form may or may not be beautiful; it may or may not be virtuosic; it may or may not be an exemplar of craft. But meaningful form and value for me are at the heart of what art is.

*(1995: 421).*

I begin with a prequel in the 1950s–early 1960s, when much of what we called political theatre challenged some aspect of the status quo through its subject matter but maintained it by taking place in institutionally designated spaces with clear separation between professional performers and habitual spectators. I then move beyond established art venues to public places. I close with my current focus, performance projects that seek both aesthetic and efficacious impact through any means necessary, leading artists to either expand their skill sets or collaborate with people who have the expertise to extend beyond the aesthetic frame.

### **I. Performance in Institutionally Designated Spaces**

Through the 1950s–early 1960s, US theatre meant plays. While emphasizing product over process, plays provided a spirit-supporting alternative to the constrained world of much suburban and small town life. But this was also a fecund period of exploration. Unlike the largely realistic plays of Arthur Miller, experimentation in form embodying a break with aesthetic norms in tune with the growing counter culture contributed as much to theatre’s social critique as its content. Like Kafka’s desire for the book to serve as “an ax that smashes the frozen sea within us,” productions including Peter Brook’s *Marat/Sade* and The Open Theater’s *America Hurrah* received tremendous attention by bringing the outside world in—*Marat* resonating with the Vietnam War and *America Hurrah* with US conformity and consumerism covering over a violence



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1 just under the surface. While I would be remiss to not mention the Living Theater, whose very  
2 name suggests aligning art and one's everyday life, my own revelations as a young person from  
3 Reading, Pennsylvania were most catalyzed by plays that stayed in the proscenium even as I recall  
4 theatre goers running down the aisle and out of the auditorium at a matinee performance of  
5 *Marat/Sade* in New York City.

6 Peter Brook directed *Marat/Sade* while exploring the work of Antonin Artaud (1896–1948),  
7 the French mystic/creator of “Theatre of Cruelty.” Artaud saw everyday life as false and  
8 looked to performance to get beneath that veneer to our more authentic selves, in the sense of  
9 uninhibited or socially unconstrained. His “Theatre of Cruelty” was intended as to be raw (the  
10 literal translation of the “cru” in the French word “cruauté,” not “cruelty” as meanness in the  
11 English sense), to provoke spectators through emotional violence that put them in touch with  
12 deeper feelings. Influenced by Artaud, Brook wanted spectators to *go through* something and  
13 shaped the theatrical event accordingly. The idea that theatre could be a place where something  
14 happened to the spectator as well as where something was imagined was part of the grounds for  
15 theatrics that aspired to political activism later on.

16 *America Hurrah* (1966) by Jean-Claude Van Itallie is a trilogy of three short plays that was  
17 directed by Jacques Levy and Joseph Chaikin and developed with Chaikin's Open Theater, my  
18 favorite company of that period. The actors peeled away the mask of everyday life in very  
19 theatrical ways—the giant puppet that dominated one of the three playlets, the transgressive  
20 scrawling on the walls that overtook another. The level of commitment from every actor was  
21 palpable, partly because they were communicating something about US life differently than in  
22 the realistic theatre preceding it, and because they helped make the play and were not merely  
23 “interpreters,” the role open to most actors. This so-called collective creation was a political  
24 move in the sense of expanding agency, from the writer and director to the actors, an artistic  
25 expression of the participatory democracy taking hold in the social movements all around us.  
26 Such plays and companies provided the occasion for likeminded people to gather and find their  
27 own sensibility and perspective reflected back. At the time, someone told me I went to the  
28 theatre the way other people go to church.

29

30 I could be bounded in a nutshell and count myself a king of infinite space, were it not  
31 that I have bad dreams.

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(*Hamlet II, ii: 251–252*)

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34 Later hearing creator of Theatre of the Oppressed Augusto Boal say that theatre is the human  
35 capacity to create a space within a space gave me a way to understand what was such a lifeline  
36 about those productions. I could imagine breaking out of the constraints of how to be a person in  
37 Reading, PA. This resonates with Judith Butler, who has written famously about the constraints  
38 of gender that, as something performed, can be enacted in other ways than inherited. By  
39 extension, how one performs personhood may similarly be reinvented to defy the norms. The  
40 epitome of the space that theatre gave me as a child to perform a self larger than the one that felt  
41 restricted by everyday small town life began by playing Helen Keller in *The Miracle Worker*, whose  
42 outside expression was of a piece with inside sensations. I thrashed around, not seeing, hearing,  
43 nor speaking; I felt that even people who loved me wanted me socialized whereas I wanted  
44 the state of full sensory awakensness described by ee cummings in the poem “I thank you God for  
45 most this amazing ...”. And (certain) theatre was where, as a young person, that happened.

46 The impulse to make theatre an experience integrating the actor's off-stage life was manifest  
47 in experiments in not only collective creation but also in autobiographically based solo perfor-  
48 mance. The space of performance, too, was open to question; environmental theatre (as dubbed

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1 by Richard Schechner in his book of that name) seated spectators in the midst of the playing  
2 space. For many, the logical next step was to move physically beyond the safe confines of  
3 the theatre building. A performance could unfold anywhere, with passers-by unexpectedly  
4 ensconced in prepared dramas. In feminist experiments of the 1970s, women created alter egos  
5 they then performed in everyday life to try out parts of themselves they had hitherto kept  
6 within. The compulsion to move from theatre buildings to a “theatre unbound” was epitomized  
7 by the phrase “it’s just theatre,” signaling the limits of theatre as a space to concretely  
8 address social ills, the fact that it was discounted before the first spectator ever entered the  
9 institutionally marked place. The idea that theatre could be disruptive, that the world outside  
10 could tear through their imaginary world, now strikes me as a rehearsal for bringing art out of  
11 an institutional space to interrupt a social space. Hence: Phase II.

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## 2. Expanding Where Art Takes Place and its Spectators and Makers

15 Radical street performance in the 1960s–1970s, Augusto Boal’s Theatre of the Oppressed since  
16 the 1970s, and community-based theatre in the 1980s–early 2000s all brought aesthetic and  
17 everyday spaces together. I have defined radical street performance as expressive behavior meant  
18 for public viewing, set in places with minimal constraints on access, that question or re-envision  
19 engrained arrangements of power (Cohen–Cruz 1998: 1). The last 40 years of the twentieth  
20 century witnessed performances moving to union halls, community centers, parks, and city  
21 streets, dispensing with institutional art spaces and gatekeepers, while still manifesting what Boal  
22 identifies as characteristics of aesthetic space:

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1. Tele-microscopic: bringing close what is far and making big what is small;
2. Plasticity: transforming reality such that, for example, time can go forward or  
backwards, and events can be enacted that are simultaneously in various time frames;
3. Dichotomic/ dichotomizer: doing an action and looking at oneself doing it at once.

29 These qualities of aesthetic space expand art’s reach, also rebutting Claire Bishop’s criticism that  
30 art with social goals is held to social outcomes but not artistic ones (2012: 13). Though balancing  
31 two sets of goals can be challenging, much of social art’s efficacy happens precisely through its  
32 aesthetic capacity including the capacities noted above.

33 An example of performance’s tele-microscopic quality to bring what is distant close is the  
34 long tradition of the theatrical display of power in public spaces. The church and state re-  
35 enforced their power in the street through religious commemorations, royal weddings, hang-  
36 ings, and military exercises, reminding the populace of the large hand of control ready to  
37 squeeze at any moment. There are also examples of people without power enacting their  
38 demands and desires in the street. Public protests and enactments questioning received  
39 arrangements of power brought their perspectives in capsulated forms to places where a broader  
40 demographic could see them.

41 Among the forms that plasticity has taken is Boal’s technique of forum theatre. After the  
42 enactment of a scene in which the protagonist is not able to overcome some form of oppres-  
43 sion, *spect-actors* (activated spectators) are invited to replace the protagonist and perform some-  
44 thing else they might do to achieve their goal. These interventions can go on longer than the  
45 scene itself, and can include what might have been done earlier or later than the scene itself as  
46 well as possibilities in that moment.

47 The capacity to both perform and see oneself perform was a natural extension of collective  
48 creation, the power of making art now being shared with actors. Participating and then

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1 reflecting frequently led to consciousness raising which was often a goal when such projects  
2 were brought into settings like prisons where previously only performances *for* inmates  
3 had taken place. This move reflected the confluence of a number of movements: the rise in  
4 participatory democracy, the second wave of feminism, and experiments in art integrated in life  
5 by Allen Kaprow and others.

6 Experimentation expanding who holds the reins of the theatrical experience was taking place  
7 not just in the US but also throughout Europe and Latin America. In Brazil, Boal generated  
8 multiple techniques of Theatre of the Oppressed (TO), repositioning spectators to actively  
9 rehearse strategies for personal and social change. In TO, workshops are more prevalent than  
10 performance, though both occur. Through invisible theatre (which Boal describes at length in  
11 *Theatre of the Oppressed*), actors perform in the street, at the beach, in restaurants, e.g., stage issues  
12 where they actually happen but without people knowing they are staged and thus manifesting  
13 Boal's first condition of aesthetic space, bringing close what was far. TO's therapeutic techni-  
14 ques are the ultimate in plasticity, not only taking place back and forth in time but also giving  
15 form to people who continue to exert influence on us from the past. (See Boal 1995: *Rainbow*  
16 *of Desire*.) The therapeutic techniques typically allow actors to act and see themselves acting, for  
17 example trying out parts of their personality that have been eclipsed and strengthening them in  
18 practice, so they are available in their everyday life in the future.

19 The theory of change underlying TO is where its political meaning is most manifest. TO  
20 is based on the potential for change among people with the most motivation for themselves  
21 and others in their social situation, in the pursuit of social justice. It provides methods for  
22 experiencing the social dimension of the personal, how a power dynamic also affects others  
23 of the same gender/class/race/circumstances, and collectively coming up with solutions.  
24 TO workshops take place in groups without apparent power in schools, living on the street,  
25 in prison, or struggling around the same oppression, e.g., nurses dealing with an uncom-  
26 fortable hierarchy, undocumented workers, etc. While some situations may not be so  
27 extreme as to call them oppressions, TO is applicable to any group on the less powerful side  
28 of a power dynamic.

29 Boal believed that theatre could be a rehearsal for the revolution; by emboldening ourselves  
30 to speak out and act in the safety of a workshop, we could then transfer that pro-activity to our  
31 lives. Workshops often begin with games, freeing people to speak out and create bonds of fel-  
32 lowship in order to move forward collectively. Scenes provide the imaginary worlds in which  
33 to practice possible solutions. As a city councilman in Rio, Boal also devised "legislative thea-  
34 tre;" challenges people in a problematic situation could not overcome in theatrical workshops  
35 were brought to the attention of the legislature and voted upon as the basis for laws. Indeed,  
36 during Boal's term "seventeen laws" were passed as a result of this process.

37 Community-based art, encompassing much of TO as well as other artistic modes, is expres-  
38 sion facilitated by artists collaborating with people aligned with each other by virtue of shared  
39 geography, tradition, circumstances, or spirit, whose lives directly inform the subject matter. For  
40 as many ways as community can be understood, Randy Martin notes a source germane to this  
41 discussion:

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43 The meaning of community to emerge from civil rights and other social movements  
44 [was] as a common cultural endowment of those subordinated through these dom-  
45 inating social processes to resist their baleful effects and assert differing values and  
46 orientations. Indeed, what is now referred to in a more politically engaged sense as  
47 community is deeply implicated in these histories of collective cultural creativity.

(Martin 2013)

Jan Cohen-Cruz

1 Examples of culturally grounded theatre’s capacity to make sense of life even in the most  
2 challenging circumstances abound. Dwight Conquergood’s work with Cambodian refugees in a  
3 Thai refugee camp is a case in point. Deracinated from their homeland, their adjustment to camp  
4 conditions was challenging. In one instance, when rabies broke out, Conquergood and several  
5 Cambodian colleagues created a street performance featuring indigenous Hmong folk characters  
6 counseling people to take their dogs for rabies shots immediately, and letting them know where  
7 to do so. This performance succeeded where other means had failed, and almost all the camp  
8 dogs were inoculated by day’s end (Conquergood 1998).

9 US community-based performance in the late twentieth century grew out of a national  
10 movement of theatre situated between aesthetics and efficacy through its ties to energetic social  
11 movements. In the 1960s, the San Francisco Mime Troupe was aligned with the free speech  
12 movement in the Bay area; Bread & Puppet reached broad crowds through its role in anti-  
13 Vietnam War protests and marches; El Teatro Campesino was a cultural wing of the Chicano  
14 Movement as was the Free Southern Theatre of the African American civil rights struggle in the  
15 south. Companies including It’s Alright to be Woman accompanied the women’s liberation  
16 movement. These alliances depended more on shared cultural roots than on individual genius.  
17 But by the mid-1970s, these social movements were losing momentum nationally, having  
18 achieved certain goals—like the end of the Vietnam War—or been eclipsed by other issues  
19 demanding attention. Community-based theatre advocates recognized that there was still much  
20 to do at home.

21 At the root of community-based theatre’s power is recognition that people get at least as  
22 much from making art as by seeing it. Exploring a topic of shared interest, using techniques  
23 that facilitate sharing of very different points of view, and going through the process of making  
24 and presenting something involve aesthetic skills that are also useful in human interactions  
25 outside of art. In the same spirit, and involving a range of artists and institutions, from large  
26 and mainstream (e.g., the Jewish Museum in New York) to small and community-situated  
27 (Marty Pottenger’s solo performance), the Animating Democracy Initiative focused on arts-  
28 based civic dialogue, supporting thirty-two art projects that engendered communication  
29 around issues that are “contested by various stakeholders, eliciting multiple and often con-  
30 flicting perspectives on the issue” (<http://animatingdemocracy.org>). Decision-making that  
31 engages all stakeholders bespeaks the politics of participatory democracy enacted through the  
32 arts. The story circle is the epitome of the democratic impulse in art: participatory, welcoming  
33 all; pluralistic, having no conditions that would leave anyone out; equal, taking place in a  
34 circle and inviting stories that come from first-hand experience, a great leveler because  
35 experience cannot be “wrong.” Note that participation in such a process rather than in  
36 a production was meant to develop critical thinking—Paulo Freire’s conscientization—and  
37 co-decision making in the body politic.

38 Nevertheless, community-based art is critiqued for catalyzing only temporary change, as is  
39 the norm with enacting utopia: when carnival ends, we go back to our regular life. This lim-  
40 itation was reflected by cast member Mary Curry in Cornerstone Theater’s production of  
41 *Romeo and Juliet in Port Gibson, Mississippi*, performed by white upper middle class and black  
42 working class residents in that largely socially segregated town:

43  
44 [H]er son Allan and another ten year old cast member, Athena Hynum, a [white]  
45 Academy girl, may be playing together now, but as soon as the show is over every-  
46 thing will return to normal – whites will once again pass black people in the streets  
47 without so much as a hello.

(quoted in Kuflinec 2003: 70)

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1 The temporary nature of the change is predictable given that artists do it as art and, other than at  
2 exceptional moments, there's not enough happening in the culture at large simultaneously to use  
3 such enactments towards a new status quo.

4 Bill Rauch, inspired and inspiring co-founder and then director of Cornerstone, often said  
5 that whatever happens in a community after the company departs is strictly in the hands of  
6 the people who remain. Cornerstone typically left a couple hundred dollars seed money for  
7 ongoing theatrical activity, but that was the extent of it. Not did they go out of their way to  
8 look for local people to continue the social processes the play had set in motion or supported.  
9 Such community-based art intersects with politics on a modest yet valuable scale as a context  
10 for many people to express their views and hear different perspectives. More than that  
11 depends on the initiative of local participants apart from the artists or the inclusion of local  
12 artists who participate by virtue of their community as well as artistic identities and goals.  
13 Indeed, it is often local artists whose ongoing projects make a palpable impact on people's  
14 lives. Martha Bowers, executive director of Dance, Theatre, Etc. (DTE) in Red Hook,  
15 Brooklyn, is an example of an artist and organization whose many years of programming in  
16 the same neighborhood have transformed the lives of numerous young people, propelled by  
17 DTE into professional pathways in the arts and other fields that they would not have thought  
18 available to them.

19 All three modes—street performance, Theatre of the Oppressed, and community-based per-  
20 formance—offer an intersection of art and politics that resonates with Murray Bookchin's call  
21 for "a recovery of politics as an activity that must be distinguished from statecraft: politics in the  
22 Hellenic sense of wide public participation in the management of the municipality" (1974: 14,  
23 1986). Art making is a form that public participation can take, providing a context and a set of  
24 prompts for day dreaming individually and collectively. It is politically useful through its capa-  
25 city to bring alternatives to a broad public. Art inserted in everyday life, be it a workshop  
26 sponsored by one's union or seemingly spontaneously in a public byway in the case of street  
27 theatre, is a chance to dip one's toe beyond the strictly imaginary context of art.

28 Jacques Rancière identifies that the main problem with critical art is not that the dominated  
29 lack understanding of the mechanisms of their domination (which he assures us they don't) but  
30 that they "lack the confidence in their own capacity to transform it" (cited in Bishop 2012: 83).  
31 After participatory art like TO, a well-received street presentation, or an affirming expressive  
32 experience in one's own community has boosted confidence, *where* might one intercede? Peter  
33 Marcuse (2012) noted the challenge facing the Occupy movement wanting to go "beyond"  
34 Zucotti Park, but to exactly what governmental office do they bring their grievances? Or do  
35 they go to a government agency at all? Who can "fix" the lack of agency most people experi-  
36 ence vis-à-vis contributing to the polis? Of course, Occupyniks are not philosophically inclined  
37 to look to the government to make changes and many have transported the work to other  
38 contexts. In New York City, they have been very visible in post-Hurricane Sandy recovery, for  
39 example. Characteristic of the present moment is the integration of the arts with other sectors,  
40 whether the outcome is a work of art or not.

41  
42  
43

### 3. Ecosystems

44 I use "*ecosystems*" to mean interwoven, multi-sector clusters that integrate art with other dis-  
45 ciplines in response to public issues and needs. Ecosystemic thinking is a way an artistic initiative  
46 may be brought to scale in a larger framework with other sectors without losing its distinctive  
47 aesthetic qualities. "Sectors" are portions of the social whole that represent certain interests,  
48 systems, and expertise such as the business, government, public health, or education sector.

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1 Movement towards the integration of socially motivated art and other sectors was noted at a  
2 2004 gathering of longtime practitioners of community-based arts in the US to reflect on the  
3 state of that field. I quote from a report about that convening:

4  
5 The most significant discovery resulting from this convening was the emergence of a  
6 new energy: a vibrant hybridity, an accelerated fusion of community-based arts and  
7 other fields of activity, such as community development, activism, education, aging,  
8 civic dialogue, cultural policy and globalization. The center of activity is not a “field,”  
9 but an intersection of interests and commitments.

10  
11 While these practitioners have always collaborated across disciplines and outside the  
12 arts, they have tended to identify primarily as arts-centered, hence the need to describe  
13 the work as its own field. There is now a hunger to do more than collaborate.

14 *(Burnham et al. 2004).*

15  
16 Many artists participate in ecosystemic clusters. Some brief examples: In Australia, Aboriginal  
17 people were at the core of a *Big hART* production in their own tongue, as part of a campaign  
18 to legitimate more than English as the national language. As research into the role of the  
19 creative arts for people with dementia, University of Wisconsin-Milwaukee professor and  
20 playwright Anne Basting collaborated for two years with gerontologists, elderly people in a  
21 senior living residence, theatre artists, and students. It culminated in a site-specific performance  
22 based on the end of the *Odyssey*, when a very old Odysseus returns home and wonders if his  
23 equally aged wife Penelope will recognize him. In the Philippines, a month after severe  
24 flooding and typhoons destroyed people’s modest shacks, US artist Mary Mattingly created and  
25 paraded wearable, portable architecture with high school students and teachers, artists, and  
26 architects. Individual units are wearable or the parts may be zipped together into an archi-  
27 tectural structure, creatively effecting mobility and assembling off-the-grid community spaces.  
28 Naturally Occurring Cultural Districts is an initiative encompassing artists based in multiple  
29 neighborhoods across the five boroughs of New York. They have joined with small manu-  
30 facturers, local business people, educators, and residents to identify how each of these sectors  
31 contributes to more livable neighborhoods and advocate for city policies that support small  
32 cultural and other organizations on that level.

33 Each of these initiatives bespeaks recognition that large issues cannot be solved by any one  
34 discipline but rather by bringing various kinds of expertise together. These uses of art might  
35 seem like anomalies; to be perceived as professional, western artists have framed their work, by-  
36 and-large, as strictly aesthetic, since the advent of specialization in the late nineteenth century.  
37 However the arts are also and always have been dispersed throughout society. Certainly Theater  
38 for Development across the continent of Africa has long been an inspiration in this regard as  
39 have countless uses of theatre for education and therapy. Many people do not want to lessen  
40 their commitments to various social struggles just because they are equally passionate about art.  
41 They recognize that when addressing social issues, their art can make a contribution but they  
42 require other expertise as well, and they apply skills honed through art making, such as syn-  
43 thesizing many points of view, are applicable in these other contexts.

44 The desire to translate insights derived through artistic processes into concrete social  
45 improvements was suggested in a public conversation between Liz Lerman and Jawole Willa  
46 Jo Zollar, two icons of US dance who have stretched who dances, where, and about what.  
47 Collaborating around a focus on wealth and poverty, they knew they would make dance and,  
48 in the process, engage people from various related fields. But they also wanted to explore ways

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1 to leave something behind. At an early public conversation, they brought in a third conversant,  
2 Shanna Ratner, an expert in the equitable generation of community-based wealth. Ratner is  
3 working with the Ford Foundation to identify “intermediaries” in communities who continue  
4 initiatives that Ford helps develop, from finding local sources to generate wealth to keeping  
5 wealth in communities. The three mused about artists as among the intermediaries with whom  
6 they could partner in communities and the nature of the wealth they contribute, drawing from  
7 the seven kinds that Ratner articulates—individual, intellectual, social, political, natural, finan-  
8 cial, and built (Ratner 2013). Ratner’s participation is an example of needing to go beyond art  
9 to arrive at some of the desired goals.

10 Participation in ecosystems is a way that artists help move initiatives into policy. The three  
11 templates of the arts and politics in this chapter are not ordered to mean that the third is the  
12 fulfillment of the other two; all three are on the table. But artists who want their work to bring  
13 into being what is imagined require more than dancers and actors to get there. Similarly, people  
14 like Ratner with other kinds of knowledge benefit from a space where people can dream  
15 together such as a performance component provides.

16 Integration of the arts in other fields is a very old model. Songs and dances to learn religious  
17 tenets, the history of a community, or to communicate information (like Conquergood’s rabies  
18 parade) are all tried and true examples. The term cross-sector is a current but nevertheless  
19 controversial way to describe it. Carlton Turner, executive director of Alternate ROOTS, an  
20 organization supporting community-based art in the south, asserts that the term leaves people  
21 out. Those who profit by it most are from arts institutions with the financial and administrative  
22 capacity to attend conferences where funders speak whether or not those artists have the artistic  
23 and community capacity to make the necessary relationships to carry out such work (Turner  
24 2013). Nevertheless, Mark Valdez, director of the Network of Ensemble Theaters, believes that  
25 artists need to know the language circulating among funders (2013).

26 How does integration of the arts within cross-sector ecosystems relate to my other examples  
27 of theatre intersecting with politics in this chapter? Years ago, I identified markers of activist  
28 (e.g., having a political or social impact) performance by considering: 1) where the event takes  
29 place; 2) how its form facilitates movement from an imaginary to a real realm; 3) who the actors  
30 and spectators are and how fully they are involved (Cohen-Cruz 1994: 110). I wrote that  
31 locating performance outside of art spaces creates a bridge between real and imaginary actions.  
32 Integration with social service and educational organizations embed artists with those publics  
33 and purposes and attracts a broader and more diverse group of people than are likely to enter an  
34 art space (111).

35 Now my response to “where” is about situating art to make the most concrete impact. In  
36 1998 I thought of such spaces as “the street,” in which I included any accessible venues where  
37 people gathered. For many people, that now includes the internet; indeed, performing in the  
38 streets can make one vulnerable to censorship or worse and only infrequently gathers a very  
39 diverse or large public in any case. The bottom line is who sees/participates in a performance,  
40 and how it enters a serious discourse that can affect people’s lives. This translates into different  
41 venues in different circumstances. Broadway was a very significant platform for Tony Kushner’s  
42 *Angels in America* in 1993 when AIDS was not part of broad public conversation.

43 My second point regards the form of the theatrical event, recognizing that *the play* is not  
44 always “*the thing*.” So for example, observing rehearsals of the National Folkloric Theatre in  
45 Cuba opened to the public in 1983, I saw older people pass on to the younger generation  
46 dances and music that were part of the then-outlawed Santeria religion. In the political act of  
47 maintaining traditional culture in the face of a Marxist government who framed all religion as  
48 “the opiate of the people,” rehearsals where older people joined the dances and literally taught

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1 traditional moves were more efficacious acts of cultural transmission than performances where  
2 everyone stayed in their seats and watched. Frequently when artists are part of ecosystems,  
3 workshops and rehearsals are more fruitful contexts for grassroots decision-making than are  
4 performances. I would add now that shifting the *phase* of performance that is central also shifts  
5 *who* is central from artists to artists' collaborators and publics.

6 I would rephrase my third point from expanded roles of actors and spectators to expansion of  
7 who makes use of theatre together (whether they know a given practice comes from theatre or  
8 not) and who sets the agenda. In 1972, I experienced the power of theatre *making* rather than  
9 strictly viewing. Returning from a national tour of inner cities, migrant camps, prisons, and  
10 other venues not part of mainstream theatre touring circuits, the director of the New York  
11 Street Theatre—Jonah Project, Richard Levy, invited me to co-facilitate a workshop in Trenton  
12 State Prison. He did not propose we perform there but rather create the conditions for people  
13 in that maximum-security facility to create their own theatre. Not until 1998, when I was  
14 researching *Radical Street Performance*, did I recognize how widespread the impulse was, in the  
15 early 1970s, to share not the product but the means of theatrical production.

16 Now we are in a different phase. By dispensing with the terms “actors and spectators” we  
17 open up thinking to anyone who might engage in an imaginative act that helps move towards a  
18 doing, whether they are consciously making theatre or not. Director Michael Rohd integrated  
19 theatre techniques into a Catholic Charities conference, workshopping better ways of listening  
20 and building actions together. The goal was more effective poverty reduction work after the  
21 conference. In that case, the subjects were neither artists nor people in poverty but others  
22 working to eradicate it, suggesting with all due respect to the potency of the people with  
23 a problem solving it, that other people, too, can be involved in (and use aesthetic tools for)  
24 solving social problems.

25 I do not advocate for social ecosystems to replace plays and engaged performance processes  
26 but rather be added to what Boal called “the arsenal” of tools. As a different kind of invisible  
27 theatre than Boal theorized, such practices will not necessarily be called theatre but will simply  
28 be part of the way that some artists participate in their time and place. Some will continue to  
29 make theatre, too. People with equal commitment to performance and something else might  
30 not frame all their professional activities as art; they might just add what they do to a greater  
31 goal. Not a bad thing.

32 Where might emerging theatre-makers enter and extend these traditions? In a track for  
33 socially engaged theatre that several faculty members and I are conceptualizing now with the  
34 Syracuse University Drama Department, we are requiring student participants to double major  
35 in theatre and something else, depending on their passions. It might be gerontology, or criminal  
36 justice. But they will thus be positioned to understand the tools that two disciplines bring to an  
37 effort to effect policy. I also urge artists to be more multiple in how they conceive of their  
38 professional identity. People in the arts, stressed by how undervalued they are generally, can  
39 become defensive and rigid in their artist identities. In fact one can be an artist and care equally  
40 about all matter of things.

41 In the 1970s, I was astounded to see a photograph of the Liz Lerman Dance Exchange with  
42 people from age 17 to 80—something dancing together. As a person past middle age (unless 60  
43 really is the new 40), I need to see more images of different ways to be old. I am lucky to be a  
44 baby boomer; there will be more movies, plays, and books about people over 60 than ever  
45 before, because of the number of consumers. What do you need to see? What do you need to  
46 do? Art grants you wings to imagine it, and depending on the company you keep, colleagues  
47 with whom to make it fly. I'd like young artists compelled by art's capacity in aesthetic, social,  
48 spiritual, and political contexts to remember that the paradigm of spectators sitting in a dark



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1 auditorium and actors performing on stage is just one of many formats of cultural expression.  
2 One of the great recognitions of our times is that creativity has a place in all walks of life,  
3 meaning that artists do, too. Letting go of a preconceived idea of what form performance  
4 activity must ultimately take opens the way for experiments in art fully embedded in spiritual,  
5 social, and political contexts about which we have not even yet dreamed.  
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## 31

# IF YOU REALLY CARE ABOUT CHANGE, WHY DEVOTE YOUR LIFE TO ARTS AND CULTURE?

## Reflections of a Cultural Organizer

*Caron Atlas*

Grace Lee Boggs never ceases to inspire me. At 98 this Detroit-based creative activist is committed to the future. She writes that the “next American revolution” of sustainable activism and humanity will be built on a shared “faith in our ability to create the world anew” (Boggs and Kurashige 2012: 42). This isn’t just rhetoric for Boggs; she has devoted her life to making it happen.

What are we willing to commit ourselves to over a lifetime?

This article reflects on the catalytic moments, transformative relationships, and generative challenges that have shaped my work over 30 years as a cultural organizer working for social justice. I have seen how art and politics, individually and together, can expand the world or diminish it, reinforce the status quo or re-imagine it. Believing that another world is possible—and making it happen—is a deeply creative act, mixing vision and agency. It also means seeing ourselves as part of a greater whole. This whole includes being part of a history of creative activism and recognizing that art does not make change alone.

### **Experiencing Rebirth**

During the 1960s and 1970s the Free Southern Theater (FST) re-imagined the world and moved its vision into action. It didn’t do this alone. It was the theater wing of the Student Nonviolent Organizing Committee (SNCC) and an integral part of the Civil Rights Movement, fighting against the racial segregation and for the civil rights of African Americans.

In 1985 I attended the FST funeral that marked the end of the movement and the start of something new. I was working then at Dance Theater Workshop in New York City and organizing activist artists on the side.

It was a New Orleans Jazz funeral, complete with a second line parade. As in the tradition, burial was followed by renewal, and in this case it took the form of a festival. It was a powerful mix of theater by those inspired by the FST, and popular culture, that engaged the community and transformed the streets. Described as “a valediction without mourning” the funeral and

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1 rebirth reflected the way that the FST activated people and strengthened their sense of purpose.  
2 Those of us who participated recognized that we were part of a history and a transformative  
3 process much larger than ourselves. The struggle was long and hard but it was also joyful. Art  
4 could be part of individual, community, and systemic change.

5 Attending the FST Funeral helped me see the intersection of art and politics with new eyes.  
6 It was grounded in culture, place, and vision, and extended beyond New York City. The  
7 politics were participatory and inclusive, and welcomed everyone's creativity. They were also  
8 strategic, with a long-term commitment to a broader movement.

9 John O'Neal, cofounder of the FST and founder of Junebug Productions, regarded as FST's  
10 successor, explained this commitment:

11

12 I soon discovered that the struggle that we had chosen to engage was not going to be  
13 straightened out in three to five weeks, three to five months, three to five years.  
14 Indeed I had joined a struggle that was going to take at least one lifetime. Normal  
15 lifetime, because lifetimes were being cut short there by all kinds of means. So,  
16 I made a decision then that this would be my life's work. Since then, I've come to  
17 understand that it may be three-five lifetimes of work in the lifetime of an average  
18 human being.

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*(Atlas, Richardson and Turner 2011: 75)*

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**Creating a Moral Economy**

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The FST funeral spurred me to move from New York to central Appalachian. This mountain region in the south of the United States has a long history of economic poverty and cultural wealth, extractive industry, and citizen activism. Culture, place, identity, and community come together powerfully there in the struggle for social justice. The Highlander Research and Education Center, for example, another inspiration for my move, has engaged a "strategic use of arts and culture to move progressive policies and practices with marginalized communities" for over 81 years.

I worked at Appalshop, a cultural center addressing social, economic, environmental, and political issues in the coalfields of Kentucky and Southwest Virginia. There I experienced many creative forms of resistance, including music as an integral part of union organizing and community media as a forum for diverse voices to be heard. I also became aware of the long history of cultural misrepresentation of Appalachian people by the media and how this misrepresentation was used to justify the exploitation of the region's resources. I wondered what would it take to shift this narrative? How might self-determined stories, songs, and images from the mountains capture the country's imagination to the same degree as television stereotypes and appropriated music? And, as Appalshop filmmaker Elizabeth Barrett asks in her film *Stranger with a Camera*, "Can filmmakers show poverty without shaming the people we portray?"

You can't ignore the connection between power, politics, culture, and economy in Appalachia. As Judi Jennings, former Executive Director of the KY Foundation for Women puts it:

Political power in Appalachia has historically been connected to economic power all the way back to the coal 'company towns.' Economic power makes it's own politics. School superintendents and coal companies have power because they can give people jobs—or not—but neither are elected power.

*(Atlas 2013a: 3)*

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1 These power relationships sustain poverty in the region. Writes activist scholar Helen Lewis:

2  
3 We realized that so many of the problems communities were dealing with were  
4 related to the economic system, and if we could not reform the economy—develop  
5 a moral economy, one which serves all the people—we could not solve health edu-  
6 cation, environmental problems.

7 *(Beaver and Jennings 2012: 214–215)*

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9 Culture is part of the equation. A moral economy requires the dismantling of a system of  
10 arrangements that support extraction. This requires a significant cultural shift.

### 11 **Becoming Accountable**

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14 If you have come here to help me, you are wasting my time. But if you've come  
15 because your liberation is bound up in mine, then let us work together.

16 *Said by Aboriginal elders as they addressed social workers arriving in their village*

17  
18 During my 10 years living in Appalachia I learned to be an ally in the active and accountable sense  
19 of the word. I was part of, and had an active stake, in what happened in Appalachia. But I also  
20 learned that I needed to spend more time listening. Many people come to the region, as they do  
21 throughout the world, with inappropriate technical solutions. Appalachia has a unique history,  
22 culture, and rural context and my urban experiences and intuitions had limitations.

23 I had to come to peace with being an outsider in a region that has a history of being unin-  
24 dated with them. This included recognizing the privilege I had as a middle-class person working  
25 in a poor community who could (and did) leave when I was ready to move on. I learned that  
26 I could use this privilege to make valuable connections and generate useful resources. I experi-  
27 enced how cross fertilization and outside perspectives could be helpful (which was also the case  
28 with the FST, which included artists from inside and outside of the region). I became adept at  
29 being the New York Appalachian. But I also needed to face up to some uncomfortable con-  
30 tradictions: My prior ignorance about where electricity came from and how my energy use fed  
31 the region's poverty. Earning a living in a community with few jobs. Being asked to be a  
32 spokesperson for a community and culture I was not from by city colleagues who could relate  
33 to my experience. What constitutes an ethical practice? How does this extend beyond indivi-  
34 dual responsibility to community accountability?

### 35 **Committing to Values**

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38 I credit this time in Appalachia for shaping my values, strengthening my analysis, and deepening  
39 my grounding in culture and grassroots social justice. This has all significantly influenced my  
40 work today with the Arts & Democracy Project.

41 Arts & Democracy supports the cross fertilization of culture, participatory democracy, and social  
42 justice. The Project grew out of the National Voice 2004 campaign that engaged  
43 groups committed to constituencies who are underrepresented in the American decision making.  
44 I joined National Voice to bring artists in as a constituency. I soon learned that while artists might  
45 have been missing from the organizing, culture played a key role, especially in Latino and Native  
46 American communities. My work expanded to support this organizing as well.

47 When we started Arts & Democracy, we held a series of co-sponsored convenings to learn  
48 what has, and hasn't, been effective in building closer ties between arts and culture and

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1 sustained and strategic activism. Based on this knowledge we developed our program and  
2 decentralized network. Our values and understanding of progressive change are fundamental to  
3 our work and play a key a role in shaping what we do. We describe them as follows:

4 Arts & Democracy roots our work in the liberating power of arts and culture that help us re-  
5 imagine and remake society. This requires shifting power, dismantling structural racism and  
6 other forms of oppression, and seeking a fair and equitable distribution of resources. We engage  
7 a spectrum of creative approaches to support individual, community, and systemic change. We  
8 see our work as part of a diverse ecology of art and social justice practice, where a small,  
9 decentralized, and nimble network such as ours can be a vital resource.

10 We actively commit ourselves to:

- 11 • Cultural equity and cultural rights
- 12 • The self-determination, vision, and agency of our communities
- 13 • Collaboration, interdependence, and sustained relationships
- 14 • The power of place, importance of context, and abundance of community cultural assets
- 15 • A vision of arts and culture as an integral part of our communities

16 We believe that:

- 17 • The people most impacted by policy need to play a significant role in shaping that policy
- 18 • Change happens when we link grassroots action, analysis, imagination, and policy
- 19 • We need to work actively against racism and other forms of oppression, and for social justice
- 20 • We need to bring our full selves to our organizing and take care of ourselves and our  
21 communities as we do this work over time

**Walking the Talk**

22 Art and politics come together both in our creative work and in the ways that we engage  
23 communities, activism, and policymaking. We put arts and culture on agendas where it hasn't  
24 been before, connect artists, cultural organizers, and activists who wouldn't otherwise know each  
25 other, and create the connective tissue and generative environment needed for cross sector  
26 collaboration to succeed.

27 Our work is based on cultural organizing, a hybrid practice where arts and culture are fully  
28 integrated into organizing strategies. We also support organizing that comes from a particular  
29 tradition, cultural identity, and community of place or worldview. We see cultural organizing as  
30 a dynamic practice, understood and expressed in a variety of ways reflecting the unique artistic,  
31 cultural, and community contexts of its practitioners.

32 Cultural organizing can be used to unite people thorough the humanity of culture and the  
33 democracy of participation or it can also be used to divide people through fear and polarization.  
34 The difference is the values, principles, and vision for the future (and definition of whose  
35 future) that lay at the heart of the organizing. We are clear that the purpose of our organizing is  
36 to advance social and economic justice.

37 Arts & Democracy recognizes that powerful change happens in the intersections of genera-  
38 tions, cultures, sectors, and geographies and we create contexts that can nourish these connec-  
39 tions. We support the bridge people who live and work in multiple worlds, and the  
40 organizations and networks that bring people together. While often invisible, this intermediary  
41 work is critical. We have found that equitable relationships and transformative connections  
42 don't just happen; they are nurtured over time. With Service Employees International Union

*Caron Atlas*

1 (SEIU) we are creating an artist in residency program to tell the stories of workers and their  
2 communities and provide a liberating experience of creation. We are also collaborating with  
3 Participatory Budgeting (PB) in New York and helping build a coalition there in support of  
4 naturally occurring cultural districts.  
5

### 6 **Creating Democracy**

7  
8 Through PB, we are integrating arts and culture into a process of neighborhood-based decision  
9 making across New York City. Four city council members got it started in 2011, each providing  
10 \$1 million in public capital dollars to their communities. Arts & Democracy got involved from  
11 the start to ensure that art, culture, and grassroots media would be part of the pilot. We took  
12 leadership in our district and became part of the citywide steering committee. We infused arts and  
13 culture into the process, standing up for this work when some argued that it would unfairly  
14 benefit those who were creative. Once they participated in the workshops and videos people  
15 became enthusiastic, recognizing that this art was for everyone. The work expanded as more  
16 districts got involved.

17 Working within the city system got PB budgeting in New York off the ground. The  
18 community members involved were empowered by the process. I facilitated the culture and  
19 community facilities delegate committee and was very moved by the dedication of its  
20 members. At the same time our creativity was limited by the restrictions of city capital  
21 funding and requirements of city agencies. The experience made participants want more and  
22 they gained the know-how and connections to demand it. PB became a key theme in the  
23 2013 citywide election in New York. This will scale up the effort significantly in 2014. Our  
24 hope is that this will also open up the possibilities of what can happen as part of PB, such as  
25 extending the cultural process, further integrating artists, and increasing support of commu-  
26 nity-based culture. This has begun with more cultural organizations being invited to serve on  
27 the steering committee.  
28

### 29 **Reconstructing Policy**

30  
31 Policy, for many, is an immutable force. But for Naturally Occurring Cultural Districts NY  
32 (NOCD-NY), our alliance of community-based cultural networks and leaders, policy is a social  
33 and political construction overdue for change. NOCD-NY came together to revitalize New  
34 York City from the neighborhood up through a strategy of supporting naturally occurring  
35 cultural districts. These neighborhood hubs and networks support community self-determination  
36 and equity, strengthen social networks, and incubate innovation and civic engagement.

37 Our members include artists, small arts organizations, creative manufacturers, civic groups,  
38 small businesses, and community-based cultural centers. Our communities and constituencies  
39 are in Greenpoint, Red Hook, south Williamsburg, and Fort Greene, Brooklyn; East Village,  
40 El Barrio and Chinatown, Manhattan; Corona, Queens; St. George, Staten Island and Hunts  
41 Point, and Westchester Square, Bronx.

42 “Naturally occurring cultural districts” is a mouthful of words and we are aware that few  
43 things are truly natural. We adopted the term strategically from “naturally occurring retirement  
44 communities” (NORCs), a field of work that had already generated policy change. By devel-  
45 oping a citywide alliance we could amplify the voice and assert the value of community-based  
46 culture. We could stop complaining about displacement and do something about it by coming  
47 together to support cultural equity and equitable community development. NOCD-NY  
48 develops policy recommendations that have been presented at New York City Council

*Reflections of a Cultural Organizer*

1 hearings, commissions profiles of innovative uses of urban cultural space, and organizes colla-  
2 borative programs, community tours, a university course, and citywide forums.

3 This cross sector work engages, and moves us beyond, our expertise. It requires collabora-  
4 tion, patience, and knowledge of the art of policymaking. My participation in the “21st  
5 Century City for All” is a case in point. This is a process to develop a progressive agenda for a  
6 more fair and equitable New York City in a year (2013–14) of leadership transition.  
7 The progressive agenda includes affordable housing, jobs, community development, aging  
8 and more. But, at first, it didn’t include the arts. Building on a long-term relationship I was  
9 able to write an article as a companion to the chapter on community development and urban  
10 planning. The article articulates a pluralistic and equitable vision for cultural policymaking  
11 that puts neighborhoods at the center. Three programs demonstrate how the policy would  
12 look in practice. But first I had to argue why arts and culture should even be part of a pro-  
13 gressive agenda:

14

15 Creation is inherently liberating. It posits that something else is possible. For architect  
16 Teddy Cruz, “the future of cities is less about buildings and more about the reconfi-  
17 guring of social and economic relationships. Artists can really contribute to that.” Milly  
18 Hawk Daniel of Policy Link, a national economic and social justice institute, recog-  
19 nizes the challenge of arguing for arts and culture when resources are limited. But it  
20 is precisely those times when they play a key role. “The propensity to see art and  
21 cultural expression as ancillary to survival makes us forget how essential art and culture  
22 are to sustaining community, history, and livelihood.

23 Arts and culture contribute to the vitality of our neighborhoods, “full of character,  
24 vitality, open to others and otherness, pulsating with poetry,” as photographer Jaime  
25 Permuth puts it. But they can also contribute to a city for the few, furthering a  
26 commercial culture of consumption, increasing inequality, reinforcing civic elites, and  
27 helping drive displacement. It is critical, therefore, that cultural policy be viewed with  
28 a social justice lens.

29

*Atlas 2013b: 396)*

30

31

**Engaging Questions and Challenges**

32

33 The relationship between culture, creative action, and political change raises several questions.  
34 Are there times when it is better to work within the system and others when it is better to be  
35 independent from it? How does this relate to artists participating in policymaking? How do  
36 imaginative ideas and creative methodologies extend conventional modes of civic participation  
37 and reframe assumptions about leadership? Are there trade offs between making creative leaps and  
38 making systemic change? How can the two be integrated in ways such that each stretches the  
39 other towards positive change?

40 This work isn’t easy. Its many challenges range from a basic lack of respect to systems of  
41 power that won’t give up without a struggle. They also include:

42

- 43 • The degree to which art is regarded as elitist, having no place in social justice work, or not  
44 taken seriously
- 45 • Working within enduring structures of racism and economic injustice and recognizing my  
46 power and race and class privilege as I seek to shift these systems
- 47 • The inability to keep artists and the arts at the policy table once we have successfully fought  
48 to get them there

*Caron Atlas*

- 1       • Making change within bureaucratic systems that limit what is possible●  
2       Measuring the true value and impact of the work  
3       • The lack of understanding of what rooted intermediaries can do to create conditions for  
4       systemic change  
5       • Project-based collaborations that end just as the true work is beginning  
6       • A dependence on short-term funding that is inconsistent with long-term commitments to  
7       change  
8       • Unequal power dynamics in grantmaking and cross sector collaborations that decrease the  
9       agency of participants  
10      • Balancing purpose, passion, and patience over the long haul.

11  
12       Sustaining a practice that remains consistent with our values is a particularly tough challenge.  
13      It raises questions related to our relationships and the support systems and structures of  
14      our work:

15       How does the struggle dehumanize us? I participated in an intergenerational discussion about  
16      art and social justice where young activists challenged us to consider whether our personal  
17      relationships were consistent with principled action. Their question was rooted in their own  
18      experience; they had grown up without their parents present due to their commitment to the  
19      Civil Rights Movement. Arts & Democracy’s cultural organizing methodology stresses that we  
20      bring our full selves to our organizing. We also have a fundamental value of taking care of our  
21      communities and ourselves so we sustain this work over time. How often do we do this?

22       Are our partnerships equitable and reciprocal? Are they based on dignity and respect? Latino  
23      scholars describe how a fundamental principle of cultural citizenship is “respeto” (respect).  
24      Writes anthropologist Renato Rosaldo, “Bridging the discourses of the state and everyday life,  
25      of citizenship and culture, the demand for respeto is a defining demand of cultural citizenship”  
26      (Rosaldo 1997: 38). However all too often the lack of respect leads to the downfall of our  
27      collaborations. In the case of cross sector collaborations both creators and organizers feel that the  
28      integrity of their work was misunderstood or compromised. We need to take the time to build  
29      our collaborative capacity and understand each other’s processes so that we can engage them  
30      with respect.

31       How do we create a sustainable structure consistent with our values? We created Arts &  
32      Democracy as a decentralized network so it could be nimble, responsive, and sustainable. This  
33      structure has supported our work for almost 10 years, in good times and bad, with a small  
34      budget. It has enabled us to work deeper locally and to extend our work nationally and inter-  
35      nationally. Using a fiscal sponsor allows us to focus our attention on programs and relationships  
36      rather than organization building. Our structure reflects our values. However, it has led to  
37      diminished support or kept us from accessing key foundation and public funding from agencies  
38      that will not work with fiscal sponsors.

39       How can we create support systems consistent with the values of this work? Ken Wilson,  
40      President of the Christenson Fund, a foundation committed to transformational work, articu-  
41      lates why this might present challenges in the Grantmakers in the Arts *Reader*. “It suggests an  
42      ambiguous or downright dangerous unleashing and deployment of power, and it doesn’t fit  
43      the current enthusiasm for ‘stakeholder’ approaches and ‘win-win’ partnerships” (Atlas 2006).  
44      Cultural movements, he continues, “are not manageable; they actually self-replicate without a  
45      grant report or a new proposal, and they ARE transformational but only when and if they take  
46      off. We know that this kind of funding won’t allow us to predict—let alone control—the  
47      product that will come out of it.” Art, Culture, and Social Justice Network, and the global  
48      Philanthropy for Social Justice and Peace Network are two networks working to align funding



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1 with progressive values. Other support systems, such as solidarity economies where we support  
2 each other's products and services, can offer opportunities to increase community ownership  
3 and reciprocity.  
4

5  
6 **Being Part of a Greater Whole**

7 I learned that Hurricane Sandy was about to hit my city of New York while visiting my old  
8 community in Kentucky as a writer for the Network of Ensemble Theater's Appalachian  
9 MicroFest. In an unexpected synchronicity I was watching the play *Higher Ground*, in Harlan  
10 Kentucky, which enacted the community response to floods, real and metaphoric, in that place.  
11 *Higher Ground* is not only a play about neighbors coming together to support and change their  
12 community, it is neighbors coming together to support and change their community. Project  
13 Director Robert Gipe describes how,  
14

15 in the process of making plays about drug abuse, mine disasters, outmigration, and  
16 land use, we have developed a strong community organization, one that finds hope in  
17 addressing problems together in a way that celebrates strength rather than enabling  
18 hand-wringing.  
19

(*ArtPlace America 2012*)  
20

21 The play and its performance in multiple contexts, including before the Appalachian Regional  
22 Commis, a federal policy making body for the region, demonstrates how theater can both build  
23 community and people's capacity to engage policy.

24 During disasters, be they floods in New York or Appalachia or collapsed coalmines, people  
25 step up to help one another in extraordinary ways. In *A Paradise Built in Hell*, Rebecca Solnit  
26 writes about this civic capacity that gives us a "glimpse of who else we ourselves may be and  
27 what else our society could become" (Solnit 2009: 9). The question is how do we build this  
28 capacity and incorporate it further into our everyday lives? Is our policymaking built on fear and  
29 competition? Or is it one that supports creativity, compassion, and solidarity—being part of a  
30 greater whole?

31 In the aftermath of Hurricane Sandy I was part of an extraordinary community. Park Slope,  
32 Brooklyn, was spared most of the destruction of Hurricane Sandy. Two evacuation shelters  
33 were located in the community, including one at the Park Slope Armory and over 500 elderly  
34 and special needs evacuees from nursing and adult homes in the Rockaways were sent there  
35 after their community was badly flooded.

36 Three days after the evacuees arrived I was asked by City Council member Brad Lander  
37 to meet with him and the shelter leadership about organizing some activities to engage the  
38 evacuees. I had a history of working with Lander, most recently on PB. They said we could  
39 organize activities if we created and took responsibility for their infrastructure, including the  
40 volunteers, and if we included wellness activities along with cultural ones.

41 We drew on our strong relationships in the community and in the city to create a wellness  
42 center in a corner of the armory drill floor, with programs that included arts and culture,  
43 exercise, massage, religious services, an election-watching party, film screenings, and therapy  
44 dogs. In essence, the wellness center became the living room of the armory, serving the resi-  
45 dents, and the staff and volunteers.

46 The wide range of performances ranged from jazz ensembles to classical music to circus.  
47 Regular storytelling and writing workshops and a nightly knitting circle provided opportunities  
48 for residents to process what was happening to them. Daily sing-alongs built community and

*Caron Atlas*

1 raised spirits. Artists said how rare it was to engage in such meaningful work, and several  
2 became members of our core organizing team. The wellness center also helped connect cultural  
3 and civic groups, schools, and networks with the armory shelter.

4 Four things made the combination of art and politics work:

- 5
- 6 • We had an invitation to come in from an elected official and the shelter leadership.
  - 7 • We knew how to organize the infrastructure and programs and were willing to take  
8 responsibility for them.
  - 9 • We accessed preexisting cultural and social networks and resources.
  - 10 • Local volunteers and nonprofits were welcomed to work alongside city, state, and federal  
11 workers with a common goal of creating a humane shelter.
- 12

13 The shelter closed and one of the groups of adult home residents was still unable to return to their  
14 residence. We became advocates for them, continuing to do programming at the increasing  
15 challenging shelters they were sent to, including a psychiatric institution. Arts & Democracy  
16 continued to support arts and culture as an integral part of recovery and joined a citywide alliance  
17 fighting for just and equitable rebuilding.

18 Hurricane Sandy both devastated and stretched us. It displaced residents and unified com-  
19 munities, exposed inequities, and offered us the opportunity to become part of a greater whole.  
20 It remains to be seen whether the intersections between culture, community engagement, and  
21 government will survive after the storm.

22

### **Making a Commitment**

23  
24  
25 No longer can we think about social change as a revolution of only the body (orga-  
26 nizing), the mind (education) or the spirit (art). It is all three at once in concert,  
27 and this calls for nothing less than a revolution in how we think about and practice  
28 social change.

*(Boggs 2003)*

29  
30

31 At an interview for a fellowship I was asked about the change I wanted to see in the world.  
32 I spoke passionately about the world I wanted to live in and the social justice that could get  
33 us there. Their response was, if you care so deeply about this change, why waste your time with  
34 arts and culture? Outraged at the moment, I have to admit that this question can still haunt me.  
35 There is such great pain and inequity in our communities. However when I ask myself what I am  
36 willing to commit to for a lifetime, the answer remains consistent: social justice through the arts. I  
37 believe that creativity is needed to remake the world, precisely because our problems run so deep.

38 “Life is more important than art”, wrote James Baldwin. “That’s what makes art important.”  
39 I first heard this quote as a description of the Los Angeles Poverty Department (LAPD),  
40 a theater company made up of people who live and work on Skid Row. LAPD’s powerful  
41 body of work, the company’s long-term commitment, and their partnerships with social  
42 justice organizations have helped to reclaim human dignity and reshape the narrative and reality  
43 on Skid Row.

44 Creative action is also reshaping Grace Lee Boggs’ Detroit, even as it faces bankruptcy. Says  
45 Boggs:

46

47 No longer can we think about social change as a revolution of only the body (orga-  
48 nizing), the mind (education) or the spirit (art). It is all three at once in concert, and

*Reflections of a Cultural Organizer*

1           this calls for nothing less than a revolution in how we think about and practice social  
2           change.

3  
4           The Detroit Digital Justice Coalition is developing new forms of economic development and  
5           community power based on the principle that communication is a fundamental human right. A  
6           growing urban agricultural movement is reclaiming vacant lots to grow food. And Detroit  
7           Summer joins youth leaders with movement veterans like Boggs, to “rebuild, redefine, and  
8           respirit” the city (Boggs 2012).

9           I am often asked, “How do you remain passionate when change can take so long to come?  
10          My passion is regenerated by the creativity of the work and the commitment of the people who  
11          are doing it. This includes the public service workers standing up for human dignity, the young  
12          immigrants building a Dream Movement in Kentucky, and the public housing residents fighting  
13          for the community center that got them through the storm. In the last two weeks we marked  
14          the one-year anniversary of Sandy and the 50-year anniversary reunion of the FST. In both my  
15          passion was renewed by the stories we told, the music we heard, and the dance that literally  
16          moved us ahead.

17          At the FST reunion, “Talkin’ Revolution,” I witnessed the revolution of body, mind, and  
18          spirit coming together as described by Grace Lee Boggs. Organized by the new leadership of  
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47          Figure 31.1 Founders John O’Neal and Dr. Doris Derby release doves at the 50 Year Anniversary  
48          Reunion of the Free Southern Theater.

Caron Atlas

1 Junebug Productions, Producing/Artistic Director Stephanie McKee and Managing Director,  
2 Kiyoko McCrae, the reunion honored the FST founders and celebrated the extraordinary  
3 work that has happened since the theater's funeral. This includes Junebug's FST Institute,  
4 which is renewing the values and methodologies of the work for a new generation of young  
5 artist activists. At the reunion we toured civil rights sites in New Orleans and ended up in  
6 Congo Square, a place of liberation, and the place we buried the FST in 1985. This time,  
7 there was no burial. Instead, Mardi Gras Indian Queen Cherice Harrison-Nelson led a ritual  
8 where FST founders released white doves. As the birds soared in the sky, we felt, together,  
9 the arc of change.

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## 32

# PEDAGOGIES IN THE OAKLAND PROJECTS

*Suzanne Lacy*

In the early 1990s I noticed that the prevailing images of the “teenager” in California no longer favored the delinquent white working-class kids of my generation. Now the “troubled” teen had a distinctive color, clothing, and language style, modeled after white fears of shifting demographics that would leave them in the minority. The effect of these media images reached beyond education into areas like immigration and welfare policy. Youth experience remained a matter of private knowledge, locked inside communities that had little purchase on public voice. Imagery created by teens themselves was becoming a thriving sub-culture but mainstream media reinforced negative stereotypes. Co-option of inner-city youth turned potential protest into a commodity. Mediated expressions of youth defiance obscured their social abandonment and worse, heightening public fear.

With its vibrant youth culture and high percentage of African American teens, Oakland was at the epicenter of a mix of cultural politics and activist organizing strategies focused on a broader social critique of race and class inequalities. As sociologist Mike Males (1996) pointed out, the income of California youth dropped sharply between the 1970s and 1990s, leaving a large percentage of the state’s youth in poverty. These changes were coincident with a variety of factors, but one in particular is relevant to this discussion: the rise in youth poverty reflected demographic changes in age—the state population had become younger—and ethnicity—the “minority” population was on its way to becoming the majority. Guided by the media’s images, middle-class residents of all ethnicities in Oakland feared a rise in crime. For example, high school students hanging out at street corners while waiting for a bus across from City Hall were seen as an obstacle to redevelopment.

In the late 1980s and early 1990s pioneers of racial equality, labor, free speech, the Socialist Party, and the Black Panthers were still active in public life. Progressive educators supported youth citizenship rights and penned ideas on youth development that often included arts in classrooms and after school (countering the passage of Proposition 13 in 1978 which, among other things, led to the elimination of school funding for many arts). A flood of organizations and strategies developed to make institutions more responsive to youth.<sup>1</sup>

Within this landscape a wide ranging and continually morphing group of collaborators—begun by Chris Johnson and myself and quickly expanded to include Annice Jacoby—created eight distinct artworks which came to be known as the Oakland Projects. This series of large and small projects took place over ten years and focused on local youth, aspects of their social

Suzanne Lacy

1 circumstances (particularly as these contribute to their relationship with communities and, ulti-  
2 mately, with civic participation) and the manipulation of their representation in mass media.  
3 My collaborators and I examined the institutions that “serve” youth in four key intersecting  
4 areas—health, education, criminal justice, and civic legislation—and the public attitudes that  
5 evoked policies and programs impacting youth in each.

6 We deployed strategies from youth development and empowerment, inter-institutional col-  
7 laboration, pedagogy, and media intervention, as well as installation, performance, and video  
8 art, to constitute a public practice with an active role in local civic processes. In truth, the  
9 complex of relationships and activities, punctuated by key moments of art production, was the  
10 “work”—ten years framed as an expanded public performance as well as sustained advocacy and  
11 intervention.

12 The individual performances within the series, beginning with *Teenage Living Room*, were  
13 conceived, as we progressed, as a sequential and evolving series, one performance or action  
14 growing out of the necessity produced by its predecessor. The first large-scale performance  
15 event titled, *The Roof Is on Fire* (1994) featured 220 public high school students engaging in  
16 unscripted conversations on family, sexuality, drugs, music, neighborhoods, and the future as  
17 they sat in 100 cars parked on a rooftop garage. Audience members roamed from car to car to  
18 listen, while news crews filmed. Youth identified conflicts with police as a major concern, so  
19 the next project was a series of six dialogs between youth and police officers that explored the  
20 so-called youth “riots” at an annual festival. *Youth, Cops and Videotape* resulted, a training video  
21 for new officers. To announce the passage of the Oakland Youth Policy, we presented the  
22 performance *No Blood/No Foul* (1996), a fast-paced basketball game between youth and police  
23 that included video interviews, dance crews, sports commentators, graffiti muralists, a hip-hop  
24 heavy sound track, and audience participation. The project was later presented in Japan by four  
25 of our collaborators. *Expectations* (1997), a six-week summer school art class for 36 pregnant and  
26 parenting teenagers, focused on political stereotypes, social policy, and personal experience in a  
27 curriculum later adopted by the County. Students from that project returned to produce an  
28 installation at Capp Street Projects in San Francisco, design a poster, and participate in a sym-  
29 posium for health care policy makers. *Code 33-Emergency, Clear the Air* began with televised  
30 conflict resolution meetings between youth and police officers. Over two years the project  
31 provided more than 300 youth with skills in public art and media through workshops and lead-  
32 ership programs. A spectacular live performance featured 150 youth, 100 police officers, and  
33 80 community residents, low riders, video monitors playing youth-made neighborhood com-  
34 mentaries, teen dancers, and a police helicopter. At the end of the decade *Eye to Eye at Fremont*  
35 *High* (2000) was planned at the request of students who wanted to “talk it out” with teachers,  
36 and a series of conversations/performances resulted in a list of reforms presented to the Oakland  
37 Unified School District superintendent.

38 Our projects merged pedagogy, politics, and cultural production. When framed as art, rather  
39 than youth development or education—a distinction whose borders we continually explored—  
40 they offered an example of one of the most developed explorations of community, youth lead-  
41 ership, and public policy in visual arts practice at the time.<sup>2</sup> Even among collaborators there  
42 were differences of opinion on what, in the end, was more central to our mission—making an  
43 artwork, addressing a large general public or multiple publics (such as city politicians), or  
44 establish a radical educational agenda.

45 At that time the notion of public art was raising issues about the sufficiency of art criticism, and  
46 art theory provided little framework for these projects. I turned to critical pedagogy as a context  
47 for the work in part because it is a body of textual knowledge that has never strayed far from its  
48 application in the classroom relations of power, and thus attempts to theorize personal, relational,

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1 ethical, and public practices: “Within critical pedagogy, all theorizing and truth claims are subject  
2 to critique, a process that constitutes analysis and questions that are best mediated through human  
3 interaction within democratic relations of power” (Darder, Baltodano, and Torres 2003: 15).

4 By thinking about the Oakland Projects as art but through another lens of applied and the-  
5 oretical pedagogy, I aimed to broaden the knowledge base for social practices in art, which at  
6 the time floundered between theories difficult to implement within the complexities of real and  
7 substantial communities, on the one hand, and a simplistic and non-critical art that was at the  
8 very least reductive, if not palliative, on the other. Although change in one person at a time is a  
9 viable approach, and one often adopted by artists, I was more interested in how perception  
10 operates within different publics and how these publics could be supported to work toward a  
11 “common good” through what Christopher Robbins called “public pedagogies” (Christopher  
12 Robbins and Suzanne Lacy: 2013).

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**Action Research**

16 As “social” or “public” practice has entered the theoretical environment of visual art, artistic  
17 research has emerged as a key strategy. This critical positioning—art as research—derived from  
18 community-based artists’ attempts to establish a reciprocal, respectful mutual learning environ-  
19 ment for the production of new forms of making, politicking, and educating.<sup>3</sup>

20 My research methodology is a combination of field research—gathering opinions and per-  
21 spectives and figuring out the relationships between local institutional programs and policy  
22 approaches—and more traditional academic research. I approach new work with a primary  
23 question: What do I stand to learn here? This covers both art-related questions (such as how the  
24 current state of inquiry informs my practice aesthetically) and broader concerns (such as equity  
25 issues). Although in many ways they overlap, for the purposes of discussion these questions are  
26 directed at two sites of reception: the “art world,” including art education, and the social and  
27 political context on issues under investigation.

28 As the project progresses and more people join, my question becomes: What do “we,” both  
29 collectively and as individuals, stand to learn? Throughout the Oakland Projects we asked:  
30 What do we (the complex groupings that formed our local culture in the Bay Area in the  
31 1990s) think about young residents, and how does that perception affect our attention to their  
32 needs? How are youth “framed” within public discourse? As Greg Hodges states in an interview  
33 in the film *No Blood/No Foul* (Baughan 1996), “How do we think about young people? Are  
34 they problems to be fixed, or folks who can score a point?” In a sense we can see the Oakland  
35 Projects as a classroom of mutual call-and-response, involving questions posed and answers  
36 given by young people themselves, reciprocity of learning leading to empowerment not unlike  
37 the classroom of mutual inquiry proposed by Freire (1968).

38 An important task in the early phase of our research involved sorting through competing  
39 methodologies, institutions, and theories to form a position or set of positions for the project.  
40 What constituted the “right” kind of activism was contested. Although we balanced delicately  
41 on the knife’s edge of competing positions and ideas about how to solve problems—such as  
42 whether truancy laws or after school programs were better strategies to stop school drop outs, or  
43 how to support police mentorship of youth (through programs like the Police Activities League  
44 and Midnight Basketball) while also teaching youth how to manage their rights in police con-  
45 frontations—our projects were based first on youth advocacy and a belief that poverty, violence  
46 against youth, and racism were root causes of the problems faced by (and often ascribed to)  
47 youth. We were not “neutral,” but we wanted to operate outside of pre-existing factionalisms  
48 by bringing together a broad coalition.

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1 It is important to trace the human and personal impact of injustice as one analyzes the  
2 complicated social and political systems that preserve it. In the case of the Oakland Projects, my  
3 colleagues and I were led to explore systems of incarceration and adjudication, public education,  
4 health care, and local policies that exclude youth from public voice. During the ten years of the  
5 Oakland Projects, as our research moved forward, we paid attention to advances in related  
6 disciplines: sociological research on specific issues, such as the relationship between teen preg-  
7 nancy, family violence, poverty, and schools; progressive political analyses of juvenile incar-  
8 ceration and its history in slavery; deconstructions of media coverage, especially its role in  
9 forming public response to issues and resulting public policies (as in Governor Pete Wilson's  
10 anti-teen pregnancy campaign); and informal interviews by developing supportive environments  
11 where youth could feel free to discuss their lives. Experiences revealed by young people as we  
12 worked together produced the idea of another potential public, and new partners who might  
13 shed light on the issues. We met with organizations and politicians to understand the com-  
14 plexities of local issues and their relationship to a national political picture. My colleagues and I  
15 continued to learn, to frame, and reframe the issues, by listening to personal experiences, youth  
16 advocates' analyses, and reading progressive theories on subjects ranging from community  
17 policing to immigration reform. The output from these investigations was instrumental in our  
18 formation of the work.

### Expanded Pedagogy

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22 In *Performing Pedagogy* (1999), Charles Garoian explored the various ways in which performance  
23 art operates seen within a teaching-learning context. Addressing these projects, he observed:

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25 Lacy's public projects demonstrate a participatory democracy wherein citizens are  
26 acknowledged as public intellectuals capable of taking responsibility for determining  
27 the quality of life in their families, neighborhoods, and communities. What is cur-  
28 riculum? What would curriculum look like if it were not circumscribed within  
29 the schools? How would students' learning be affected if its form and content  
30 were determined through a community discourse? What role does art play in the  
31 development of community-based curriculum? Is there an aesthetic dimension to  
32 curriculum production? How does curriculum function as performance art text?  
33 How does a performance art curriculum facilitate civic education? Questions such  
34 as these expose the curricular implications of Suzanne Lacy's community-based  
35 performance work.

[Garoian 1999: 14]

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38 Five areas might be seen as elements of our expanded pedagogy and each, derived from political  
39 necessity, expanded the art conceptually and aesthetically. As important, each addition to our  
40 frame was strengthened by a reciprocal relationship with critical pedagogy.

#### (1) The Classroom of Public Messages and Counter-Messages

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44 In the early 1990s popular culture imagery constituted a growing battlefield between youth and  
45 the adult world, a false "war" that hid the increasingly dire social conditions for youth as a result  
46 of increasing income inequality in the state. For 20 years there had been a progressive dismantling  
47 of family income, of support systems for the poor and for youth of color as class divides widened.  
48 The insights on this shift from the sociologist Mike Males and the cultural theorist Henry Giroux



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1 were important in our formation of a broad base of cultural inquiry and critique. As Christopher  
2 Robbins comments:

3  
4 Researchers and advocates like Giroux (1996) and Mike Males (1996) provided rela-  
5 tively rare instances in which children and youth, as both contested signifiers and  
6 embodied beings, were spotted early as collateral casualties—or even direct targets—in  
7 neoliberalism’s then emerging war on the public. And, why wouldn’t they be? They  
8 depend(ed), as a function of their limited political and social rights, on various institu-  
9 tions associated with the social state—schools, community organizations, social support  
10 systems, etc. It is difficult to attack the institutions on which youth depend, unless youth  
11 themselves also get cast as problems integrally related to the “wasteful” public institu-  
12 tions that need to be wasted. Twenty years into the “war on youth,” we “publicly”  
13 discuss things like the “school-to-prison pipeline,” “youth as criminals,” and “failing  
14 public schools” as we might have discussed publicly, a generation ago, the school-to-  
15 college (or -job)-pipeline, “youth as the future,” and “helping public schools succeed.”  
16 *(Robbins and Lacy 2003)*

17  
18 Key targets of neoliberal ideology in 90s mass media were youth crime, teenage pregnancy, and  
19 failures of public education. Rarely connected to increasing youth poverty, the neoliberal agenda  
20 developed in California through policies and programs supported by the likes of Republican  
21 Governor Pete Wilson. Thus welfare reform was addressed in *Expectations*, which brought  
22 together different actors to discuss teen pregnancy—a primary target of anti-immigration policy  
23 makers—and its relationship to education and poverty. We wanted to counter what Christopher  
24 Robbins describes as the “symbolic and material work” that was dismantling the social rela-  
25 tionships between adults and youth:

26  
27 These social things do not operate only as serious, sometimes deadly serious, political  
28 issues, but they operated, and continue to operate, in (anti-) public pedagogical terms;  
29 it takes considerable symbolic and material work, across a range of sites and relation-  
30 ships, for adults to unhinge youth, along with public institutions and agencies that  
31 were once “beyond left and right,” from collective commitments to each other and a  
32 democratic future.

33 *(Robbins and Lacy 2003)*

34  
35 The very attractions of the media for youth—its own form of public pedagogy reframed and  
36 directed at them often (but not only) by commercial interests—made its closer analysis an  
37 important platform for the Oakland Projects’ broad-based pedagogy. The media, public opinion,  
38 and youth policy all became primary targets. In this sense our projects took on the pedagogical  
39 work of challenging media with the media.

40 We began at Oakland Technical High School questioning youth on how they experienced  
41 their portrayals in the media, a year-long course which culminated in our first performance:  
42 *Teenage Living Room*. Two high school and two college teachers<sup>4</sup> collaborated on the course,  
43 built around media literacy,<sup>5</sup> which taught students how to deconstruct the highly mediated  
44 and often unfavorable images of youth in the news. Our rationale for pursuing this subject with  
45 high school students rested fundamentally on an equity argument. As we noted:

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47 In a culture segregated by economics and geography, we gain much of our information  
48 about others from the media. By definition, the images of a few, shown on the media to

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1 represent the many, become stereotypes ... Our personal contacts with these different  
2 groups are limited: the homeless are better known through a television documentary  
3 than through the brief and intermittent contact we have with them in the streets; we  
4 learn about battered women from magazine articles not the woman next door; and if  
5 we are not ourselves closely associated with inner-city teenagers, then much of what we  
6 know comes from media, recently through reportage of violent crime.

(Archive, in Lacy 1991–2001).

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9 Young people understood media and valued its self-reflective identity-forming capacities  
10 (although they weren't always able to articulate the deeper implications, for example, of  
11 gangsta rap and increased youth incarceration), and the opportunity to consciously construct  
12 images through video and performance was quite appealing. As Leuckessia Spencer Hirsh,  
13 one of the student leaders in *The Roof Is On Fire*, said: "I think of media literacy as trying to  
14 teach a fish about wetness. It's everywhere; it shapes your whole way of being. When  
15 all those images are negative, when they tell you constantly that you are less idealistic,  
16 less intelligent, less motivated, [and] have fewer opportunities than the generations that  
17 came before you, you feel bad and frustrated" (Spencer, Roof on Fire video transcript,  
18 Archive, in Lacy 1991–2001).

## 21 (2) Formal Curricula in Classes and Workshops

22 The success of our first course, based on student course evaluations, faculty reflection, and  
23 anecdotal feedback on students' performance in *Teenage Living Room*, prompted us to think about  
24 how curriculum could operate artistically and pedagogically. It provided an angle through which  
25 we approached other topics of empowerment and citizenship. Young people in Oakland, with  
26 the truths of their lived realities, were the primary interlocutors, teachers, and partners. Their  
27 experience was the fundamental materiality of each project.

28 It made sense to engage district-wide in the second phase of the project, to encourage  
29 teachers from each of Oakland's eight public high schools to generate their own lessons in  
30 media literacy. As one of our high school faculty partners told a *Los Angeles Times* reporter:

31  
32 We knew that media was a very influential part of their lives, almost like an absentee  
33 parent. They have a very ambiguous relationship to media because their culture is  
34 co-opted for commercial purposes, to sell products, which brings them into the  
35 mainstream culture, but media also projects an image of teenagers as gangsters. It  
36 becomes very complicated, so we thought we would give them some tools to think  
37 about media and how it affects who they are. At the end, we did a performance,  
38 which was very successful.

(Muchnic 1996)

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41 Over the course of the Oakland Projects we designed curricula for high school students, their  
42 faculty, pregnant and parenting teens, incarcerated and adjudicated students, and police (among  
43 others). We partnered with county and city school districts, but also with youth organizations, the  
44 health department, probation office, and police department to design curricula that linked youth  
45 experiences to public policy. Concrete and repeatable curricula, with syllabi and background  
46 readings developed by artists or high school and college faculty, became integrated as a key  
47 component in the Oakland Projects, and some of these were adopted by the agencies with whom  
48 we worked.

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### **(3) Youth Development Activities**

Working with youth has direct pedagogical responsibilities that extend beyond the classroom. The dilemma for artists and other youth workers is, as we quickly discovered, the overwhelming lack of support. We constantly confronted dilemmas, not unlike the ones Lauren Manduke told me she faced as a high school teacher: If you discovered a student had been thrown out of her home, should you let her spend the night on your couch, in spite of school regulations? As individuals, we had to intervene in unexpected ways, from consulting with a teacher to taking pregnant girls to the hospital, from helping fill out college applications to testifying in court.

Around the early 1990s, as negative images of youth culture began to operate for political ends, the concept of youth development shifted from primarily psychological descriptions of life stages and challenges to an activist notion of the environment and pedagogies that could support adolescents emergence into adulthood in spite of dysfunctional institutions, absent social and familial supports and almost no public voice. Thus the work of Bay Area youth-serving organizations operated as platforms for political critique of education, racism, poverty, and violence, while supporting the education and “positive development” of youth. Art was very much a part of this complex hive of activity.

Youth development strategies were widely shared among youth workers. Karen Pittman and Michele Cahill (1992) defined youth development as

the ongoing growth process in which all youth are engaged in attempting to (1) meet their basic personal and social needs to be safe, feel cared for, be valued, be useful, and be spiritually grounded, and (2) to build skills and competencies that allow them to function and contribute in their daily lives.

Unlike a school, educating youth wasn't our only, or even our core objective, but we understood that vulnerable youth needed sustained and focused support, and we saw it as our ethical responsibility to ensure this as much as we could.

We used local research to identify assets and indicators of youth wellbeing, in particular the *Call to Action: An Oakland Blueprint for Youth Development* published in 1996 by the Urban Strategies Council. They had extensively interviewed youth to develop a list of key “indicators” on topics from families and parenting, to school and ambitions for the future, to the lack of safety in youth's neighborhoods. This research became the groundwork for ongoing policy and program formation, including the Oakland Youth Policy. We adopted their indicators (sense of safety, self-esteem, feelings of belonging, perception of responsibility to others, self-awareness) as both a guide to our planning and as the criteria with which we evaluated our relationship with youth.

We used this research to develop a set of best practices focused on what was needed to support young people through developmental stages that resulted in a “successful” adulthood. Feedback from our youth leadership teams, organized for each project, was a fundamental aspect of promoting “youth voice” and authority. The fundamental premise of each project was to advance youth capacities and leadership abilities and we did this in three ways: youth workshops/classes, the creation of youth leadership teams for each project, and personal mentorship. We addressed more than 1,000 youth in our workshops and brought scores of adults into the conversations as well. Workshop participants and leadership teams acquired skills in art-making (including video and performance), computer-aided graphics, and public advocacy practices (including speaking to media and community groups). All project artists were asked to develop mentoring relationships particularly around art making. Mentorship training was also

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1 our approach for police curriculum—our training manual developed for Oakland police officers  
2 in 1998 featured a review of current literature on social conditions of youth in the city  
3 (demographic factors including economic status, schooling, and parenting), indicators of youth  
4 well-being, discussion of criminal justice and youth/race issues from a progressive and youth-  
5 centered perspective, and a set of guidelines for being a youth ally. In *Code 33* mentor  
6 recruitment was a prominent part of the audience engagement strategy. Interestingly, some  
7 police officers had a real interest in mentoring. As police captain Sharon Jones said in *Youth,*  
8 *Cops, and Videotape*, “We need to be role models and friends, not just authority figures.”

9 It was in the schools that I first began to understand the depth and breadth of social, insti-  
10 tutional, and familial failures in the lives of Oakland youth. On a personal level, through these  
11 projects I came to see that coaching—mentoring—was the most critical need in areas such as  
12 Oakland. I realized early on that the most significant contribution I could make in the indivi-  
13 dual lives of young people was to personally mentor a few youth, and I’ve formed several  
14 relationships that have lasted for years. I am not alone in this. It is characteristic of most youth  
15 workers and artists who explore youth development.

#### 16 17 18 **(4) Producing Publics: the Pedagogy in Community Organizing**

19 Within an aggregate of publics that included youth workers, politicians, educators, and com-  
20 munity residents, could we, as artists, develop artworks that both supported youth in develop-  
21 mental learning while serving a mutually identified need for public advocacy? Organizing led to  
22 the production of a variety of “publics” who, along with a large number of “actors” with a stake  
23 in the game, constituted the dimensions of participation in setting collective agendas.

24 We started with an analysis of the existing power relationships, the organizations, activities,  
25 and institutions that dramatically impact the ability of youth to thrive, including education,  
26 health care, criminal justice, and city government. The analysis also recommended non-profit  
27 organizations, churches, neighborhood groups, and families, each suggesting a “public” that  
28 could be temporarily produced for the artwork through organizing. We created literal maps of  
29 the local institutional and political “geographies.” Who, we would ask, are the major players in  
30 city hall, on school boards, in police departments, on police oversight committees, in respected  
31 non-profits, and in public and private high schools and continuation schools? What are their  
32 spheres of influence, their theoretical approaches, their best practices that we might adopt, the  
33 potential ways we might support them? We initiated collaborations by looking for people who  
34 could add to the analysis and strategies we formed over the lengthy process of developing each  
35 project, and organizations and institutions, like the Oakland Unified School District, where we  
36 could affect some small changes or offer some small means of support.

37 In this way the entire trajectory of ten years could be seen as a lengthy process of community  
38 organizing. Taken together, the projects were discursive and layered, framed for the most part  
39 around small and increasingly larger conversations. These could be informal, during research or  
40 preparation, or staged in a performance or installation. Conversation was the basic medium for  
41 each project: Who was the primary voice in the work? Who needed to hear this conversation?  
42 What was needed besides art (e.g. news reports, curriculum, youth development, training in  
43 how to deal with street encounters with police, and so on)? Conversations for purposes of  
44 research could become an opportunity to align values and goals and an invitation to partner. At  
45 some point during each meeting we asked: “What needs to be done?”—thus creating a shared  
46 image of where and how we might impact existing programs, situations, and attitudes. The  
47 performance siting, narrative arc, conversation topics, media framing, and audience participation  
48 were derived from, or designed to align with, existing agendas from progressive organizations,

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1 critical to the formation of the “publics” that would temporarily operate within the work. This  
2 lengthy process of finding intersecting agendas and developing resources to produce the work  
3 created “publics” for the project; and these publics were contextualized by a broader notion of  
4 publics, which included residents of the region, youth across the country, prison reformers,  
5 those who follow the news, who vote, who might even be antagonistic to our aims—those we  
6 wanted to “educate.”

7 As a project progressed, collaborators joined our group of artists and volunteers as needs  
8 presented themselves. For example, if lighting became important, we sought out a lighting  
9 designer, who assumed a level of engagement based on interest, available funds, and ability to  
10 enter the discursive frame of the work. In addition to artists, people with shared values came  
11 forward to assume paid or unpaid roles, as fund-raisers, organizers, or the like. As an example of  
12 this complex community-organizing process, my relationships with two consecutive mayors and  
13 two police chiefs and our offices within city hall provided scores of opportunities to hold  
14 meetings under the umbrella of various city agencies. Charles Garoian (1999, my emphasis)  
15 reported on this process:

16

17 *To satisfy my curiosity, Lacy graciously invited me to be her guest at a luncheon meeting in city*  
18 *hall (an unlikely environment for an artist to work in), where I could observe, firsthand, the way*  
19 *that she works with communities. Lacy, Mayor Elihu Harris, and other high-level public officials.*  
20 *were seated around a conference table in the mayor’s boardroom. They had gathered to review*  
21 *The Roof Is on Fire and No Blood, No Foul, two nationally publicized performances that*  
22 *dealt with youth ... more important, the meeting was intended to discuss the possibility of further*  
23 *collaborations with the Oakland community and youth over the next two years.*

24 When it was her turn to speak, Lacy stated: “I represent art skills. Each of you  
25 represents a different set of skills necessary to the success of this project. It is essential  
26 that we work together in partnership. I need each of you to brainstorm with me, to  
27 provide insights into your various issues, needs, and ideas on solving community pro-  
28 blems. Art is a neutral zone where these issues can be dealt with in creative ways.  
29 Community-based art focuses not on art objects, but on cultural processes. Art in the  
30 past has been alienated from society. Now artists want in. Students [youth] want to say  
31 something, and artists can facilitate their (voice) ... Art needs to be connected to  
32 policy and service in the community.”

33 . As the meeting proceeded, Lacy invited all who were in attendance to participate  
34 as members of an advisory group, to help continue and shape the project with her and  
35 the youth of Oakland.

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[Garoian 1999:156–57]

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38 The aesthetic task for the artist in all of this is to “find the shape,” the act or acts of imagination  
39 that are formed and inform the processes set out above. Having constituted publics through  
40 engaging varied collaborators, performance works brought them together on a platform that  
41 allowed the audience to supply their own multiple meanings.

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**(5) Performance and Pedagogy**

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45 The final site for our pedagogies was in the public gaze, where we enacted our performances,  
46 installations, and mass media productions. Each artwork was the culmination of a particular body  
47 of research and represented new and previous processes, values, and agendas. Given the ongoing  
48 nature of our projects, though, the work never really ended after a production. We were

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1 involved in evaluations, budget finalization, thank-you notes, video editing, and follow-up  
2 conversations with our youth teams for months, even years, after each project. For example, at  
3 the public screening of the documentary of *The Roof Is On Fire* at the Oakland Museum, I began  
4 a conversation with the police chief Joe Samuels, which laid the groundwork for our next  
5 performance, *No Blood/No Foul*. This interconnection is why we extended the artistic framing to  
6 include process and performance, relationships and results, negotiations and failures. The Oakland  
7 Projects would not be interesting as an artwork without the performances, exhibitions, and  
8 installations, but these would not be sufficient without the connective tissue described above.  
9 Through performances and their media coverage, we engaged with a truly broad audience, often  
10 national in scope. It was the most visible piece of our pedagogy, which operated, as Christopher  
11 Robbins has suggested, on multiple pedagogical registers:

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Youth engaged in conversations about their lives in a reclaimed public space, where  
community members acted as witnesses to the youth's individual and collective acts of  
testifying. You engaged the local news stations in the events and, in this way, the  
projects took on another public pedagogical dimension when the interest stories that  
explored the project played across thousands of television sets, momentarily reclaiming  
both material and visual space while illuminating the public and a set of some of its  
most pressing problems. These projects provided a richly layered form of public  
pedagogy: They drew upon and connected a variety of groups and institutions (e.g.,  
the police, the media, the schools, the "community," and youth), while reconstructing  
public spaces around a set of issues that had at its center the public interest, the  
reclaiming of a public space in the public interest.

(Robbins and Lacy 2013)

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The pedagogical work of the performances and installations was meant to engage youth in an  
understanding of their collective position in society and to engage an audience as witnesses to  
their rights to political public voice. For Nick Couldry (quoted by Christopher Robbins), voice  
matters as a "value to us as both humans and social actors/citizens." Here he is referring "to the  
act of valuing, and choosing to value, those frameworks for organizing human life and resources  
that themselves value voice ... Treating voice as a value means discriminating against frameworks  
of social economic and political organization that deny or undermine voice." The primacy of  
"voice" was not only a performative device but also a developmental one for the youth. Training  
in personal expression, political intervention strategies, and other strategies of enacting  
"empowerment" was necessary as "rehearsal" for the performance. With the performance we  
provided a stage on which to examine authentic, multiple, and (mostly) unmediated voices. Its  
importance to the political sphere was immeasurable. Through their individual voices we hoped  
to reframe a political context for youth experience. Each performance marked a point along a  
path to, as Christopher Robbins has put it, "re-hinge" youth with our social and political  
aspirations as a society (Robbins and Lacy 2013). Thus the scale of a performance was as  
important to this political aim as it is to a rally or strike.

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Over time youth participants evolved as communicators. In a sense, the performance was the  
expression of the youth development that had taken place individually and collectively. By  
detailing these pedagogic practices, this discussion offers an exploration of how activist art can  
promote community building around common values, increase public awareness, influence  
civic institutions, and foster an inclusive civic discourse.

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Although each performance or installation could be reviewed in its own right—and here-  
tofore this has been the approach of most writers, including myself—the body of work,

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1 extending over a decade, can and should be seen in its entirety. I now look back at the Oakland  
2 Projects as a whole to extract the ways in which life and art intertwined, particularly in terms of  
3 personal relationships, politics, and education. That means a detailed investigation of the fabric  
4 of relationality, negotiation, research, education and action that took place between the per-  
5 formances and installations, leading up to and after each work. If we look at the Oakland  
6 Projects not as a series of individual performances but as an entire work, the “relational glue”  
7 holding the whole together becomes relevant to issues of intention, impact, and aesthetics, or  
8 quality of the work. It is impossible to work with complexity and on a scale as large as a city  
9 without examining the interconnectivity based on multiple sets of relationalities within a series  
10 of “publics” formed for, or captured within, the project.

11 As Robbins articulates, The Oakland Projects can be held up as “a model of one type  
12 of public pedagogy—of a pedagogy that operates in a variety of spaces in the public interest.”  
13 He explains:

14

15 *This work continues to speak to the challenge of “find[ing] ways of ensuring free and*  
16 *responsible comment and criticism, and of distributing the actual range of work”—in this case,*  
17 *pedagogical work in which youth themselves played central roles in its production and circula-*  
18 *tion. Of great significance during our time of public attrition, Lacy’s careful attention to “the*  
19 *public” and its various problems underscored and continues to highlight the critical roles that*  
20 *materiality plays in people’s relationships to the public and in the construction of material public*  
21 *spaces in which people—especially youth—can come together to do the difficult and ethical,*  
22 *often transformative, and always pedagogical work of citizens: deciding, deliberating, debating,*  
23 *choosing, contesting, imagining alternatives in which people can live more responsibly, more*  
24 *justly, more humanely.*

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(Robbins and Lacy 2013, my emphasis)

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*Suzanne Lacy*

## Notes

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- 1 The interventions and actions we created were complex, although ours constituted only one component within the extremely diverse and energized cultural production on youth expression and politics. (See Knight, Schwartzman, et al. 2006.) Scores of organizations and programs such as East Bay Urban Arts Institute Mentoring Center, Eastside Arts Alliance, Youth Radio, East Bay Asian Youth Center, Police Activities League, East Oakland Youth Development Center and Midnight Basketball—to name only a very few—constituted a rich political environment.
- 2 These and other community arts-based projects served as templates for the later developments in social practice.
- 3 Action research (or participatory action research) was coined as early as the 1940s to address the contested position of objectivity in social sciences field research (a debate the outlines of which we can also trace in social art practices). Defined as “research initiated to solve an immediate problem or a reflective process of progressive problem solving led by individuals working with others in teams or as part of a ‘community of practice’ to improve the way they address issues and solve problems” (en.wikipedia.org; see also Cammarota and Fine 2008 on youth participatory action research) action research assumes and manages “biases” on the part of those exploring, presumes active engagement in the production of knowledge by all parties, and regards research as part of a practice of cultural or social reform.
- 4 Oakland Tech teachers Lauren Manduke and Andy Hamner and myself and fellow college professor Chris Johnson.
- 5 Media literacy, as defined by the Trent Think Tank on Media Literacy, a symposium held in Toronto in 1989, was “the ability to decode, analyze, evaluate, and produce communication in a variety of forms.” By the early 1990s theory and practices from Canada, where media literacy was taught in public schools, had become a topic of concern for progressive educators in the US. J. Francis Davis has pointed out that “the definition of media literacy education changed significantly during the 1980s. This change can be described as a movement from media education as discrimination to media education as empowerment.” Media literacy was becoming recognized as part of a defensive strategy against racism and discrimination against youth by Oakland organizations, although the means of addressing media imagery was often through murals on walls of private buildings and schools.

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