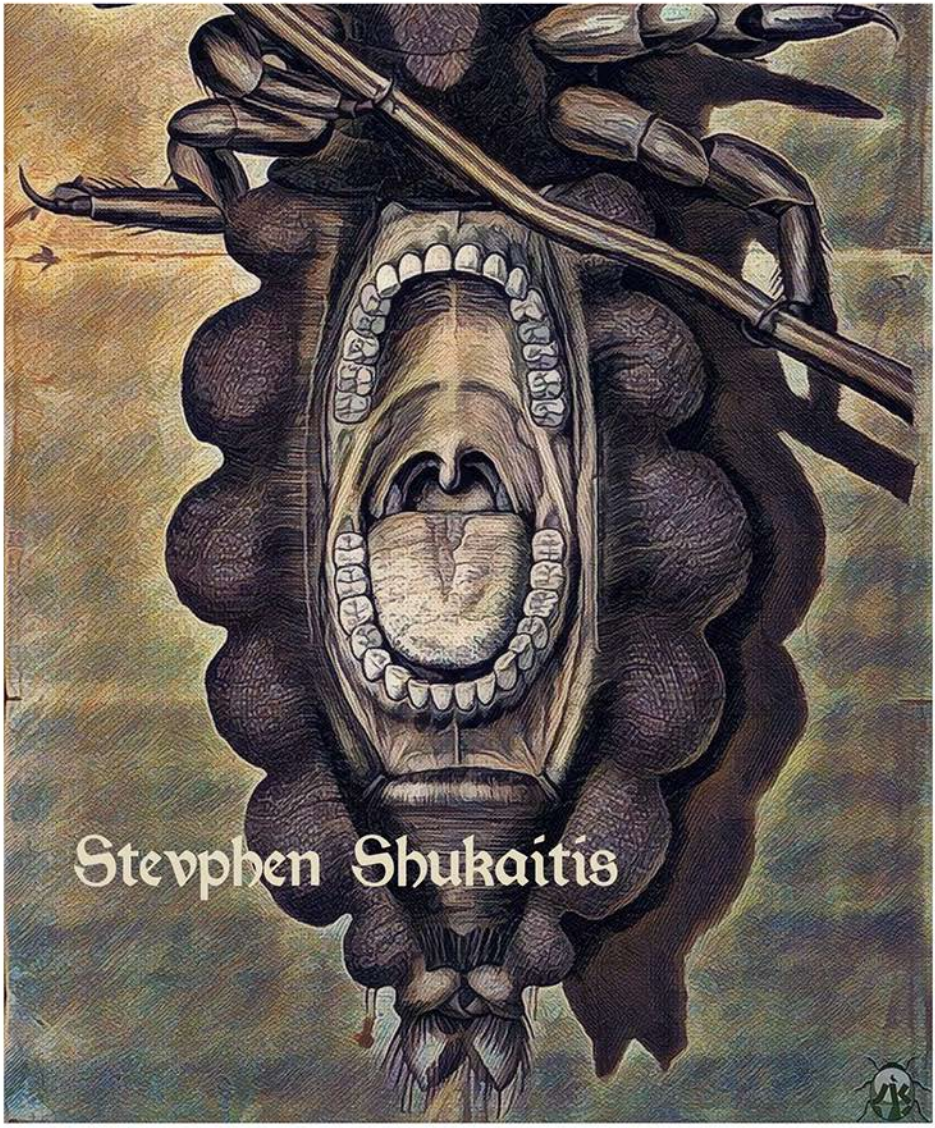
Combination Acts

Notes on Collective Practice in the Undercommons



Stevphen Shukaitis

During the industrial revolution artisans and craft workers sparked struggles against exploitation while the force of law drove unions underground. Today conditions are different… yet they are not. Collective organizing is pre-empted not by legal prohibition but rather by a perverse internalized neoliberal logic that celebrates the precarious creative worker as its exemplar.

Combination Acts draws together fifteen years of conversations with artists, musicians, activists, and theorists about the nature of collaborative practice. What sociality is produced by their practices? What forms of collectivity do they animate and embody? Taken together these dialogues provide a series of study notes for and from the self-organization of the undercommons, gesturing towards an aesthetics that occupies a space of power for itself by coming to close to, but never finally reaching, a set form.

"The mood and tense of revolution can be obscure even to those who act it out – as polyphonic combination, cutting normative conceptions of person and number – in beautifully everyday experiments that strain against the brutally ongoing. Thankfully, in this timely primer, Stevphen Shukaitis reminds us how to conjugate the verbs to live, to fight, and to enjoy." – **Fred Moten, New York University**

"**Combination Acts** offers an overview of political cultural tools and tactics radicals have mobilized over the 20th century and into the 21st. Shukaitis steers through rebellious terrain, from cyberhacking and forms of sabotage to critiques of global neoliberal institutions and horizontal re-commoning, opening new terrains of speculative imaginative possibilities. A necessary guide to militant culture in the new millennium." – **Jaleh Mansoor, University of British Columbia**

"**Combination Acts** is an exhilarating read as it boldly combines optimism (the always renewed burden of struggles on the left) and pragmatism (the requirement of actually existing praxis). Engaging dialogues and theoretical analysis are also combined in this cutting-edge study, on material and in ways that are indispensable for carrying forward the spirit and actuality of insurgent togetherness. The key question of the book – what interventions would be needed so that the grammar of self-organization would not find itself rendered into the fixed forms of capital's continued accumulation demands? – is answered through multiple narrative documents of real-life experience crossing through the art field. At the very least, the book informs us of the depth of critical thought from which practices of anti-status-quo alternatives stem; as for what the book achieves at its best, this is dependent on whether and how we seek to implement what we learn from it. An essential and inspirational reality check on collaboration, labour, its content and discontent, and the conundrum of art activism, among numerous other markers of the zeitgeist." – **Angela Dimitrakaki, University of Edinburgh**

Autonomedia

ISBN 978-1-57027-355-1

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ISBN 978-157027-355-1

Cover image: Lousemouth by James Koehnline, 2017
Cover design by Haduhi Szukis
Interior layout by Margaret Killjoy

Released by Minor Compositions 2019
Colchester / New York / Port Watson

Minor Compositions is a series of interventions & provocations drawing from autonomous politics, avant-garde aesthetics, and the revolutions of everyday life.

Minor Compositions is an imprint of Autonomedia
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Acknowledgements

This book is (literally) based on years of conversations, debates, shared meals, intense affects, and adventures. All my thanks to everyone who shared in any, or preferably, all of them. That includes both all the voices that appear in the text as well as those that are there unnamed.

Special thanks to everyone who commented on or gave feedback on drafts, including Joanna Figiel, Marc Herbst, Liam Weikart, David Jacobs, Elaine Ho, Heath Schultz, Keith Salter, and Perry Miller. Thanks to Marie Nerland from Volt, who hosted the first public presentation of the overall project in Bergen in April 2017. Thanks also to the folks from Rum46 in Aarhus, Denmark, who invited me to present the project in September 2018 as part of their "Room for Improved Futures: Sites of Becoming" exhibition.

Much of the planning of this book came together through organizing "Artist Collectives: History, Organization, and Politics," a PhD training course at the University of Essex with Alan Moore. Special thanks to Alan for co-organizing that, and thanks to all my colleagues from the School for Philosophy and Art History and the Centre for Work, Organization, and Society.

Images

je participe
tu participes
il participe
nous participons
vous participez
ils profitent

ATELIER POPULAIRE
EX-ECOLE DES BEAUX-ARTS

Je participe...

Atelier Populaire, a group of Marxist artists and students, produced numerous posters during the wildcat strikes and occupations that occurred in and beyond Paris during the spring of 1968. The posters were printed by the thousands on newssheets, using a relatively simple but quite effective style of iconography, to take on questions of press freedom, migration, and discontent with the nature of consumer society. Depicting raised fists against ugly factories and menacing police, many are now iconic, filling in sometimes too neatly to represent those moments and outbursts of struggle. These images reflect the influence of the Situationist International. While the Situationists claim their ideas were already in people heads, they did not find their way by magic, but rather through the dispersed circulation and popularizing media forms of these posters and slogans scrawled on walls.[1]

Among these images there has always been one has stood out most vividly for me. It is one that most clearly illustrates the nature of collaboration and participation in the arts. The poster's design responds to efforts of the French government to encourage good citizen participation. It's based on exercises done by French schoolchildren (and likely most children around the world) in learning how to conjugate verbs. What is literally depicted is the repeated copying of different tenses of the French word for participation. In a way, this book does precisely that – exploring tenses and conjugations of collaboration, at both individual and collective levels. Perhaps Virno's grammar of the multitude can be simultaneously more literal and metaphoric, found within such exercises.

The critique arrives with the third-person plural where the critique is made – and it's very direct. *I, you, we participate, but they profit*. While there are many ways that current debates around activist art and politics remain within the shadows and frameworks from and responding to the events of 1968, here the links are clearest precisely because the problems have remained the same. Participation and collaboration, acts of self-organization, are welcome and encouraged, provided they subsist in forms amenable to exploitation and control by external interests. This state of affairs recalls Luc Boltanski and Eve Chiapello's new spirit of capitalism, where the desire to find alternatives to the alienating and stultifying world as-it-was become harnessed into more humanizing and welcoming forms of control.[2]

But what if this did not have to be the case? Or more importantly, what would it take for this to not be the case? What interventions would be needed to keep the grammar of self-organization unfettered by the fixed forms of capital's continued accumulation demands? Can we imagine the iconic hand's writing instead that we profit? Would profit still be the right verb? Or perhaps it is still necessary to maintain a break in the exercise between tenses, but one where the third-person singular iteration can differently denote energies and outcomes of participation as they are channeled back into the origins of their production.

Staying with the terms provided by Boltanksi and Chiapello, we might say the difficulty is caused by the separation of what they describe as artistic critique, focusing on alienating conditions, from social critique, focusing on exploitation. While social critique addresses the concerns most traditionally associated with the labor movement, artistic critique attacked the alienations of everyday life and bureaucracy. In the decades since then we have seen both the decimation of social critique through the continued undercutting of organized labor movements and the absorption of artistic critiques into the workings of everything from management theory to city planning. It is essential that emerging social movements do not succumb to the false dichotomy between artistic and social critique. Rather, they must develop a new grammar of collective participation and self-organization that is not amenable to external profiteering.

Combination Acts

But what, you might well ask, are combination acts? Initially the Combination Acts were a set of laws passed in 1799 and 1800 to prevent the formation of trade unions and the use of collective bargaining. Initially this law was passed in 1799 as a response to the looming menace of the Jacobins and other revolutionaries who apparently were taking the demands of the French revolution too seriously for British industrialists. Basically the law made unionization

and going on strike illegal in an attempt to prevent such tactics being used to pressure either capitalists or the government. And it also had the effect of driving union organizing underground, turning them into forms that might have ended up being more disruptive to the continued functioning of capital and the state than forms which the law was designed to prevent in the first place.

Today's situation may seem very different, with fewer direct legal restrictions on collectivity and organizing (at least within greater parts of the world than previously). There are far fewer laws that make the forming of unions illegal, even if there are still plenty that restrict the extent and nature of how they can operate, exercise power, or defend their members. Rather than legislative abolition of unions or collective organizing there is another dynamic operating. Instead the forming of collectivities that animate and are animated by struggles over common conditions are pre-empted in their formation by the internalization of a perverse and highly individualized neoliberal logic. There's no point of talking or talking about collective conditions, let alone trying to change them, when it has been accepted that everyone is an entrepreneur of the self only seeking out the maximization of their own self-interests. It's as if we're all caught in a particular and horribly narrow reading of Adam Smith that celebrates individuals pursuing their egoist self-interests but manages to forget or ignore everything else Smith wrote, for instance those bits about fellow feeling and how relationships with others would provide checks on the damaging pursuit of self-interest.

That is not say that that this text is going to provide a magical solution to that problem. Indeed, even if there was anything approaching any answer it would be for a particularly situated conjunction of art, labor, and the political, rather than something which could be generalized from outside of that context. Rather what is argued is that any attempt to develop a politics of collaboration and collectivity within the arts that does not take sufficient heed to questions of labor, both involved in its own formation and the context from which it emerges, is doomed. Thankfully in recent years there has been much more attention paid to this both from people tracing out histories and genealogies of collective practices in the arts,[3] and more general consideration of the changing relationship between art and labor.[4] This book does not attempt to provide a general overview of these conversations and debates, although it would be useful for someone to do that. Rather it theorizes the concept of a combination act through a series of interlinking conversations and analyses, drawing on and expanding the autonomist notion of class composition, and more particularly, political recomposition.

Combination acts then do not seek to formalize and institute themselves as rule or law. Rather they are new emerging ways of thinking and organizing that precisely avoid settling into a fixed point or moment of closure. Following the historical theme these would include practices such as the way the Industrial

Workers of the World, in their use of art and culture as part of organizing, did not seek to become a representative body.[5] A similar spirit can be found in the autonomous movements in Italy in 1977, with its proliferation of pirate radio station and practices of self-valorization and autonomous culture: finding new ways to live and organize together without making representative demands.[6] They can be found in the way that during the 1970s the Wages for Housework movement sought to bring visibility to unacknowledged forms of reproductive labor, but not to celebrate them, or to actually achieve a set wage for continued social reproductive labor. Instead the organizing was intended to make this work visible as a step towards struggling against and refusing it.[7] And more recently a similar impulse can be found in the various iterations of the occupy movement, both before and after Occupy Wall Street, that organized by seize space, but adamantly and purposely refusing to put forward a concrete set of demands.[8]

Artists and cultural workers occupy a uniquely contradictory role in this new arrangement. Historically there were often important roles played by artisans in the formation and development of labor struggles.[9] And that includes labor struggles that were not about the conditions of artistic or cultural work. But in the past fifty years, in the wake of May 1968, that dynamic seems to have shifted somewhat. Maybe it is the result of new spirit of capitalism that forms of passionate and creative work undertaken by artists and cultural workers have served as the conduit through which a much more narrowly individualizing relationship with our working lives has developed. This is what the sociologist Pascal Gielen has argued, namely that the art world has served as a kind of a laboratory of post-Fordist working practices, for instance being based on flexible project work with short term contracts and no job security.[10] And it is from this laboratory that such models have been outwardly expanded and applied to all other aspects of working and non-working lives. But if the art world and cultural production more generally have provided a site for such developments, they have also incubated other forms of collectivity and sociality that are not nearly as amenable to the smooth operations and valorization of capital. Near the beginning of Richard Florida's book *The Rise of the Creative Class* there is a suggestion (which has been almost entirely overlooked in the voluminous uptake of his ideas around creativity and economic development) that within the conditions he describes it is necessary to create new forms of social cohesion, models and formats for labor organizing, as the existing ones no longer work.[11]

This is where the renewed and expanded notion of a combination act comes in. That is to say, the idea is to revive and revise it, not as a legal framework or historical analysis, but rather an exploration of how forms of collective sociality and self-organization operate and exist despite being blocked from settling into a constituted form. What do these acts of association do for those who

are involved and enmeshed within then? Do they act to counter and sabotage the logic of hyper-individuation that breaks down and pre-empts collective solidarity and sociability?

The answer to such questions cannot be given in general or ahistorical terms. Rather it comes from within the particular forms of combination acts and the combinations they create. One way to approach that is drawing on how Greg Sholette and Blake Stimson distinguish between different forms of collectivism in their book *Collectivism After Modernism*. They suggest that

> collectivism can be and should be periodized, that we can gain from giving collectivism itself greater definition as a history, and that we occupy a distinct position and face a distinct opportunity now as a new period in that history emerges[12]

Thus in doing so they distinguish between forms of modernist collectivism in the arts, which historically were associated with the rise of avant-garde arts and radical political movements, versus lighter and more airy forms of collectivism such as the creation of publics through opinion polling or the development of more temporary and flexible collectivism through entrepreneurial dynamics or social media. There you have a distinction between the collectivism of Russian constructivism or the Situationist International, which is a very thick and demanding form, versus a more contingent and flexible conception.

Angela Nollert proposes analyzing the artistic work of collectives at the level of social form. By this she means focusing on several key aspects of how collectives operate such as the nature and understanding of authorship, the working process they use, and the result that is produced. Thus she proposes that the

> multifaceted nature of artist collectives results from the various degrees of significance of and the relationship between these three elements. Does the artist collective try to create a collective work or is it more concerned with the process of collaboration? Do the artists participate in a collective idea but then develop their work individually?[13]

These are very much the kind of questions to be explored through this book, which is to say it will explore the possible politics of labor and production from an artist's point of view. That is to say not as a fixed identity,[14] but rather from the perspective of the possible 'becoming-artist' of anyone and/or everyone. The point is not to attempt to represent or give an overview of the wide range of such experiences (if such were even possible), but rather sketch out some conjunctions of art, labor, and politics such they can be drawn from.

The idea is to develop what John Clammer has described as a "sociology from the arts" rather than a sociology of the arts.[15] In other words, this is not a book that attempts to give an overview of a range of different collaborative and collective practices in political art, but rather one that takes these practices as the basis for the elaboration of continued and deepened engagement. It is not a book of ideas analyzing combination acts, for whatever practices already conceptual – they are ideas – even if not usually acknowledged that way.[16]

This is something that I've been thinking and writing about for quite some time, though approaching from different angles. First I worked on the question of the politics of research methods in relationship to social movements, focusing on how to think with and through organizing rather than fixing movements as objects of research.[17] I then conducted a project exploring how autonomous movements, and in particular their artistic and media practices, create imaginal machines, or shared forms of collective imagination.[18] And most recently I've worked on developing a strategic, class compositional analysis of the history of strands of avant-gardes, exploring how aesthetic practices can create spaces for bottom-up forms of strategy-making.[19] This book is an extension and expansion of those lines of thought, though there is no need to read them first.

Images & Conversation in/as Thought

> Alice was beginning to get very tired of sitting by her sister on the bank and of having nothing to do: once or twice she had peeped into the book her sister was reading, but it had no pictures or conversations in it, "and what is the use of a book," thought Alice, "without pictures or conversations?"[20]

Having already gestured several times to the overall theme of this book, I will here note that it is not intended as standard monograph in the usual sense of having a core argument that is developed over the course of chapters that appear in a certain order. Rather it is a text that is more like a series of curated conversations, moving between the particular experiences and considerations of collaboration, essays, and analysis. Foucault once remarked that he tended to divide his writing between books that explored new areas and forms from those intended as demonstrations of method.[21] This text is very much intended to lean more towards the experiment side of that distinction, taking its inspiration from sources such as Félix Guattari and Suely Rolnik's *Molecular Revolution in Brazil*, the older Semiotext(e) Foreign Agents series (in particular the interviews), the Singaporean journal *Forum on Contemporary Art & Society*, as well as more recent projects that attempt to bring together and blend different forms of writing, analysis, and conversation.[22] The conversations are not

other to writing but another form, one that often precedes and exceeds more typical forms of composition. They are the movement and circulation that writing often tries to capture. The idea is to find a form that is fitting for the materials at hand. I've always found that writing emerges from an ongoing dialogue with various people and ideas. Thus in mixing formats and approaches it is an attempt to reflect those in the text itself.

The discussions and texts brought together here span nearly fifteen years. Predictably enough they did not start with a preformed plan of how they would come together. Rather over time I noticed that there were common themes that kept coming up and which would be interesting to explore more. And it dawned upon me in 2013, as I was organizing an in-depth seminar on art collectives with Alan W Moore, that the concepts of collectivity and collaboration could usefully serve as meeting points for these ongoing conversations. As Brian Holmes observes, collectives function as thresholds, marking boundaries but also meeting points between different worlds and social spheres. Collectives can build infrastructure to sustain themselves, but which also can spiral off into new forms of insurgent social movement and wild creativity. From the conversations and essays in this book, themes emerge and recur with variations. One question that cropped up across multiple conversations is how the nature of the context from which various collaborations and projects emerged strongly influenced their approach, and infused their reasons for existence in the first place.

For the Croatian curatorial collective What, How & for Whom, working together as a collective was extremely important during the 1990s because of the rise of nationalist politics and the demonization of the country's socialist history and heritage. By working together and framing their work as collective, they sought to develop a mode of collectivity that was not nationalist and recovered socialist and communist history. During the same period anarchists in Russia were focusing on ecology and organizing protest camps as spaces for emergent movements, as well as carving out a new direction that did not seem connected with an overt connection to questions of labor, which would have felt discredited to many because of its lingering association with the Soviet times. This resonates with how, Joe McPhee, a free jazz musician, describes how the civil rights and black nationalist movements of the 1960s provided the context for his early work and approach to music and politics.[23]

A decade earlier the members of Test Department found themselves in a derelict and decaying post-industrial South London from which they scavenged bits of metal and machinery they fashioned into instruments for the creation of a new noise. And from this they found ways to construct a new collective and to take part in supporting the labor strikes. Similarly free jazz saxophonist Ken Vandermark talks about the way that musical performance is always also a collaboration with the physical space it occurs in, as its acoustic

nature changes the way sound interacts, which is even more important within improvised and experimental music. In a similar vein, though at a different register, net art provocateurs UBERMORGEN explore how the informational and media context shapes the context from which different forms of collectivity are possible, or which prevent their development. Chris from 56A Infoshop describes how at this time in London there was a massive and well-organized squatting movement occupying thousands of council flats, effectively creating a counter-infrastructure of autonomous spaces and knowledges. These kinds of autonomous spaces are essential for the development of other ways of working, living, and being together. They are spaces in which new emerging combination acts become possible, but are also formed out of and emerge from processes of recomposition and combination. Ruigoord, a large autonomous space in Amsterdam, was started by people coming out of Provo, the mid-1960s movement which brought together a ludic approach to politics and counterculture happenings with anarchist labor politics and strands of mysticism, thus managing to significantly change and liberalize Dutch society. Autonomous spaces help to ensure the possibility of the longer term and larger scale collaboration, whether that takes the form of the garden at Dial House that Gee Vaucher describes as the space from which her inspiration and many projects have developed, or the massive zone to defend in rural France against airport construction and infrastructural control that John Jordan portrays.

Collective Practice in the Undercommons

Stine Hebert and Anne Szefer Karlsen suggest that it is time to move beyond a discussion of self-organization that treats it as an inherently good thing, instead looking at the specific roles and purposes it plays. This is eminently sensible given the way that self-organized initiatives, forms of collaboration and collectivity, often find themselves converted to and put to use to ends far different from what they were initially intended for.[24] But that's not a surprise, or shouldn't be a surprise anymore. The question becomes then what to do about it. What energies and possibilities do combination acts make possible for those enmeshed in them?

You could say that most broadly I'm interested in what people do together, from organizing and creating art to cooking and living. To talk about the nature of the undercommons is to undertake pre-conceived understandings of these as radically different kinds of activities, or any conception that one area is a knowledge rich field of expertise and another is not. Rather it's to draw from that which is always already in motion in the forms of sociality embedded within the world as it is, precisely because from there it is possible to find ways out of it. CLR James once made that apparently paradoxical claim that the organizing was over. But this was not something meant to indicate that the

time for politics was over. Rather what was over for James was any approach that starts from declaring itself as a beginning in a way that ignores all of the activity and self-organization that was already in motion.

Thus this is not a declaration of how it is now the time to start a conversation about art collectives and collaborative practices. Those conversations have been happening for quite some time. What we have here is an attempt to draw from and bring together a series of those conversations, fragments of analysis and exploration, in a form that can bring them back into the milieu from which they emerged. This is why this is not an academic book that fixes a research object in place, but rather something closer to what Fred Moten and Stefano Harney might call study notes of the undercommons: thoughts for living, thinking, and breathing together.[25] It is, much like Yates McKee's excellent book *Strike Art*, "intended as a strategic address to those working in the art field more specifically to consider how the various kinds of resources at our disposal might be channeled into movement work as it unfurls with ongoing moments of political rupture."[26] Today we're always-already participating, whether we want to or not. The question then is developing new tenses of combination, new spaces of collectivity, to think through and beyond the logic of self-organization on its own terms.

Endnotes

1 For more information on the posters see Johan Kugelberg and Philippe Vermès, Eds. (2011) *Beauty is in the Street: A Visual Record of the May '68 Paris Uprising*. London: Four Corners Books.

2 Boltanski, Luc and Eve Chiapello (2005) *The New Spirit of Capitalism*. London: Verso.

3 For instance see Bryan-Wilson (2009), Moore (2011), and Galimberti (2017).

4 See Sholette (2017), Mansoor (2016), Forkert (2013), Arnarnda et al (2011) Hoegsberg and Fisher (2014), and Gielen and Paul De Bruyne (2012).

5 See May (2013), Thoburn (2003), and Shukaitis (2009: 61-80).

6 See Goddard (2018), Wright (2003), Marazzi and Lotringer (1980), and Berardi (2009).

7 See Federici (2012; 2017) and Weeks (2011).

8 See Research and Destroy (2009), Lunghi and Wheeler (2012), and Graeber (2014).

9 For more on this Ranciere, Jacques (1989) *The Nights of Labor: The Workers' Dream in Nineteenth Century France*. Philadelphia: Temple University Press. Tucker, Kenneth (2010) *Workers of the World, Enjoy! Aesthetic Politics from Revolutionary Syndicalism to the Global Justice Movement*. Philadelphia: Temple University Press.

10 Gielen, Pascal (2009) *The Murmuring of the Artistic Multitude: Global Art, Memory and Post-Fordism*. Amsterdam: Valiz.

11 Florida, Richard (2004) *The Rise of the Creative* Class. New York: Basic Books, xxx.

12 Stimson, Blake and Greg Sholette, Eds. (2007) "Periodizing Collectivism," *Collectivism After Modernism: The Art of Social Imagination After 1945*. Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 3.

13 Nollert, Angelika (2005) "Life is Art," *Kollektive Kreativität/Collective Creativity.* Ed. René Block and Angelika Nollert. Kassel: Kunsthalle Fridericianum, 26.

14 The rejection of working as identity as a basis for politics, referred to as programmatism, is most developed within debates around communization. For more information on this see Noys, Benjamin, Ed. (2011) *Communization and its discontents: contestation, critique, and contemporary struggles*. Brooklyn: Autonomedia.

15 John Clammer, *Vision and Society: Towards a Sociology and Anthropology from Art*. London: Routledge, 2014.

16 Practice here is not used to mean something that one does. Rather it is an activity that grounds a way of being or living. For more on this see Chapter 14 in Alasdair MacIntyre's. *After Virtue (2007).*,

17 For more information on militant research, as one way to break down this separation, see (2007) *Constituent Imagination: Militant Investigations // Collective Theorization.* Ed. Stevphen Shukaitis and David Graeber with Erika Biddle. Oakland: AK Press as well as the issue of *ephemera: theory & politics in organization* on workers' inquiry (2014).

18 Shukaitis, Stevphen (2009) *Imaginal Machines: Autonomy & Self-Organization in the Revolutions of Everyday Life*. Brooklyn: Autonomedia.

19 Shukaitis, Stevphen (2016) *The Composition of Movements to Come: Aesthetics & Cultural Labour After the Avant-Garde.* London: Rowman & Littlefield.

20 Carroll, Lewis (1865) *Alice's Adventures in Wonderland*. Full text available at http://www.gutenberg.org/files/11/11-h/11-h.htm.

21 Foucault, Michel (1991) *Remarks on Marx.* Trans R. James Goldstein. New York: Semiotext(e), 28.

22 Guattari, Félix and Suely Rolnik (2007) *Micropolitics in Brazil.* Los Angeles: Semiotext(e). For more information on *FOCAS* see https://www.aaa.org.hk/en/collection/search/library/focas-forum-on-contemporary-art-society-vol-4.

23 Fischlin, Daniel, Ajay Heble, and George Lipsitz (2013) *The Fierce Urgency of Now: Improvisation, Rights, and the Ethics of Cocreation*. Durham: Duke University Press.

24 Hebert, Stine and Anne Szefer Karlsen, Eds. (2013) *Self-Organised*. London: Open Editions.

25 Harney, Stefano and Fred Moten (2013) *The Undercommons: Fugitive Planning & Black Study*. Brooklyn: Autonomedia.

26 McKee, Yates (2016) *Strike Art: Contemporary Art and the Post-Occupy Condition*. London: Verso, 7.

What have you bought into?
How much will it cost to buy you out? Saul Williams, asks, repeating.

We won't pay for your crisis, chanted the Italian students, revolting.

And before that Dario Fo played it (Can't Pay? Won't Pay!); the campaign against the poll tax refused it.

But what of those who don't want to be bought out or bailed out?

What of those debts that are not burdens, but the very nature of the social itself. Debts that can never be paid: to parents, mentors, and comrades.

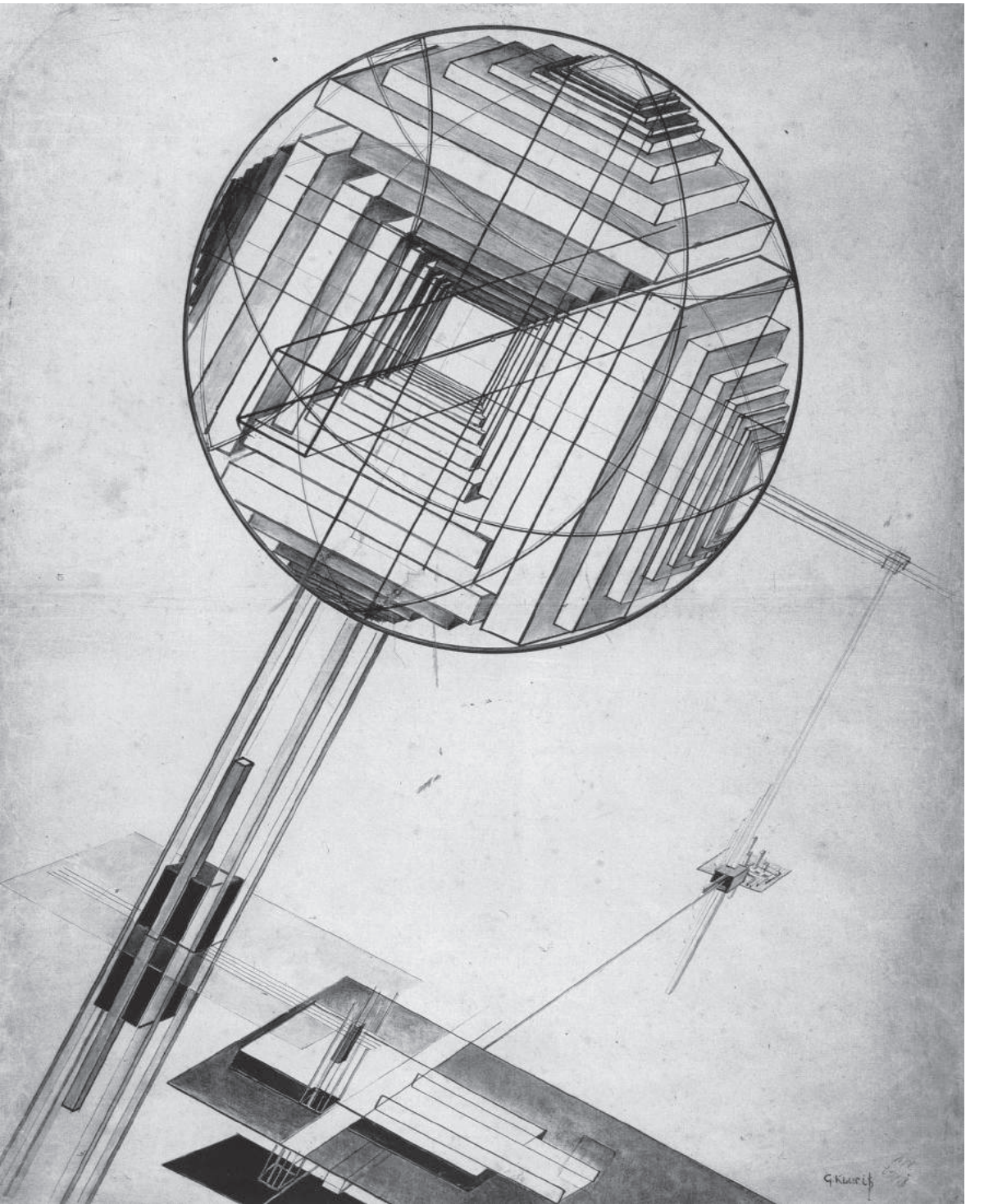
Abolish the credit system
but not the debts
of the undercommons.

Social debt as a principle of elaboration of bonds, not their dissolution-abstraction-financialization.

And with this arises an art
not of entrepreneurial production; an alchemy of value for the market

but a relationality of excessive sociality: a general economy of desire, in the infrapolitical movements of collective imaginations, in the argots of imaginal production that have no need for a Bourriaud & Ranciere but owe more to each other than they could ever pay.
or ever will…

What we have bought into? A debt that cannot be paid & lives that must be lived.



Standing on the Threshold
Conversation with Brian Holmes

Brian Holmes is one of my favorite thinkers – or perhaps an organic intellectual, if that concept can still be used – of the activist-art world. And this is not just because of the always incisive and insightful nature of his writing, but also because at times it seems that he is simply *everywhere*, in the best sense possible. That is to say that Brian can be found connecting and bringing together different domains, from art and politics to labor, cybernetics, and economics. And he does this working largely outside university spaces, extending conversations from galleries to bookstores as well activist spaces and endless Nettime threads. Thus in 2013 as I realized that various strands of my research were coming together around art collectives and practices of collectivity, I could think of no better way to develop that then to sit down and have a chat with Brian over lunch.

BRIAN HOLMES (BH): How does collectivity spread? What can a collective do to make collectivity something that gets into everyday life?

STEVPHEN SHUKAITIS (SS): I'm thinking of ways to approach that. My first thought was on the question of artist collectives, because the notion of collectivity in social practice art seems quite thin. It's talking about certain practices being social, as if all art isn't social at a much deeper and more fundamental

level. Even in apparently very individual forms of art production, like someone standing by themselves painting on easel, those elements arrive as readymades: the paint, the brushes, etc… There's always a collaborative and structural element, even when there doesn't seem to be one.

Then the problem is more, or perhaps also, in the emotions and attachment developed to certain kinds of practice or forms of labor. During the last project I was working on, I interviewed cultural workers around Brick Lane. Getting over the excitement of the immaterial labor debates, I discovered that forms of artistic and cultural work, rather than creating forms of collectivity or a basis of a new kind of communism, were creating more and more individualized forms of investment in work. 'Here's my practice, this is what I do.' People were declaring that in a way that blocks off a discussion of collective conditions.

I'm actually confounded by that. Why does that happen? That's part of why I'm interested in artist collectives. I don't think there's something inherent about artistic labor which leads to an individualized approach to work. But then what are the dynamics that lead to different forms of collectivity in artistic and cultural labor?

BH: Art is a strongly vexed thing because art's worth money. And it's worth money because it has a signature. And not only that... it's not as crude as that, because you can also say that art's worth money because it has a kind of prestige based on how identifiable the decisions are in it, so we can find out how original it is. That's how you can price it, by the original decisions. To make those decisions identifiable, the artist has to have chosen to do one thing and not other. To do that they have to be an artist, they have to be an individual.

Or, if they're a collective, they have to operate as a collective that's so rigorously controlled that you could say the collective has chosen to do this and not that. And then you can compare it to a whole set of things. That becomes a very evaluative approach where you would analyse the worth of anything in any kind of market by how much it's comparable to and stands out from other things. Unfortunately that doesn't have anything to do with collectivity in the sense of creating the basis of autonomy, by which I mean, creating shareable things that will help people to gain a footing in the world, from which they can determine their own experience, their own destiny. Art is continually being pushed away from this quest for collective autonomy.

At the same time, art is the word that we have for places where creation and invention take place. We know that in a complex society, language and images and imagination are some of the places where invention and creativity can happen the most frequently and fruitfully. So art is at a vexed pass, it's caught between forces that push for its identification and evaluation, and very

different desires seeking something that creates autonomy: a difference, otherness, escape. Art as trap, art as liberation.

But it's not like there's an either/or. A lot of people are on the threshold. On one side of the door is the art world, where all those operations of evaluation take place. On the other side of the door – outside, if you like – is everyday life, where basically art tends to dissolve and become invisible, or it's like a cherished memory that you occasionally share with other people. In the end most people are actually on the threshold. They're going back and forth between these two things. They don't go all the way into daily life as the pure unalloyed creation of collective autonomy, because when they do, they get completely lost as artists. Occasionally you meet them. You might run into this person and eventually you find out that they have all of these things to say about art and life, and you'd have never suspected because they didn't give a sign. But when you stay on the threshold, you can instantly find the people who have lots to say... because they're producing the signs. They have lots to say all the time, about signs which point away from where they are. It's weird… but I think if you're honest with yourself, you will probably have to admit that you're living on this threshold. Maybe another place to start this conversation is what to do with that location, because it's real.

SS: In the event of a tornado hitting a house, the threshold is a very safe place to be. That's an interesting way of thinking about it. There is a certain security in the threshold. Looked at that way, the threshold isn't just about passage, it's also a certain kind of structure that enables you to balance two worlds and draw from different spaces at the same time.

BH: Yes. Another thing that people want to do, and I want to do also, is you're there on the threshold – looking at the world outside – and you want to build another place complete with its own threshold, somewhere else. What you'll be missing in this place that you're leaving at your back, the constituted world of art and intellectuality, is the richness of whole sets of references, which would be tremendously useful if you could use them. But often you can't. That's why you're turning your back on them. Because when you start using them, the forms you have to put them into are the forms of competition. They're forms of production for value. It's just unbearable. But still, what's nice about the art world is the archive, such a richly constituted set of references. You can find all sorts of things in there, you can make all sorts of distinctions that will help you set a pathway in life. And what's more, you can find other people to share that with. That's the reward.

The downside is the competition, which destroys it, makes it into some kind of exchange value. Still you dream of creating a house out there, and in it, a library or a gallery. To some extent you even do it. You build your own

house. You collaborate with people to do it. You have these ephemeral houses that rise and fall. Places like Mess Hall in Chicago… they always rise and fall. And you build sets of references, images, words, gestures… you try to build them in such a way that they're totally public and paradoxically hard to find, hard to recognize. You try to build something secret into them. You continue to dream of bigger houses that would be more secret, that would have more tunnels, a whole underground world.

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SS: Do you think there's a reason why, as you said earlier, artist collectives have become more celebrated over the past twenty years?

BH: Yes, I think the real celebration started ten years ago, mid-2000s, but it was building up for a while. First you got the entrepreneurial, then the radical celebration.

SS: Because it seems to me during this period there's been a shift away from collectives… because when I read the Art Workers' Coalition or Colab… I was just reading Alan Moore's *Art Gangs* again. And there you have a history of art collectives during the 60s, 70s, early 80s that are specifically political in their orientation. It seems once you get into the 90s, there seems to be the rise of an entrepreneurial collectivism, which is much different.

BH: Totally, I remember how it happened. There was the future super-curator Hans Ulrich Obrist, who was living in France at that time. He went to London in the early 90s when the big thing, for him anyway, was a space called City Racing. It was an entrepreneurial collective pushing for a new kind of visibility on the cheap. There had been a significant financial bust around 1990-1991. Real estate values went down in London. Spaces opened up that were cheap for a while. This was the heyday of Brick Lane as an artists' hangout. Neoliberal populism thrives on such myths. Obrist came back to France with a catalogue he wrote about City Racing, and it was distributed around Europe. Thinking back, maybe the good thing is that this made art and squatting somehow comparable. So if you were coming from art, you could at least imagine opening a different door.

SS: This would also be the period of time when Stuart Home was claiming that the Neoists' art strike totally disrupted the art market.

BH: True, it was disrupted. The art market crashed in the middle of 1990. After a big stock market crash in 1987, the art market held out as a reserve of

speculative value for a good three years. And then it really crashed, seriously. A lot of the 80s gallery phenomenon was halted for a few years, and some of it permanently destroyed. During those few years this new form of entrepreneurial collectivity appeared in Britain, and simultaneously relational art emerged as a label in France. They're basically linked. The English form is more clearly entrepreneurial. The French one leans more towards the institutional market. But in the end it's the same time period, and there was a lot of exchange between them. This seemingly trivial cultural history is important because it has a lot of prestige. It can orient and disorient people.

SS: I just went last week to the Palais de Tokyo, and there was this exhibition called "Nouvelle Vague" which was supposed to about collaboration. It's a quite large exhibition taking up a large part of a sizeable institution. But when you walk around it rather seems like a whole series of micro-exhibitions that are quite discrete. There was no real connection between the different areas. The only collaboration seemed to occur in the proposition that there was any collaboration occurring.

There's certain forms of collectivity that come to stand in for content. Whereas before work might have been collaboratively produced, emerging out of living and working together, now it seems to be the opposite way around. It's produced once you've left the house rather than inside of it. I thought the reason why you had collectivity is so you could have the content you wanted, so you could do things you couldn't do otherwise, rather than the sociology of it being the thing itself.

BH: Yes. So let's make some of our own distinctions. What you're talking about is exactly what started in the early 90s. It hasn't changed since then. What's different is when people build infrastructure that's usable by anyone. Then you have a completely different orientation towards collectivity, because it's expansive collectivity. It has to expand beyond the existing containers, because the vitrines of art are limited; it's a limited market. When people build infrastructure, by which I mean shared resources, circuits of live exchange that aren't closed to entry, then this expansive collectivity develops pretty naturally.

It develops into social movements. It develops into big demos. It develops into wild occupations of spaces. That's the direction it goes because it's not limited. It's important, because if you can experience something aesthetic, you can change your life. You can change your senses. You can change your imagination without having to police yourself, to discipline yourself, to package and deliver yourself. It's an unlimited economy versus a limited one. That's fundamental. That's the distinguisher.

SS: This sounds like the difference between collectivism at a level of social reproduction – at the level of social infrastructure – versus collectivism at the level of circulation. There you have... where collectivism becomes a marketable image rather than a question of how you can live together.

BH: Exactly, because the collective, when it's marketed, is a tantalizing fantasy that, 'I could do that, too.' There's room for someone else. Whereas with the individual artist, 'I can't do that,' because you can't ever be another individual. But part of a team, you can. You can just be another member of the team. It's very attractive. That's more attractive than Picasso. You have to be born Picasso. After you're ten years old, you know you're not Picasso. Whereas collectivity, that's for you, too. There's a lure in collectivity that's very powerful for people. Neoliberal populism. That's why it works so well. It's a lure that builds on the possibilities of social reproduction. These things are two sides of one coin, circulation and reproduction. What matters is not whether they're entangled, but how, what you actually do with that relation.

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SS: One of the things that I found the most frustrating in the past few years is in discussions around the relationship between art and labor. Here I'm thinking of things like the *Art/Work* newspaper. It was great, even if it was very US-focused. It was made for the US; that's why it was US-focused. But the thing is when there's a discussion about art and labor, it's always truncated... so that labor discussed is labor within the art world itself. It's always internal to this particular circuit.

BH: Yes, so during Occupy we were supposed to support the striking Sotheby's art handlers! As though the master's house could be a house of justice.

SS: But how does artistic labor relate to broader circuits of production? One of the things I think about is that connection between particular forms of artistic labor and broader economic changes, which gets inherently messier once you say that.

BH: Well, it depends. I think with second wave of Autonomia we were really interested in exactly that question. It turned out that there was a whole lot of new professions. If you looked around you'd find out that the children of former industrial workers or standardized white-collar workers were now creating design or doing video and post-production. This was true in any of those immaterial-labor jobs, where people created signs and used computers. It was a new form of adding value to a capitalist product. And there's a whole new

arsenal of labor discipline to back that up. In my view, marketable art is a disciplinary form, like advertising or graphic design or whatever. I think our big mistake, at *Multitudes* and in the second phase of Autonomia more broadly, was the idea that within the production process itself, the fact of it being immaterial or artistic was an inherent contradiction that was going to overcome capitalism. Creativity wasn't measurable, it couldn't be disciplined, it couldn't be commanded, that's what we always said. But it's not true.

If you look around you see that it's measured, disciplined, and commanded extremely well. When you go deeper into the relation between technology and scientific innovation, you find that it's mapped out exquisitely by management – far more so than the movements of factory labor were mapped out by time-and-motion studies. It turns out that our question wasn't well framed. The question should have been: Why and how do certain kinds of creative practice deliberately set out to undo the roles to which one is assigned in society? In other words, why do people subvert? For sure, that sends you back with a smaller number of people, it sweeps away the illusion that a gigantic revolution is about to occur. But it does have the advantage of bringing back the reality of what's happening, which is that in a world that's incredibly disciplined and incredibly commanded, there are still a lot of people who are finding ways to create other forms of life.

That does direct you away from the concentrated capitalist processes, which were fetishized as the new vanguard, and back to everyday life – which is so diffuse that you can't even capture in an analytic approach, including any kind of social science writing, even the Marxist kind. You can really only capture it by a kind of writing so singular that it actually becomes another one of the arts that's involved in the process of subversion and creating another reality.

SS: Do you think there is something interesting in – let's say that moment you were referring to – where it seemed like cognitive capitalism was cool because…? The way I think of it is when my parents first got a computer. They didn't know how it worked, but I did. So I had a larger degree of freedom and autonomy, because I could work with it, and they couldn't.

BH: Yes, this is what stimulated that whole belief.

SS: Then they learned to use it. So it was no surprise that discipline returned. Maybe you can say that even without a time-and-motion study, but that doesn't mean you can't pay someone a set rate, which is its own discipline. Even if you can't measure the value creation, you can still discipline it.

BH: You can measure it, too. You can make the pay contingent on the production. You can set up piecework routines – click, click, click – it's all been

done. The grand illusion that computer-assisted production of whatever kind was liberating only held true for five years, from 1995 through 1999. And then with the market crash in 2000, the new order came down. This stuff has to pay, it has to be made to work. That's when the whole society started to get reorganised. Audit culture in Britain had started earlier than that, but the restructuring of public services and the beginning of the so-called creative economy, all that started in a rush around 2000. In America maybe it was a little more gradual because the wage cushions and public services were less widespread. But it was also very intense in the US, especially after the crash when Apple and Amazon boomed, and Facebook and Twitter started to kick in. Unfortunately, people loved it because the consumer credit money was still around, and there was the lingering or malingering promise of a big payoff. Now we have a situation where all of this economic stuff is taken much more seriously because automation has reached deeply into middle class jobs. And it turned out that many of the so-called immaterial-labor jobs were actually laying the groundwork for the new automation that's wiping out the middle classes right before our eyes.

Outsourcing is now complete. There's a wire everywhere, there's bandwidth everywhere. Life takes place in a global market and English has become a perfectly global language. Work can be done everywhere. White-collar jobs that were the province of highly educated creative workers and that Clinton and Blair said would always represent a competitive advantage for the Anglo-Saxon countries are now just generic tasks for generic labor. The capitalist process is fully present in all the fields that have to do with language and visual imagination. And AI is about to push people massively out of the picture; it's doing so already.

SS: The line that Maurizio Lazzarato has in *The Making of Indebted Man* that the creative economy has "all been absorbed by the debt economy" – there's something to that argument even if it does oversimplify things a bit.

BH: Well, not in my view. It's a good book. It's full of rage. There's a notion now that the first neoliberal period, if we can say from the 80s to 2008, ran on privatized Keynesianism. In other words demand was propped up by debt. That's the whole period of the development of the new forms of post-industrial work under private control and private discipline, where the function of effective demand was not only maintained by the state but also by the private sector, which loaned people money to buy the products and above all, the production equipment, computers and cameras and things like that. This financialized debt-money that was used to prop up production had its own contradiction: it sustained the feelings of freedom that the welfare state had created by similar means, inklings of autonomy that were hugely problematic for capitalist

society as a whole, because they interrupted labor discipline. While all this was incubating in the new neoliberal economy, demand was sustained through loans and through transforming things into assets, like your house became an asset, maybe even your attention could become an asset. You were able to withdraw money from the system on the basis of that. Everything was connected to human capital, so the banks could justify loans for education and things like that. Money rained.

Today the new belief among the entrepreneurial class, and therefore among the governing classes, is that it's now a world economy, and wages are going to gradually equalize around the world. For Western lifestyles that represents a major change, first of all because it breaks with the nostalgia for a kind of prosperity that people had under the Keynesian system, which involved more or less closed borders. Even more realistically it breaks with the really existing simulacrum of prosperity that was sustained during the neoliberal period by privatized Keynesianism, as a cover for the dismantling of borders and the total capitalization of the world. Now the corporate state has exited the privatized Keynesian arrangement. The effective demand is going to come from Asia. It's going to come from elites around the world. The demand for luxury goods, from the top 10-15% of consumers, is a big deal for the cultural sector, a very different demand than that of the debt-financed welfare state. That changes the map on which the questions can be asked. Maurizio has the tremendous merit of recognizing that. He's not going with yesterday's mythologies. He says we have to change our tune. I think that's great. We all sustained a kind of willful fairy tale about immaterial labor. Only the person who invented the word could break the spell.

SS: Let me see if I can approach it in a different way: I think there are moments where what have been known as autonomous zones, and temporary autonomous zones, are created by certain structural, economic gaps. Right now in Italy there's a bunch of theatre occupations caused by how the crisis meant that there's no money to redevelop these theatres. People are taking them over, and nothing happens because there's no use for them at the moment – no use in an economic sense.

BH: In a capitalist sense, yes, there's no productivity. It doesn't mean there's no use!

SS: Or what happened in the Lower East Side of New York in the 70s, when it was abandoned because there was no capitalist use for it. In some ways it's similar to moments of apparent autonomy in cognitive capitalism, that gap where the capitalist rationality had not yet been found to effectively discipline or control or make it productive. These gaps were temporary.

BH: The 60s, like the 2000s, marked the crest of a great economic wave that had been decades in the making. Those waves crash, and then the picture changes. A truly abandoned place is different than the crest of a wave. Now we're looking more at the abandoned places. We are also looking more at a situation where you have to question the very basis of society. The Marxist idea that bourgeois technology is great and we're going to take it over at the leading edge and transform it has proven historically false. I don't believe that idea. I also don't believe in progress. Those are the things that separate me from classical Marxism. And I think that Autonomia retained a belief in both those things.

SS: Yes, there's still a lingering narrative of historical progression. Look to the most advanced sector of capitalist development, and there we will find the most advanced struggle. With this assumption that there's this kind of historical teleology.

BH: Yes, that's fundamentally false. Here's the thing that always used to get me when I would go from France back to the United States for a couple of weeks: I'd look around and see that everybody worked for a corporation, or maybe a university that was increasingly like a corporation. Despite the "be all you can be" jingle, there were only a tiny amount of actual freelance workers. Everything was controlled to the max, also in the universities and in all the government offices. They had perfect routines of control. Nobody was dropping out. "Be all you can be" was actually the slogan of the US army in those days.

This expansive economy, the leading edges of it, were the leading edges of the control society. That's what you could see in the US, where there was no remaining cultural welfare state. It was so complete that I couldn't really talk to people. When I talked about any other aspiration, such as this quixotic thing called collective autonomy, they just laughed and said, 'You're way out of date, man. You haven't been following what's happening here.' But now the date has changed again. Since 2008, the coercive side of the social deal is abundantly clear to people who either can't bear to participate in it or who are forced out of it by outsourcing and automation. That's the whole drive of the system. There are a lot of people who now want to subvert the system and oppose it. That's good. But there's still a real question about how to reach the pilots of this thing. The drivers of the control society. The city racers.

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SS: When I teach business ethics, and – let's say I've got 100 students – I'll ask them, 'How many of you think it's possible to be ethical in capitalism?' One

hand goes up. That means you have 99 students who pretty much know that they can't be ethical within the constraints of the business world today, but they're going to do it anyway. This is what I think I've been frustrated by – that it's very easy for me to fall back into a critique of how empty and pointless business ethics is. Most of it is pretty window-dressing at best. But I don't care if I fall back on that idea that there will be other forms of social movements or political change that are possible. Most business students don't have this framework to work with. For them ethics is the closest to being an alternative framework.

BH: That's where collectives actually have a strong force, because a collective can build infrastructure, and it can build its own decision-making process. With those two things you gain autonomy. The decision-making process alone is not enough. It's like having a car with nowhere to drive. Doesn't work. If you build infrastructure at the same time that you build autonomy, then you start to have a standpoint from which you can actually organize production differently.

People are doing that out of frustration with the system. That's a really strong thing. There's an interesting choice that's made by some artist collectives to do that. I'm thinking of a collective which is more intellectuals than artists, namely Traficantes de Sueños in Madrid. "Dream Dealers," I guess you would call them. What they have accomplished is fantastic. They even have an economy for it. They're running courses under the rubric of 'common notions', where 30 people sign up. There'll be five sessions, everybody pays €35 or something like that.

These courses, which are incredibly interesting, are able to support some employment in the group. The group is able to produce all this stuff, distribute it for money and also for free at the same time. They do it with all their books, they have their speaking circuits, they're able to study all the latest things that are happening in society so they can intervene as the changes are happening. They have a network all over Spain. There are affiliated groups around Spain. They're just pushing as hard as you can push in the midst of this crisis.

SS: I've met two of them very briefly. From what I saw of the website, it looks quite impressive, but I should go visit.

BH: It would be worth it. The problem, of course, is that everything happens in Spanish. Some of it is so good that it's amazing. Immediately after the crash in 2009, two members of the collective produced a book called *End of Cycle. Fin de ciclo*, it's as thick as your arm, and for good reason, because it covers the whole thing. It's the summation of more punctual work that was done throughout all those years. They put it all together, and they analyzed the

whole picture so that people could understand the precise determinants of the crisis, as it was happening.

And then they kept following with other things. They made a shorter version of that analysis for people who can't go through such a big book. And now they're really talking about destituent power – which means, 'How would we really kick the bastards out and take over the state?' It's very impressive. I wrote a short text about it which is called "The Weakest Link". It's written under the name of Paul Cardan, Castoriadis's pseudonym. Check out that little text, because it will give you the map of what I saw when I was there. I was very impressed. There you really have a full example of a 20-year effort that has gained a very broad capacity to act.

SS: That's sounds like a relational model in terms… I have lots of friends who have finished PhDs and can't find a job and want to do something where they feel that they're using what they've been working on for years, but there isn't a space or economy for it.

BH: Yes, exactly. It's a bookstore, it's a printing press, now they have these courses that they're running. And that gives them an economy. It's not an economy where they're doing something abhorrent, something unethical. In all the steps they're doing what they want to do. Maybe they get a bit of cultural money from the government, I don't know. Anyway, that's an organizational form, a solid example. Are there artist groups doing that? Well, there are a bunch of groups in the States that were formed in the 70s, but that was the end of a different cycle...

SS: There's Not an Alternative, which is not the same, but takes something like the co-working model and makes it into a combined political project. I just got an email from someone from the Islington Hub, which is one of these co-working spaces. They're starting to work on what it would mean to have a freelancers' union. It's interesting that the hub itself is becoming a space of potential labor organizing.

BH: That's a good thing. Take Mess Hall in Chicago, what was it about? There was landlord who was really a landlord, but who was also a hippie. He recognized people's intentions and gave the place for a dollar a year, for ten years until 2013. The only requirement was participating somehow in an arts festival there once a year. As I kinda slowly returned to the US, I became part of it just by participating, producing, accompanying it without particular ownership. Mess Hall always opened its doors, and it always had a free box... At the end there were these incredible free stores with the collaboration of some sisters from a Catholic charity. There were stacks of stuff to give away that they'd collected for

an entire month. People were going through the stuff like crazy and taking all these clothes – families, immigrants, hipsters, bums, myself, whomever. It was one of the most joyous things I've ever seen. A real free store. Pandemonium!

Mess Hall is an example. It really worked. At the start it was more defined as art, but because of the way it was defined as art, it became less and less art. It became more and more a variety of things that had to do with the relationship to the area, with projects that people were carrying on – which could be about neighborhood politics, which could be about research, which could be about social justice more broadly, and which could also be about forms of art that partook of all those things. It was all sustained voluntarily by a central network of key holders that itself kept changing over time. In that way it never became a clique. People would still come randomly to the events. Some people would come because they were associated with the place, but then other people would come according to the content. You could have very different people in there for very different events.

The thing that the space didn't have was an economy, because the whole idea was it's free, we're going to build on this generosity. So there was a ten-point program of demands. 'We demand cultural spaces run by the people who use them' – that was the first one. There were nine others on a simple blue handbill we still have up in the kitchen. There was a lot about the place you could critique if you wanted, but that's what people were able to do coming out of art.

SS: I once asked Alan Moore, when you have this sort of collective, what's the value of continuing to call the output art? And one of the things he said was because that gives you a kind of space where you can do things where there isn't necessarily a criteria of success that's determined in advance. Art gets you the space where you aren't necessarily bound by the same criteria of success.

BH: I agree. It's true. And that can cover all sorts of forms of activism and social movement-type work. What happens most of the time when you try to fight the power, you lose. If you were trying to judge it on the basis of success, you'd be disqualified pretty quickly.

SS: It's interesting that because the space's original definition was more artistic, it actually opened up to doing things which were less and less artistic. Or less specifically artistic.

BH: Yes, because the original artistic definition was actually one of those threshold ones, where you're standing on the threshold looking outside with your back to the familiar world of art, and eventually Mess Hall became the outside house that could take you in for different possibilities. I was able to collaborate there on a seminar called "Three Crises," which maybe a little in the spirit of

Traficantes tried to analyze the 2008 crisis while its effects were still unfolding. It's the most significant thing I've ever done. It was deeply collaborative, the ideal productive seminar situation, and it coincided with Occupy, so political meetings took place there and people had a real desire to focus on the issues in a way that a more quiescent period wouldn't have allowed.

So that's a figure of an artistic platform that starts out of an artistic aim; it's a more well-known model. The Traficantes model is less well known to me, because I see less examples of it. With *Multitudes*, at the start it was like Traficantes and even included more or less all those people, and then it became more professionalized in a way, which is really what led to its demise. It was fucked by professionalization, by academicization. That's interesting in comparison: *Multitudes* and Traficantes. Traficantes wins.

SS: Going back to forms of collectivism as thresholds, or relay points, that comes back to other spaces… maybe I'm worrying too much about trying to understand and define collectives themselves, rather than understanding what they pass through or what they connect.

BH: That's the thing. The dead-end or the thing that's been done so much that there's no use to do it anymore is to define what a collective is, in and of itself. It's better to define what a collective isn't. Or just ask the way the collective is headed, who they're coming into contact with, how they dissolve in the end, or grow so far beyond themselves that they become something else. If they do it, that's real collectivism and it's not a collective anymore. Maybe a collective is the neoliberal form of collectivism. It's branded, it's mobile, it's networked, it's self-managed, it's profitable.

SS: I wouldn't say that sociologists or social scientists should do this... I'm very hesitant about saying social scientists should just do anything in relation to social movement studying, because most of what they do is crap, but the thing that gets done so little is actually how movements end, how projects end, because there's so much writing about the initial stage. In the next year or two there will be far too many books about the first month of Occupy. But the moment of how things disperse and then become something else, no one talks about that, which is really weird, because that's actually the harder part. One person who does this is Linus Owens, who wrote a really interesting book about squatting in the mid-80s in Amsterdam. And he writes about what happened after the heroic period.

BH: Yes, although some of the Adilkno group actually did that, too, in *Cracking the Movement*. There's a whole lot of Adilkno archive you can check out, because they were finishing up in the early 90s, so they put it online. It's infrastructure.

There would be something really interesting to do about the end of the anti-globalisation movement, because people are so focused on the beginnings. People are not able to realise the degree to which the movement of movements changed the world by reinventing a whole leftist culture and pattern of circulation and conduits of the exchange of ideas and correspondence. What we've talked about infrastructure – and the creation of alternative global cultural infrastructure by the so-called anti-globalization movement – is really phenomenal. What an address book.

All this is an open door for all kinds of people who are younger or who have never been involved. The idea that this didn't produce anything or that we didn't win is absurd. A door was opened. Some people think that the movements of 2011 are fundamentally different, because they were bigger and because they happened in more countries. But they're not fundamentally different in the way that they unfolded and in the forms that they used, nor in the kinds of desires that they mobilized and the limitations that they faced. For better and worse, all those things are really similar.

SS: When they kicked off I found myself getting into the same debates around mobilization and tactics. It was 2003 again, like a rip in time.

BH: I know, it's a bit dismaying even, but to see people doing it in the thousands rather than the hundreds wasn't dismaying.

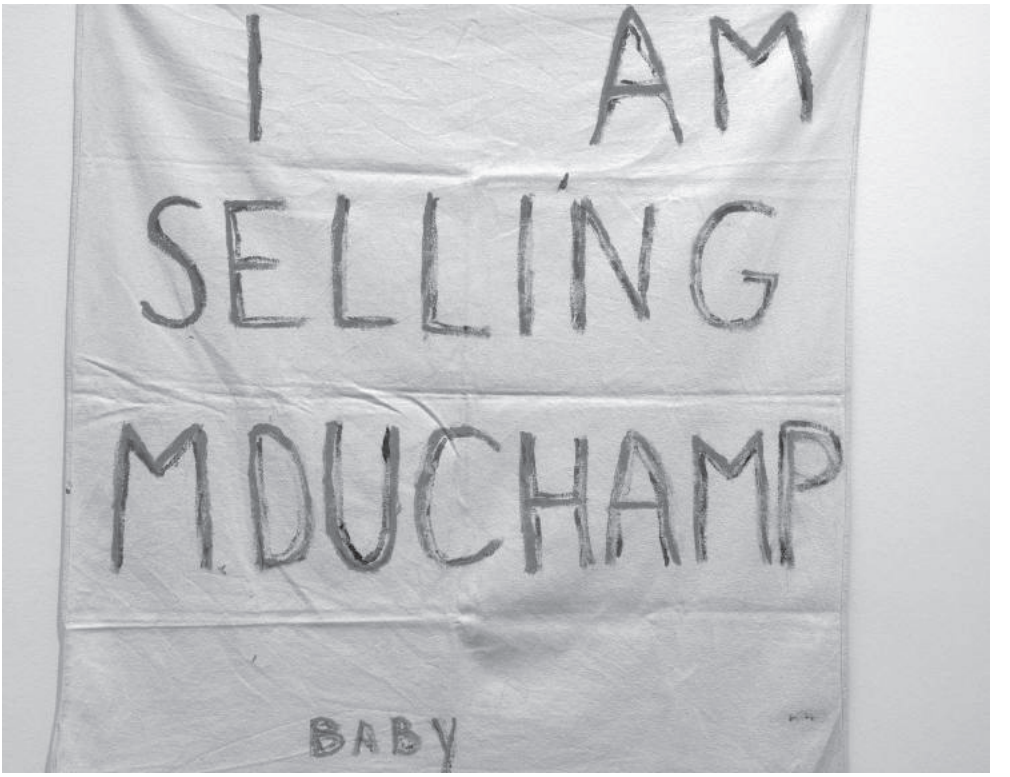
SS: It's somewhat discouraging having this debate again, but it's so much better to be having it with so many more people involved.

BH: There's a kind of continuing. That's the old mole theory. Well grubbed, old mole. You know that Marxist phrase.

SS: Yes, which was why Sergio Bologna talked about the tribe of moles.

BH: *Imaginal Machines,* that was already on this kind of subject, wasn't it?

SS: I was thinking about similar things. I guess one ends up thinking about similar things, even if you're not meaning to. Where I'm trying to go with this project at the moment is thinking of looking at particular forms of investment people have towards their work, and then say 'let's go back to other forms of collectivism' rather than assuming that all collectives are inherently entrepreneurial, or that work is ego-centered. A certain kind of history there may provide a different backdrop.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Collective Creativity, Between Choice and Necessity
Conversation with WHW

The curatorial collective What, How & for Whom has done more than anyone else in bringing together an in-depth engagement with the nature of collectivity in art. This engagement is articulated in their writings and exhibitions and imprinted in their practices and organization. Further, these explorations of collectivity are carefully historicized in the socialist and communist contexts of WHW's origin. In 2013 while I was organizing an in-depth seminar on art collectives with Alan Moore, WHW was, serendipitously, preparing their first UK exhibition at Calvert 22 in London. Delighted at this happy coincidence, we arranged a conversation with them as part of the seminar.

SS: What was interesting about the discussion yesterday is how we tried how to nail what collectivism is, and largely failed, though I'd like to think in a productive way. I don't necessarily want to get back into that, but maybe it would be interesting if you could start with what collective practice means to you? How have you actually deployed it in your own work? You've been working together for 15 years?

WHW: Yes, forever… Since 1999.

SS: I'm interested in collective projects that hold together for a long time.

WHW: Yes. It was one of the focuses of our *Collective Creativity* exhibition in 2005. It was one of the criteria how we chose what collectives to involve, which for us was about the knowledge created when you persist, that you survive something. To answer this question we would have to go back to fifteen years ago. The social and political context that we started from was a big part of our decision of working together and working in a collective. We were very shaped by the circumstances that we were working in and growing up with. It was after the Croatian war in the mid-90s in this intense atmosphere of nationalism and strong anti-communist and antisocialist feeling which was present in all levels of the public sphere… but it was connected to the cultural field.

It was reflected in what was happening within the cultural field where few artists who we were in touch were reacting to what was happening. But mostly there was a sense of isolation on all possible levels. It was a time of broken links in all directions. It was also happening in terms of international communication where suddenly Croatia, cut off from the rest of what used to be Yugoslavia, felt very far away and very provincial, really sinking in into its own kind of pit being dug every day by the nationalist right wing in power.

When we started working together we felt that an attempt to do a cultural project… no matter how… it sounds pretentious, but it was an attempt to make it as an intervention. Both an intervention in what the cultural practice is but also an intervention in the political field that we were surrounded with. The element of collectivism was important in several ways. Very practically, we felt that this effort to intervene was something which none of us could do alone. We really wanted to share this strength and being a front which would then have more voice, be louder, have more power.

The first project we did was dedicated to the 150th anniversary of *The Communist Manifesto*. This is how it started but the actual exhibition happened on the 152nd anniversary because it took us two years to do it. This was a really important for us, in this moment when of anti-Communist sentiment, to claim a right, both coming out of our political standpoint but also from a generational standpoint. This is something we wanted to discuss.

And it was not our idea, but a set of circumstances. The book was republished on the 150th anniversary, by the publishing house Arkzin, which was intellectually the strongest oppositional voices in this isolated monolithic right wing nationalistic ice that we lived for ten years. They republished the book with a preface by Slavoj Žižek and they invited us to think of doing an exhibition around that. And we thought this is something we need to do, and collectively, we thought let's do as much as possible to raise our voice as much as possible to put *The Communist Manifesto* on the agenda, to put socialist history on the agenda.

It was important to communicate from this collective position because during this process of so called transition in the 1990s collectivism was something connected to the socialist past, but with negative connotations, like everything that had to do with socialism, and we wanted to affirm it as legacy for the present and for the future, against the hegemonic idea of individualism in all possible meanings… we felt that this an important political position to communicate: to think about collectives and communicate from a collective position. This was the beginning of our work together. The communication among us made sense and there was enjoyment in working together. The group became more than just four of us, so there was also surplus being produced. And we were very effective.

Not successful in market terms but in terms of what we were managing to do and the projects that we managed to organize together. We were efficient and in a way successful. This Communist Manifesto exhibition was the lead story in prime news coverage. This was unimaginable in Zagreb. We managed to make a show with fifty artists. We invited people from all former republics of Yugoslavia as artists, and from other places. It was the first time after ten years that you had Serbian artists showing in Zagreb. We invited cultural practitioners to talk about their practices. It was absolutely important. This kind of success.

We recently organised a round table. A question from the audience was about New Tendencies – and they asked "how did you start working together? How did you start working internationally?" BAD.co, a performance collective, had an amazing answer. They said 'working together was both a personal choice and a necessity.' When we started we were in our mid and late 20s. For us it was a necessity because the landscape of cultural institutions in Croatia was highly problematic and linked into a nationalist agenda. We had to self-organize if we wanted to address things in a real social way. It has to do with the politicality or social dimension of our work.

In the Kassel exhibition this choice and the endurance of collectives were crucial questions. Why continue? When we did the Kassel exhibition we stressed that the collective way of working is not a privileged artistic or political expression. Especially for collectives in the 60s and 70s - they dismantled in a more organic way.

Our idea was not that we wanted to be curators. We did not really care about curating. The question was how can we practise culture in a meaningful way – and then along the way we became curators. Nowadays, that's really what we do. We put exhibitions together and we try to contextualise them so they make sense. Our curation is as a collective. That was our impetus in the late 1990s when we started to work, and it sustained us until Istanbul Biennale, which was the biggest project we ever did. It took place in 2009, four years after Collective Creativity, which we did in a moment when we felt enchanted

with our collective practices and wanted to see how other groups and collectives did it. What kept them together? What was this element of endurance? How did they make political interventions? It was a fantastic chance to make it in a proper German museum. This we never thought would happen. Istanbul Biennale was the continuation of our agenda. Istanbul Biennale was based on Bertolt Brecht. The title was "What Keeps Mankind Alive," which was from *Threepenny Opera*.

We took Brecht's method of how to put a show together, but also metaphorically. This was a huge effort, a big exhibition with an institution by its nature more complicated than usual. Our effort with Istanbul was again thought of as an intervention in social reality. We were not obsessed with the city… blah blah blah, as beautiful city, as an East West meeting point, with Bosporus … none of this but more an intellectual intervention in this legacy of Brecht as a cultural icon appropriated by the left in Turkey. We did our best with this exhibition, and we were shouting from the roof…

SEMINAR PARTICIPANT: Shouting from the chairs, whatever was needed.

WHW: After that there was an exhaustion. There was also doubt about our practice. It was also a moment when the financial crisis started. There was a lot of imagining the future in artistic works. This exhibition was the end of an era for our curatorial thoughts. After that it was coming to terms with what makes sense. How did we do it? Because of the crisis, in Croatia somehow nationalism was showing its face again. Things were getting better for a few years in the mid 2000s, then suddenly this was no longer the case. Hundreds of thousands of people waited for Croatian generals when they were acquitted in Hague… A big disappointment for us, obviously not for many others.

SS: But I think the radicalisation you mentioned is not specific to Croatia, is it?

WHW: That's true. Croatia, or Balkans, is no longer an exception. But of course its context is more visible for us.

AWM: Could I ask about the Fridericianum exhibition? I really don't know very much, except that it's branded maybe with the name of René Block who was an art dealer. He was or is closely identified with Fluxus. I was curious how that relationship came about.

WHW: René Block was working a lot in the Balkans in Turkey. In the early 2000s the Balkans became kind of fashionable. Harald Szeemann did an exhibition on the Balkans which was horribly titled "Blood & Honey." Rene did "In the Gorges of the Balkans" in Fridericianum. He was very generous in his

relationship with people and in setting up structures. One of the things that he did for the Balkan project was not only come and take artists and then do the exhibition in Fridericianum but also to organise many different kinds of exchanges and work with the local initiatives throughout different countries. One of those initiatives was with us. We got a grant from René Block's Balkans project to do a project with artists from Kosovo. There were a couple of things that we did with him. As a result of this long-term collaboration, he invited us to do an exhibition in Fridericianum.

But why is he artistic director of our exhibition? We were at that time really not vain, so we didn't care that this name is up. Also because that was the politics of the house. We really didn't care. We could do what we wanted. We did it and we felt, "It's our project." Maybe we should have been more careful because when you Google Collective Creativity it really comes up René Block.

SEMINAR PARTICIPANT: I was curious because I knew René ages ago and organised a show with him called Voice in California. At that time the Fluxus people were all alive, and they had a strong political identification. In the subsequent history of Fluxus it has really has been washed out.

SS: Yes, it's washed out and contested and the people who were not political lived longer. I was curious if René was only on this kind of level of a manager.

WHW: No. We included work which we normally would not think about because he suggested it. René visited Zagreb quite frequently. That was the turning point. He saw a long-term project we organized in 2003 and 2004 called "Collective Action" in the Gallery Nova. We ran a non-commercial gallery space in Zagreb, Gallery Nova, so we started a programme there. Lots of things happened, like exhibitions, lectures, etc. His proposal was to give it a momentum in the form of a grand exhibition and in that sense René showed lots of trust and generosity. Although we worked internationally since the very beginning it was for the first time that we dealt with a space of such high symbolic value. We tried to contest it, of course.

One of the things which might be interesting in terms of discussion about collectives and communication was the fact where an exhibition was happening because… there is in the nature of the collective usually these kind of two strong poles, so either something which is this complete vitriol against any kind of institutions, which could be the Moscow group Collective Action. But the other strong tendency is to initiate communication, to involve people in a dialogue.

It was hard for us to translate many collective practices in the context of Kassel, those that dealt with public spaces, for example, also to have connection with the institution. It made it complicated in some terms. Some of the

collectives we invited had a very different way of working. Then we had a lot of discussions about the question, for whom? Let's say that the book has its life, and it was part of the answer. We decided maybe we can allow ourselves to say that for whom is also partly for us, for us not being WHW but for us being all the collectives that we are bringing together.

Quite a bit of the budget and effort was made to really bring people in. The joke afterwards is that the most important thing that came out of it was Russian/Argentinian friendship. We had a lot of these situations bringing people in. Fridericianum was really generous on those terms. They understood that inviting a collective is nor sending one person from Argentina but trying to bring at least two, three, four people from each collective. And not bringing them for two days, but arranging for a week's stay. Organizing meals every day for everyone, so there will be a gathering space. This kind of non-hierarchical whatever kind of sitting together. It happened a lot during these days. I don't know how much of this energy was visible in the exhibition for a visitor later but for us this was really important. It's 100 people getting together, opening some doors. It's a lot of money for having people but people spend it in worse ways than making an exhibition. Just being together and to see what will come out of it. The public programme was maybe one day. Everything else was an internal process.

This exhibition was definitely the moment of enchantment with working collectively. After Istanbul we lost the object of our engagement in Croatia. At least it's changed with... this anti-nationalist, this anti-capitalist, fervour: let's bring back a socialist past, let's develop links between generations because history doesn't start with independent Croatian states. All of these regional tasks that sustained our practice for years were no longer crucial. There is a new generation of people starting from a similar position but doing a different kind of research, even more based on documents, less on slogans, or activism.

The landscape in which we operated, both locally and internationally, changed. For the moment collective practices here, is still the best way to do it. Still none of us are affiliated with an institution internally and permanently. We can allow ourselves these kind of excursions with Russian oligarchs – state bank kind of place now – which doesn't colour us forever. We also go out and the next thing could be something completely else. We are in a way completely freelance... precarious freelancers in the worst possible way but being collective, we take care of each other. If someone gets sick tomorrow the collective will take care of you in a way... as if we have the best social contract from the most developed welfare state. It's a fantastic thing. We can actually do what we are doing by staying together. Now the four of us are still curators. Only curators, yes. Which is actually disappointing, but since the beginning we were working with a designer who does all our books.

SS: Dejan Kršić?

WHW: Dejan, yes. He's still a member of our collective and now there are a few younger people assisting us. For the first time we have other people working with us. It started a couple of years ago when there was an assistant. Before that we were literally dividing everything among us, including paying the bills and reserving the plane tickets. For the few past years we have somebody helping and it's a different dynamic that you have to ask someone. A whole new dynamic actually, having somebody who is a young curator working with us. We will see how that develops in the future.

One thing which is important to say is that what we are doing is not an isolated example in Zagreb. In the late 90s, a different kind of independent institutions developed in different fields of culture… also contemporary dance, and urbanism. People more interested in digital media started organizing themselves, and the know-how we had was somehow connected to the broader political milieu. This was being built as a part of this broader attempt to develop civil society. All of this is a huge chapter to talk about, how successful or unsuccessful this was, and where the notion of civil society led us in the end.

In Zagreb something really specific happened, both because this was discussed a lot but also it's sometimes a good thing that you are in a rather small city where somehow these networks have allowed the possibility of being influential, of having a voice that is heard, so that you got organised together. We worked a lot in advocacy for cultural policies. There is a need for public money, public spaces, that it's the duty of the state to support critical culture, collective organizing, and self-organizing.

There are different types of foundations and special councils within the Ministry of Culture and the city of Zagreb's cultural department, which were helping not just our work but also the work of all of these different extra institutional initiatives. We had strong desire to do a lot of regional, more long-term collaboration with similar initiatives. Especially within ex-Yugoslavia there is some hesitation on any kind of institutional communication or collaboration. You mentioned Kuda. Kuda is one of these also collectives. They have organisations from Novi Sad, from Serbia, which means we worked a lot. There are many different examples of that. There was also this moment that there was this generation which decided together they also want to both invest and maintain and keep and support this collective heritage from socialist times. This element of self-organising being an important part of that. It's definitely kind of a wider scene that we are part of.

SEMINAR PARTICIPANT: Would you say that's changed now in terms of how younger artists develop?

WHW: It is changed to a certain extent. This new generation of scholars, philosophers, activists working in a different way. This experience of an NGOization of culture and the younger generation also reaping possible models because we also see lots of models of collective work not being organised as an NGO, as an organisation, working informally or more consciously. But it's interesting you ask about artists. The self-organisation of the artists didn't follow that much. It started the last few years maybe. There are more activist groups.

It is interesting that somehow the artists feel less influential. There was an occupation of University of the Humanities a few years ago when they started introducing fees. They were amazing. They really made it as a collective thing with no spokesman. The media were going crazy looking for a leader. Many initiatives came out of this which are totally activist. Maybe this is our vain hope, that this is an approach is happening, with this type of thinking, which was happening more in the late 90s in the cultural field but is really happening now in more activist ways. They are working with the workers, trying to do research on that level, helping out in all possible layers when a whole factory goes down and everybody loses their job.

Our feeling is that this is hopeful, that there is something between contemporary art production and collective practices. We would like to open our gallery as much as possible but they don't need it. They don't need this kind of visibility. My impression is they really use it as an office. People come in the evening and meet behind the closed door. But that's fine. It's sharing the resource, both for performance-based seminars and for internal things.

Contemporary art is not necessarily on the agenda. Activism is not on the agenda of contemporary art either. In Croatia, when we look at artists, it's not like there's a lot of artists that are politically or socially active.

SS: A few years ago I published with the English version of the *Occupation Cookbook* handbook that came out of the university occupations. Dejan designed it. What I found amazing about that handbook was the focus on how to undercut individual spokespeople. The constant rotation of who was representing the space to avoid fixation about who's the star, or about individual personalities.

WHW: This came out of the Occupy movement. We have a little bit of voice in the background and we have some ideas about organisation of political struggle. We are not clear about this, but what the university occupation in Zagreb managed to do was to resist this making a leader and spectacularization in the media of one person, which was a fantastic achievement.

SEMINAR PARTICIPANT: Do you think that here in England you are experiencing this new wave of collective work being also connected to social agenda? What is your take on this?

SS: Yes, I think there's some connection but I wouldn't say it's widespread or as strong. There's moments where practices emerged, particularly around the anti-cuts movement, around occupy, but there seems to be an almost deep-seated spontaneous individualism that re-emerges again after that. You'll have a temporary collective project but then things revert back to we're all looking for ourselves.

WHW: For us it's part of the disenchantment with collectivism. When we did the Kassel exhibition, we didn't necessarily assign intrinsic political values to collaboration, but we were definitely enthusiastic about it. Not in every case but we do believe that four women working together coming from Zagreb and sustaining the practice of a collective, it does bring with itself certain political content. How do you deal with institutions? How do institutions manage to deal with us? What kind of space do we provide for other voices? There is intrinsic politicality in our desire to sustain collective practice. There is some challenge in this also.

SS: What you were saying before reminds me of the introduction to *Collectivism After Modernism,* particularly with its distinction between collectivism in relation to nations versus kind of new economy collectivism – lighter and more ephemeral. Yours is an approach to collective practice that is neither nationalistic, nor sort of new economy-ish, but is something distinct.

WHW: We take the role that suits the moment. These three questions – What, How and For Whom – which is the name of our collective, they are the basis in economy. Every organisation answers these three questions and that's how we took the title in relation to *The Communist Manifesto* exhibition. But these questions are something that we try to address with every project. Now with What, How and For Whom exhibition here at Calvert 22, there is openness in audiences but it's also very much about us and the people involved.

We are very often perceived as the institution, from outside especially, and by young generation of artists. At first, this surprised us. We are not an institution. People are now reluctant to engage with collective practices that involve economic support because it takes too much energy, which might be the reason that the gatherings are temporary. All the activist groups that we mentioned, they receive support. Rosa Luxemburg-Stiftung is operating as a foundation for culture and activism. They are supporting all these people where they're really trying to make projects with the workers on a theoretical level or are very

practical on the ground. We are doing a long-term project on contemporary fascism, titled "Beginning as well as we can, how do we talk about fascism?" It's financed by the European Union and European Cultural Federation. If we would start something now, hopefully we'd choose not to build an institution in which we are really overwhelmed with bureaucracy. It's a nightmare.

SS: A self-sustaining nightmare?

WHW: As we described, it's always as soon as one funder would pull out, there would be another one. Now our reputation is really much more in the art world, so money comes from there. When we did the Istanbul Biennale, or any other international project, we pool much resources to do projects in Zagreb. Right now we are doing this bi-annual kind of festival devoted to Arab world, called Meeting Points and happening in several cities. This project has been ongoing for about ten years, and it tries to open up a space for communication within the art world countries which, because of political differences, are mutually isolated in terms of artistic production and exchange.

When we got the invitation in 2013, we thought it was really not a time to represent anything connected to the Arab world, that we should instead try to see in which way everything that was happening there is and should be part of international dialogue, and questioning different ways in which their struggles and their doubts concern all of us. We are doing it as an exhibition which is changing in several cities and the project just opened last week in Zagreb. That's also one of the ways how we try to connect our other engagements to always somehow get a chance to discuss it and rethink it in our local context with the local audience. The state is still funding culture. It's not great, it's very precarious. It's always that you get it in April for the running year. By April you're supposed to figure out how to make a program, but it's there. It's not like in Serbia where they cut it completely or some other places where it's almost non-existent. Our reputation in the art world, and how we use international projects, helps to sustain projects at home.

SS: Dimitri Vilensky in one text alludes to the workers' clubs as a fountainhead of collective practice eighty years ago. To what extent do you look back to something similar?

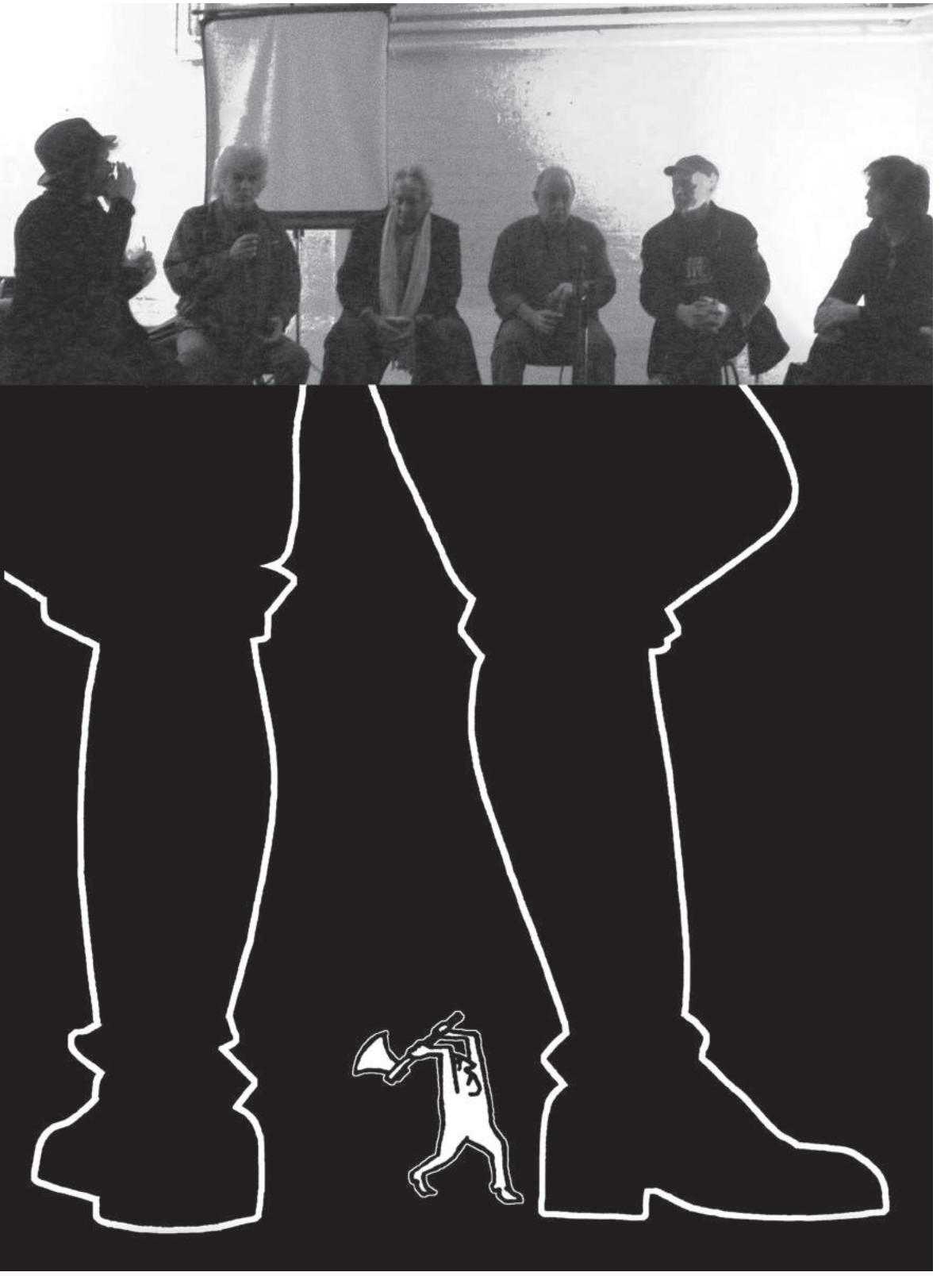
WHW: We do. This similar is kind of Russian avant-garde and there is really a tradition of also the artists we work with, like Mladen Stilinović which is from whom we borrowed the title of this exhibition from: *Dear Art*. You will see the words at the very end. The legacy of Russian avant-garde was alive throughout Yugoslavia. In our practice, our books, our designer very much cherished the language of Russian avant-garde.

For us also this element of looking back, reading again, making links, and being in dialogue is important, especially since in the 90s all of our heritage was taken away. This notion of looking back and learning and repeating it. There are examples. We've done a lot of anti-fascist monuments and because they were anti-fascist they were destroyed, or abandoned to disrepair. We've done different projects with these kinds of links. Revisiting and learning is very important for us.

More Information:

Nollert, Angelika and René Block, Eds. (2005) *Kollektive Kreativität/Collective Creativity.* Kassel: Kunsthalle Fridericianum.

What, How & for Whom: http://www.whw.hr



Provo, Autonomy, and Ludic Politics

The legendary Dutch anarchist movement Provo staged political and cultural interventions into the symbolic and everyday spaces of Amsterdam from 1965-1967. The rise and fall of Provo stretches from early Dutch "happenings" staged in 1962 to the "Death of Provo" in 1967. The small group left an unusually large mark on the events of the time due to their skillful analysis of social unrest among Dutch youth. By tying their political program to the rich magical heritage of Amsterdam's bohemian subculture, they created political street theater that captured the pulse of Amsterdam's population.

This conversation was held in London in 2009 to celebrate the release of *Provo: Amsterdam's Anarchist Revolt* by Richard Kempton, the first book-length English-language history and analysis of Provo.

HANS PLOMP (HP): The Provo movement in itself was thousands of people involved but with very few at the front. It was not a hierarchical movement at all. We have one Provo here that we can identify from the book. That is Auke. I was in the crowd mostly at the time, although I kicked one of the smoke bombs which Peter threw from behind me in the crowd. I kicked it forward into the road. I was part of the exhibition where you saw the guy being beaten up, the guy with his bike.[1]

Anyway, that's not my most important contribution to the Provo thing. I am basically a writer and in 1972 we found this village just outside Amsterdam and we occupied it.[2] We squatted it. It was going to be demolished for industrial purposes. And in this village since then, which is almost 40 years now, we have tried to make the ideas of the Provo movement real, however diffuse those ideas were. To my immense pride, I can say that Robert Jasper Grootveld, a few months before he died he came to the village. He sat in front of the church. It's a church with twenty houses which is an alternative community, an alternative theatre. He sat in front of the church and said *zo heb ik dit bedoeld* (That's what I mean). For me that was the biggest compliment, that we made the step from a movement in the streets to a real village where we made the ideas of Provo come true in a creative, ludic way. The term Homo Ludens, the playful man, was invented by a Dutch historian, Johan Huizinga. In the 1930s he predicted that the next phase in the human evolution would be the Homo Ludens: the playful man.[3] The Provo movement was in a way a first attempt. It strikes me, when I see this documentary for the first time, that in the fifty years since then nothing has changed. The girls look the same. The cars look the same. The pollution is the same. The crops look the same. It's like they pursued this cause that Provo was protesting against for fifty years. They didn't follow our ways. They followed the ways of the establishment and we see where the world is now. It's what they had warned about. What do you think Arie?

ARIE TAAL (AT): Yes, you could say that. Is there anybody here who was connected with the Arts Lab and *International Times* in those days?[4] I'm now talking about 1966-1967. Nobody here? Maybe I should tell them what we did. We came from Amsterdam every fortnight with a very old car that had been decorated into some sort of brothel and imported *International Times*, *Oz Magazine* and posters and records that had not yet come out in Holland. We transported people up and down every fortnight. We tried to establish a link between the underground movement in Amsterdam and what was happening here in London. In those days *International Times* was very important in giving a voice to the underground.

This movie for us was old memories but for a lot of you it was just completely new. What happened... Hans said it, Homo Ludens, the playful man, we played around with the authorities in Amsterdam. What came out of it was that the authorities showed how incredibly stupid they were. They still are. As far as that goes, little has changed. All I can say is that there is a movement nowadays, The Yes Men. They are trying in a playful way to change things. That was what Provo was about. I lived for twenty-five years with Jasper Grootveld, the prophet of Provo, in the same house. It was a pleasure most of the time. Sometimes it was also terrible because he was a raging manic depressive. But now that he has died, we miss him very much. What he came up with as the

sum total of all his work was building floating islands. I learned from that. Now I have a floating island based on recycled styrofoam, nylon and plastic. It hasn't sunk a millimetre in twenty years. Maybe it's something... It would be a way to make England larger – floating islands.

NICO VAN APPELDOORN (NVA): They are not in the canals. They are in the ocean. On one side in the North Sea, on the other side, the floating islands. I was one of the Provos, more of the kind that came from the street. Here you had like motley rockers, teddy boys, things like that. Part of the Provo were coming from there. That was one of the unique aspects of Provo, that the street kids mixed with artistic people doing happenings. That mixed with all kinds of artistic stuff with political people. It was a very unique mix in 1965 that happened in Amsterdam: artists, street kids and the politically motivated. That was the main thing that made Provo special.

In 1968 in Paris you saw the same process but that was just three years later. I had never seen this documentary. It's probably the best one there is, but that's only because it's just about the only one there is. Most of this was made fairly late in the Provo period, from the winter of 1966, maybe spring 1967. What was very significant for me in the movie was that you saw Robert Jasper, the magic prophet. He was doing his happenings here indoors. The beautiful thing about these happenings was that he did them outdoors, that he did them every Saturday night. That's how I was recruited by Peter Bronkhorst, one of the early Provos.

I was recruited at the Spui. It's a square in Amsterdam. There's this little statue on the square. The statue was donated by a cigarette company. The statue was a Dutch street kid, a small boy, maybe an image of a boy from the 1930s, placed there in the early 1960s. In 1964, and even earlier, Robert Jasper realized that smoking tobacco is one of the worst habits and very unhealthy. These days there were posters of tobacco companies all over town. What Robert Jasper started with was writing on these posters. He wrote the K is the first letter of the word cancer in Dutch. Here it would be a C. He got arrested for that because you cannot damage the publicity machine. He spent sixty days in jail for that just writing C for cancer on the posters. And there was one other thing I always thought was very imaginative. The police station on the Leidseplein, which is the centre of Amsterdam, on top of the police station there was a big neon light, an advertisement, which said "Chief Whip on everybody's lip." Chief Whip was a cigarette brand. This police station from where all the raids of people that smoked little joints were started. Robert Jasper explained that too. This is weird. We have this one addiction and the police goes out and tries to kill this addiction and arrest all the people – and it was very heavy in those days in Amsterdam – and at the same time on the police station there's this big advertisement.

Every Saturday night at midnight he went to the Spui where the little statue was, the little boy, the enslaved consumer of the future. The boy was going to grow up consuming all these things – cigarettes, television, all these things that you get addicted to. Robert Jasper would walk around the statue, tell his beautiful stories, make his prophecies and make a beautiful act. People would gather around there. At a certain point Provo joined these happenings. Shortly after the police joined them too. The real shit hit the fan when Provo introduced the white bicycle and put a white bicycle there. The police confiscated the white bicycle because it didn't have a lock. It's forbidden to put your bicycle on the street without a lock because then you provoke theft.

But the bicycle was for everybody. Everybody could use the bicycle. That was the idea. From that point on we realized that the police were the disturbing factor in the whole thing. If you wanted to do a nice thing, the police would come and destroy it. A lot of kids saw that. One night I was there and the police were beating up people. Peter Bronkhorst noticed that I knew, being a streetwise kid, how to avoid getting beaten up. When I went walking home he walked behind me and tapped me on the shoulder. He said I think we can use you. We have to print some magazines tomorrow. We had these old stencil machines. We started that way. We have to make a lot of copies of a leaflet tomorrow. So can you come tomorrow? Can you help us out? That's how I started with Provo.

AUKE BOERSMA (AB): I'm Auke Boersma. I'm one of the less long time survivors. A lot of people have passed away in the last years. It's very nice to be able to talk about the movement. It was just only maybe fifteen very angry young kids who were trying to move something, to change something in the world they didn't like. The funny thing is that, those kids, they all were prophets. You saw one of the prophets, Robert Jasper, he passed away last year. I had the honour to make three of the now famous White plans: the White Bicycle Plan. The essence of a plan like the White Bicycle Plan was that it wasn't a real plan. He mentioned it as a pop art plan. They were just plans to change the minds of people, to make them think about things. To make them think about the traffic jams, to make them think about pollution, to think about how to raise kids, how to organize police, what to do with all the empty houses while there were no houses for people. In Richard's book there's a good compilation of the ten plans. It's important to see how prophetic those plans were. There was no plan about addiction, but there was a plan about traffic.

The second plan was the White Chimney Plan. It was a plan to do something with the terrible pollution of the industry in those times. The core of the plan was that the one who makes the pollution has to pay for it. It's the core principle that is now finally implemented. The White Chicken Plan, it was a plan that's not translatable because the chicken, it's the Dutch nickname for an

Amsterdam policeman. A bad cop. The little boys in Amsterdam, they're called *kip zonder eieren* (chicken without eggs). The little boys were cheating the policemen. In the White Chicken Plan there was the changing of the police, changing them into social workers.

Another of the plans was the White Children Plan. The White Children Plan was a plan of parents who want to raise their children. Kids themselves were to make crèches in an anti-authoritarian way, not to have them moulded, but to have them raised on their own way. There are four or five of those plans. The core was prophecy. There wasn't a White Money Plan but there was the Bank of Klaas. Klaas, the person who would come. You have heard in the movie talking about Klaas. Klaas was a mystery. Klaas was something like Saint Nicholas but it wasn't Saint Nicholas.

It could be Santa Claus too but be aware of false Klaases. The false Klaases, they were very many and they were like the false Messiahs. They would come and they would try to cheat you. The Klaas expectation was very important. And now there was a Bank of Klaas. They printed up a lot of bills and gave them to people. Those money bills were of 2,000 Dutch guilders, a bill that didn't exist anymore. But the essence was about money. What's the belief in money? Like the belief in Klaas, the belief in money now in the credit crisis. It's the most actual example of that time.

ERIC DUIVENVOORDEN (ED): My name is Eric Duivenvoorden. You might have noticed, I'm a little bit younger than the guys next to me. I'm more from the squatter generation. After the Provos we started anew as the Amsterdam squatters. If you are young, if you're eighteen, you're not going to look back. You look forward to the future. After my activist period, then you start to think something happened before me. And that was quite significant because it turned out that those guys, a small group as they might have been, more or less started everything in Amsterdam. They started with the environmental movement, with the squatters movement, but all kinds of other creative initiatives. I was fascinated by it, so I looked into it. Then I came across this guy, this prophet, Jasper Grootveld. He was also older than them. He was from 1932. He was from another generation. He was a kid of the war. Those guys, they are not, they are from after the war.

And Jasper, he was not in very good shape. The past four years I visited him every week and asked him if he wanted to tell me his stories. It turned out in a large book, in his biography, that was published at the beginning of this year.[5] I'm very glad he was there when it was published. He witnessed the publication. Maybe he thought it was all right. He told all his stories, and two weeks later he died. His book was buried with him. It was a good event altogether. But let me finish too and give the microphone to my neighbour who I can introduce as one of the very first squatters. The White plans of Provo,

sometimes there was the new generation who actually put into practice the new ideas of squatting.

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ELJAKIM BORKENT: Squatting is a direct child of the Provo. One of the ten famous big white plans was the *Witte Hause Plan*, the White Houses Plan. There is here in the same book a picture. It's mainly text in Dutch about the White Housing Plan but the picture is the apple, the Provo apple, which is the sign for Provo, the small apple Amsterdam. In the sign is drawn primitively the most prestigious building Dutch history has delivered. Today it's called the Royal Palace on the Dam in Amsterdam. It's originally built as the Amsterdam town hall in the golden age. Before England became an empire, there was a Dutch empire. Today the whole centre of Amsterdam is antique but especially this building. And then the White Housing Plan of Provo was to save a house by occupying the house, which is the start of squatting. *Kraken* in Dutch. One of the fifteen young rebels which were the nucleus of this Provo thing was Rob Stolk. He died twenty some years ago. He was also the one who, with two boys, erected a housing office done in an anarchist way. It was named *woningburo de kraken* (squatter's housing office). It's too difficult to explain it all in Dutch but that is the history of the squatting of houses in Holland which is still today something which is happening.

I did something similar but years later. This *woningburo de kraken*, this housing office of the squatter, was for masking things. It was to make publicity. It was to attract attention from the press in which they were very successful. This was also the core business as Provo, which was that was of a media guerrilla. What I did more solidly, more as a joke, was starting an alternative home office with the name *Koevoet*. A *koevoet* in Dutch is a tool, a crowbar, to open doors. I called it the crowbar for silent actions on individual base and no publicity for silent living but in a squat. This was 1969, which is three years after Provo.

STEVPHEN SHUKAITIS (SS): In more recent years there have been movements, like Reclaim the Streets, the Rebel Clown Army, and groups doing radical politics and creative street protests that have learned very much from Provo. I'm also thinking about the people in Copenhagen right now who are forming a bike block as a protest tactic. They're using the slogan 'put the fun between your legs.' It's interesting that we're discussing events that might seem a bit distant historically, but when you look at the way activist art has developed in the last forty years, the influence is clear and much closer. Even if people don't have direct reference points with Amsterdam in the late 1960s, we've encountered many things that have been influenced by it.

RICHARD BARBROOK: I've just been to Vienna. The local social democratic administration has a free bicycle scheme which seems to be entirely modelled on what you did in the 60s, where you can get on a bicycle, cycle around. And it's amazing, the white bicycle, which probably seemed the most ultraleftist thing is now solid, technocratic, right social democratic policy in Europe.

HP: The atmosphere in Amsterdam at a certain point, the summer of 1966, the atmosphere became very grim. The violence was from the police side because we were really non-violent. We were always trying to avoid violence. That was not an ideological decision. For me it was a strategic issue but we were always non-violent. It's always the police who were violent. In 1966 there was a demonstration of construction workers for more wages, for holiday money. The police were so used to beating Provos and Provos never fighting back they started doing the same with these construction workers, which was a very bad idea. But when the battle was over, one of the construction workers, Jan Weggelaar, was dead. This triggered another three or four days of riots. For Provo it was a turning point. And this documentary you saw… it's kind of weird to watch it because the magic of Provo is not really in the documentary. There was another atmosphere at that time.

AB: The riots you saw, it was March 1966, after the wedding, ten days after the wedding. A lot of the interviews were made later.

HP: The most interesting thing about it is maybe that the early editions of the *Telegraph*, which is the biggest right wing newspaper, the early edition said he was killed by a stone thrown by his own comrades. In the morning all the construction workers and Provo read the news... this first edition of the newspaper. Everybody went to the newspaper building and they tried to burn it down. It almost succeeded. The big riots really started then. The interesting thing is that the next edition of the newspaper claimed he died of a heart attack. Later all the historians that wrote about it took this story and they said the newspaper told the truth – the man died of a heart attack. They told the truth and in spite of that the construction workers and the Provos, they went to the newspaper and tried to burn the newspaper building down. That is very significant, the falsification of the newspaper itself. What they did, writing in the second edition, writing probably a true story but just wiping out the first edition which everybody had read in the morning where they had this lie that his own comrades had killed a man and not the police. He was beaten by the police and probably had a heart attack which was never clear, whether it really was a heart attack. Every now and then you see a newspaper article about the history and then again it said, without any probable cause, those Provos attacked the newspaper building. That was a very bad thing to do, almost a

fascist thing to do, attacking freedom of press. And every time I write a letter again, even a few months ago, to these publications to say, no, it's not true. It's very hard to get this thing changed.

JOHNY BROWN (JB): Some of us know what you're talking about up here. I was 14 in 1966, for example, but it was all filtering into a lot of people even then. Certainly Provo means a lot to me in a strange way, although I'm very interested in your timing of all of this. I would say it was the first time where people snubbed their nose at authority in a very Dutch way. It was happening all around the world. Today people talk of viral ideas spreading. This was all predicted in a way with what you were doing with Provo. It was appealing to people's sense of violent playfulness and an alternative model for revolution. The question is really about this timing because in England it's still that influence of America, of the summer of love, and then Altamont and things going darker. In Holland it seemed you had your kind of dark turning point a lot earlier. How did that then play out in the years that followed that?

NVA: Well like you saw in the documentary, we took the happenings which only resulted in conflicts with the police, we took them off the streets. We took them in little places like this or we built a bigger place. Even then I think we realized at a certain point that we couldn't go on this way. In May of 1967 Provo decided to stop. We had one last happening in one of the Amsterdam parks. There we announced that the movement stopped. It was very easy to do because the movement never existed at all. There was one guy who protested against it. He said, I'm selling this program actually. At some point he sold 20,000 copies each month. Maybe you have that here, for the street people, the homeless people, selling magazines? We did more or less the same thing, although the poor people on the street, they were selling the magazines. They were one guilder a piece and they bought them for 65 cents. One guy protested, saying "I'm going to go out of money. I'm going to go out of work in this way." But it was agreed that it should stop at that point because it would get like in Germany with the Baader-Meinhof, the RAF, which started a little bit later, but it tended a little bit in this direction. That was something none of us really wanted the responsibility for.

JB: Last year in the riots a martyr fell on the streets of London. He was a news seller from Old Street, from this area, and he fell on the streets of London. He was clubbed to the pavement by the police. He staggered like 300 yards. According to the establishment, he had a heart attack. His own construction workers stoned him to death in the name of non-violence.

But what I wanted to ask you is, as a teenager I was aware of people around even small country towns wearing Provo badges in England. I've sort of always

been interested in what Provo did and always wondered why we weren't capable of doing something similar here. But the question I have is, after you stopped, were the Kabouters an attempt to continue in another way? Or were they really a dilution of what you were doing?

HP: Kabouter, it means a leprechaun. It was the Orange Free State in which you played a very important role. It was an attempt actually to realize the ideas of Provo. What I missed tremendously in this documentary is the role of psychedelics and marijuana. When the Provo movement was abolished, the Dutch weed scene exploded. The psychedelic revolution actually began and you could see that there were early laboratories in Amsterdam where LSD was produced.

There was another great prophet of the days, Bart Huges, who promoted trephination. Many people actually had their skulls trephinated. There was the homosexual emancipation. There was the awareness of the environment for the first time. There was the pro-choice movement. All this somehow was rooted in Provo. There was the interest for other cultures. To my parents, the former colonies, they were like slaves. They were like inferior people. To our generation, we went there to go to the gurus, to go to the shamans, to take mushrooms with those primitive idiots. There was a never a concert of music from India. African music was considered barbarian. All those things originated in these days. If you look at the world now, not that the world of pollution and congestion and wars, but at these other things I just mentioned, you can see that it has become like mainstream, like the White Bicycle Plan. What happened is that there was a stone thrown in the pond at that moment. It caused a wave but, as it goes with waves, they become smaller and smaller as they reach the edges of the pond. You can compare that to the ideas of Provo, which first were only acceptable to a few people and have now become really mainstream. Somehow our notion of 2012 and all those talks about the end of the world, it's more significantly pointing to a moment where the things that were realized by those early prophets have to become a reality. I don't know what we're going to see. But I wanted to stress the importance of the psychedelic revolution. This has also caused a kind of new awareness. Jasper Grootveld was not only criticizing the tobacco industry, he was actually promoting the use of marijuana. The non-violent psychedelic revolution.

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JB: I remember reading an issue of *Anarchy* which devoted to Provo in 1966 or 1967. That had a huge influence on me and my friends. There was nothing like that in England at all, not that combination of combining a form of anarchist politics with cultural change, and psychedelics, or making connections with

street kids as well. I was a mod, but in Amsterdam there were connections made with the equivalents in Amsterdam. There was nothing like that over here. It seems startlingly original. It also seemed to me to have affected a lot of things that came afterwards like the Diggers in San Francisco and the Yippies and Reclaim the Streets. Were you aware of being influenced by people in San Francisco? Obviously it sounded like there were some Situationist influence but apart from that it seemed original.

AB: There was a big connection between Amsterdam and Paris at the end of the 1950s. We were very aware of what was happening in the rest of the world. There were some very good connections with the United States and with other places where things were happening. It was picked up from both sides. There was an exchange. Very often we heard things directly and before they were published. That was just due to a few people, like Simon Vinkenoog, a Dutch writer, and Robert Jasper also. Robert Jasper, one of his prophecies was Amsterdam's going to be the magic center of the world. Everybody was laughing. Come on, Amsterdam is of non-importance at all. And then five, six years later... Yes, it was and everybody came to Amsterdam, if only to smoke grass. They came. It was very interesting that all his prophecies, one by one, they became true. That was a special thing. Nobody knows how that happened, actually.

SS: In the 18th Century Amsterdam was the most liberal city in Europe, wasn't it? We can go back quite a long way.

HP: That's what Robert Jasper always said too. He was always referring to the history. He was always referring to the history of Amsterdam. He knew more about it than I ever did.

ED: Maybe that's a generational thing because those guys were really young. They were 16, 17, 18 years old. Jasper was a little bit older. He was already in his 30s and was talking and thinking on a completely different level than the politically motivated baby boom young generation. That's true. He was very religiously inspired. His rituals, the places he picked out to have these happenings in the street, they were motivated by Catholic-prepared processions in Amsterdam. This whole idea of the magical center of Amsterdam. This was a thing of the 17th Century when all the saints and all the people came to Amsterdam to be cured. It was a town for the emperor. There was a lot of religion in his prophecies. He wasn't a Provo himself. He never joined the movement. He couldn't join the movement.

JB: He wasn't a Provo but he was a bit older then the Provos, older than you guys. He was the father because he started everything in the streets, in the proper places. He did all the magic that was needed to assemble all the dimensions. He put the things in the right places, then he pushed the right buttons and all you guys went into action and it was a situation as Boomnanza.

AB: He was accompanied by a younger man for my age which... I mentioned his name before, Rob Stolk, and these two boys, the older Robert Jasper Grootveld and this younger Rob Stolk. They had an amalgam. They made that media guerrilla and that is the relevance for us today, that we suffer so much from spin doctors, from governmental and other institutional information every day. It's a bombardment every day. We are brainwashed by so much spin information. Provo is a good reminder on how to fight that still today.

HP: Yes, but the spin doctors were then not in charge like they are now. This was a very hidden thing, that there was some spinning but not that much as there is now. The thing about Provo was that we did really use the media. We really used all these things that they use now as the spin doctors. We use the same thing. Rob Stolk was an anarchist. He was from the anarchist youth. It was this nice combination of this magic little bit, a religious inspired old man with this young kid from the anarchist movement, which made this huge explosion, actually. We have to mention Roel too. There was another guy from the pacifist movement, a student, a very serious person, Roel van Duijn. He came too to this. We had three things. We had this serious Dutch student pacifist, we had this anarchistic labour, this working class kid from Rob Stolk, and then we had this artistic magician… we experienced this very explosive mix.

NVA: After Provo died or was declared to be finished, there was an archive. These boys gathered an archive, especially Rob Stolk again. Then there was a day some years later, 1968 or 9, that it was sold to the University library of Amsterdam for 13,000 guilders, which was a nice amount for those days. That money was put in a foundation for a *goed en goedkoop leven*, that is, to translate, for a good and cheap life. That name, again, is a part of that media guerrilla. It was a continuing thing. There was during Provo, at the end of Provo and after Provo, the same people. They had an *Anti Reklame Buro Sneek*, an anti-publicity campaign. Sneek is the name of a Freesian town in the north. It's in English the snake and there is also something in of the sneaky. This mystification on media, that was the permanent thing. It is relevant for us today.

HP: Now there's another thing, talking about miracles, he believed in because one of his announcements was Klaas is coming. The incredible thing was that our princess decided to marry someone named that. Now she's queen. Today

she's the queen. Then she was the princess. She decided to marry a German guy, an ex-Nazi who actually turned out to be turned out to be a very nice man. A few years before he died he finished by holding a speech to an audience of very uptight people and he finished the speech with taking off his tie and throwing it away. He said, this is something that limits me. I don't want this anymore. And he opened his collar and threw away his tie publicly, which was the man of our queen. Maybe we turned him on. I'd like to take that credit. This was one of his miracles, that the guy was called Claus. He was called Claus. Here he came and this is what started the riot. This is how he took actual happenings and incorporated them into his magic. He may have thought that he was a real magician.

AB: Prince Claus Von Amsberg, he was the only normal, gentle person in the whole dynasty of the royal family since 200 years.

HP: But his father-in-law... Prince Bernard, the husband of Queen Juliana... He was a Nazi, and a great friend of Hitler. He was being paid by arms manufacturers to buy certain planes for the Dutch army. He was unmasked. When his daughter, Princess Beatrix, came up with another guy of whom we saw pictures in German uniforms, the country exploded somehow. This was also an important factor in the whole writing. The royal house had completely lost its credibility.

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SS: I'm interested in this idea of the media guerrilla. Is there any advice you give to younger people who are starting in activism? Are there tricks that another generation should be thinking about?

HP: I'm afraid that a lot of people are now really according with many of the principles. We see a new interest in the 60s. The fact that this book has been published, the first book in English. A biography of Robert Jasper Grootveld has come out. The greatest junkie poet of Holland this year got the highest literary award of Holland. It shows that there is something in the air. People feel the end of the road of the old system is there somehow but a lot of young people are used to put a thing on the Internet, to say no or to sign petitions on the Internet. The only thing we need now is just the person or the word or the occasion to bring the people back to the streets because this is the Internet generation and that's fighting the system on their computer. We want to bring them back into the streets.

NVA: We were very lucky. We were so lucky we made a revolution that was completely non-violent. We stopped before the real violence came in and because it was non-violent we had an incredible influence. We could have been radicals too. In another situation we could have been radicalized, with violence and in a lot of trouble, like Baader-Meinhof. But we were lucky to make a start and to be the spark for many other movements in the time after that. I worked as an addiction therapist for years. A lot of them, they really died in my hands afterwards because they could not come back in society for another way. It was rather heavy too.

HP: There is one thing, because the Baader-Meinhof group is coming up. The Red Army Faction from Germany, they came to Amsterdam in 1965-1966 to buy LSD, to buy hashish. We befriended them. We played football with them. Suddenly they got these long black coats. They started to come in Daimlers. They were running twice as fast as us cannabis smokers in the football field. So we understood that amphetamines had come into play. But most of all, they accused the Provo movement of accepting what they called repressive tolerance.

They said, "you are satisfied with your piece of the pie. You don't want to turn on the whole population." We said, are you mad? Do you think we want our parents to take LSD? This is a thing for shamans. This is a thing for people who are ready for that. Of course I'm grateful to Timothy Leary, that he discussed with Aldous Huxley. Huxley said we should only give it to an elite, to the people who are ready.

Timothy Leary said, no, we should spread it and see what the casualties are. If Timothy Leary would not have been there, I would probably never have got on LSD. Of course there were many victims. The breaking point with the Red Army faction was when they said you are accepting repressive tolerance. The fact that Dutch society gave in to Provo and gave us the Paradiso, the Cosmos, the Milky Way, all those places where we could do what we liked. They allowed coffee shops. They allowed sleeping in the street. They gave in and the Germans said, you are satisfied with just your own thing and you don't really want to change the nation. We said, no, but, you know what happened afterwards. But this was a breaking point because there was a kind of hippie element in the Red Army faction in the beginning.

ED: I was today in the city center, on the big square, and I was talking to some people and they were waiting for some kind of provocative action and also then they couldn't find out what to do. There's a nice campsite on Trafalgar Square because of the Copenhagen Summit. Maybe you should pay a visit one of these days and help the people there to get more attention. They may start a big campfire in the middle of the night to provoke something.

More Information:

Kempton, Richard (2007) *Provo: Amsterdam's Anarchist Revolt*. Brooklyn: Autonomedia.

van Riemsdijk, Marjolijn (2013) *Assault on the Impossible: Dutch Collective Imagination in the Sixties and Seventies.* Brooklyn: Autonomedia.

Endnotes

1 These comments make reference to *It's a Happening*, a short documentary by Michael Apted that was directed for the BBC in 1966, which was shown at the event. The video can be seen here: https://vimeo.com/294174568.

2 This is Ruigoord, a village and cultural free haven that exists in a port in western outskirts of Amsterdam. It has been squatted since 1973. For more information see http://ruigoord.nl.

3 Huizinga, Johan (1949) *Homo Ludens: A Study of the Play-Element in Culture.* London: Routledge.

4 These were important underground publications from that period. For more information on *International Times* (which has recently been restarted) see http://internationaltimes.it.

5 Duivenvoorden, Eric (2009) *Magiër van een nieuwe tijd. Het leven van Robert Jasper Grootveld* (Magician of a new age. The life of Robert Jasper Grootveld). Amsterdam: De Arbeiderspers.

Protest Camps & Ecologies of Freedom

Russian Anarchism in the 1990s

In 2005 I attended the "Capturing the Moving Mind" conference, which took place on a train going from Helsinki to Beijing. Sessions were held in train cars with people perched on bunk beds, leading to temporary dance parties on train platforms and seemingly endless dinners of dumplings sold by the grandmothers who would suddenly appear at the stations to sell their wares to passengers. It was a surreal and wonderful experiment in collectivity that transcended the highly-circumscribed itinerary of your usual academic conference. Along the way we stopped in several cities for a night at a time. While in Moscow, Steffen Boehm and I met with some anarchist comrades for some drinks and discussion. Unfortunately in the years since then I have lost my record of their contacts, but I wanted to include this important discussion of changes in autonomous politics in Russia in 1990s and in particular the protest camps in which new forms of social movement emerge.

STEVPHEN SHUKAITIS (SS): Can you plot out a bit of post-Soviet history, in particular of autonomous political action and the role of anarchism? Yesterday we talked about one of the most important things being the environmental camps. Can you talk about what's been happening over the last five to ten

years in terms of political action? What main currents in Russia do people gather around?

OLGA: The end of 1980s and beginning of 1990s was a really special time in the Soviet Union. We had a lot of movements and new political organisations. Many new movements started in the early 1990s, including anarchist movements. Until 1994 there were some organisations here in Russia. They published some newspapers. Rainbow Keepers was founded in 1989.

STEFFEN BOEHM (SB): Was that in the wake of perestroika? Or Gorbachev?

OLGA: The time of perestroika was from 1987. Then almost all organisations died – however anarchist organisations, and environmental movement, Rainbow Keepers, persisted. They organized summer protest camps. One person published a magazine, *Third Wave*. They participated in environmental conferences. They made actions during the year to support environmentalists. Several people went to the USA to listen to lectures of Murray Bookchin. At that time it was quite easy to get some grants for environmental activities, and for small groups, because the idea was that we should help the new organisations.

SB: That continued throughout the 1990s, the Rainbow Keepers?

OLGA: The Rainbow exist until now. They have changed quite a bit.

SS: The agendas and the issues are still similar but people come and go?

OLGA: And the strategy. This idea to organise protest camps has been quite popular until now because it really works. It's activities for young people, to spend time in some camp, in some communities, and to solve some real and concrete problems.

SS: It has to be practical?

OLGA: Yes. It should be practical.

SB: But how did the camps emerge as one of the most important tactics? Was there a specific example? Why camps? Why not direct action, street parties, or other things?

OLGA: A camp because it's the only place where people are living together. They don't have usually another possibility in other towns to live and they organise a

different kind of action. During the camp there can be a street party, or radical actions like blockades or occupation, while working with media at the same time. There are all kinds of things which you usually do for campaigns, but during the camp there is something new in this town's life: it's open and people can go and communicate. There is also the possibility of being attacked.

SB: By police or fascists?

OLGA: Yes, some fascists or people who were hired by local authorities or factory owners.

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SS: You mentioned people going to see Murray Bookchin. What has been the influence of social ecology and Bookchin's work in Russia?

OLGA: One of the most active people, Shengiv Mitchov, wrote a lot about Bookchin during perestroika. First it was idea that it's possible to create some kind of movement in Russia which would be similar to the German Green movement. And it would be based on Bookchin's idea of social ecology. He wrote and translated a number of articles and one book, *Remaking Society*.

ALEXEI: If you want to describe Rainbow Keepers' politics, it's a social ecologist organisation. It was always tried to connect with local socialists in general, and deep ecologist ideas were much in the background.

SB: Personally I'd like to stay a bit more practical for the moment – maybe you could talk about one sort of successful camp as an example. Where did it happen? What were the issues? What went on? Maybe a recent one, or something that you regarded as being a successful camp.

OLGA: I think a good example is Votkinsk. It's a small town in Udmurtia republic. It was four years ago. It's near the Urals. It was quite a small town – about 100,000 people. They have some industry there but not so big. It was quite a pleasant place and environmentally clean and for many people working in industry, but that wasn't the main topic. There are many elderly people in these places, and families with children. There is a lot of people who work for money out of this kind of town, yes, and they wanted to put… how would you say it in English?

ALEXEI: Dismantling. It was part of disarmament where they dismantle these ballistic missiles, which is good to have them dismantled, but the plan was very irresponsible. It was eight kilometers from the city center.

SS: Was it nuclear weapons?

ALEXEI: No. The problem is the fuel, which is very toxic. In the USA they had this kind of place in Arizona, at least 200 kilometres from the nearest village. But it was banned even there because of the risks for the local ecology.

SB: And then what happened? Were there some local people starting to sort of get together? How did you get involved?

ALEXEI: It was started from a lot of people from the Rainbow Keepers. They had this camp because the Rainbow Keepers has a sort of reputation around, especially in all the cities. In half of the Russian cities there is some sort of ecological groups which is perhaps very small but they're very active. It's somehow an NGO in the sense that they don't have much support, but they probably don't have any grants either. It's just enthusiastic people who go to court, who sue the corporations, and maybe do actions... do some activity against poaching or these kind of things. They contact Rainbow Keepers or maybe they contact the Social Ecological Union in Moscow, which is a sort of umbrella organisation for ecological initiatives in Russia.

SS: Is it really a Russia-wide sort of organisation, or a decentralised network of people?

ALEXEI: Basically, it's an organisation in the sense that it always functions like a network because they have by-laws. It confirms resolutions. But people are not really aware of them, especially if there were resolutions that were made ten years ago by other people. And anybody who has at once participated in a Rainbow Keepers' action can claim membership. It's a very lax membership criteria for such an organisation. But the conference still takes time. It was less than two years ago and they want to have it again.

SB: Do they have like a conference with all the members?

ALEXEI: They want to have one every year but it doesn't always work out. This was a reaction by people who considered things to be too informal and with lacking continuity. Lack of continuity and informal hierarchies, these kinds of things were problems in the Rainbow Keepers.

SS: Autonomous action came out of the Rainbow Keepers?

ALEXEI: Not only. It's people from different places, generally from Rainbow Keepers but not anymore. There are still groups in Siberia who claim to be part of the anarchist federation. It's only in Tomsk maybe but there is still association of anarchist movements, which is a formal organization. It was the first organization which split. There are different people who are in contact. It still exists but there has been a very deep crisis, less ten years or something, very few people in their meetings, and not any concrete projects together. But it's been growing during the last couple of years.

In general, it's a Russian situation, that maybe half of the anarchists are part of some sort of formal organization, which is very different from Western Europe, especially from US. Here people want to be part of something. They are 1,000 kilometers from the closest anarchists. They want to be part of something, want to get information. Before the time of the internet the organization had a greater role because it was also an information-clearing house. Now, because of the internet, during the last five years, people are more connected and information is more available.

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SB: Going back to this particular action in Votkinsk, once the Rainbow Keepers were involved, what happened then?

OLGA: It was complicated because the mayor of this town was also against the project but was being pressured. In a way and it was debated how much should we cooperate with local authorities. There was a sports club of people who take a vote here. They had some practice to swim in very cold water. It's a tradition where you clean every day in water. They had a big lake and grew vegetables for vegans at home. They had this club, how to be healthy. And they were really active. They were like an environmental NGO. They cared a lot about the environment in this town. As a result the contact with local people was quite easy because people used a lot the informal relations. The camp started and people started to spread leaflets on the streets and organize some demonstrations. Usually it's peaceful demonstrations and then, when there are not any reactions, started to move to blockades and action against representatives of regional administration in this town and offices of the company.

SB: It was a private company who was supposed to do the dismantling?

ALEXEI: It was contracted to Lockheed Martin. Lockheed Martin had an office in Votkinsk but actually in time of the protest Lockheed Martin had already

withdrawn from the project. The company which remained there was British, part of Lockheed Martin, or something like that. But the campaign was pretty much against Lockheed Martin in the city because at this point people were not aware of the situation.

SS: But the Mayor was against it?

ALEXEI: Yes. The city mayor was sort of against it. Of course they were not happy with radical protests but basically they were against the project, as was 99% of the people there. It was more the regional administration that was the problem.

SB: Did you then end up cooperating with the local authorities? Could you distinguish between the local state authority and the regional one? How did the relationship develop, once you started to have blockades? Obviously the mayor had to be seen to be against that. But how did that relationship work?

OLGA: The mayor was against it and led against it separately from the protest camp. It was an important question for public opinion because there were elections soon, the next autumn, and he announced through local media that he's against this project, that he will try to stop it. There were some environmentalists in regional parliament who also were against the project. They visited the camp and dealt with the mayor, and dealt with environmental organizations. We did not cooperate directly with local authorities. We had some people who were between us and local authorities and made some communication to give information. When you have some protests you should have some legal basis for it. And some doctors put banners on the cars, the emergency service cars, slogans on the cars. Different people were involved in varying ways.

SB: And in the end it was successful in the sense that it didn't go ahead?

OLGA: Yes, I don't know all the details but that was the decision.

ALEXEI: Maybe it was just held in a different way. It just became not convenient to have it anymore because of all these problems. But it came back two years later in Perm. Probably many of these missiles will be dismantled in Perm, which is a city of a million inhabitants.

SS: And where is that located?

ALEXEI: It's also in Ural but in the European side.

OLGA: Before they wanted to do it in Perm and then the Perm administration refused. Votkinsk was not successful and they sent it back to Perm.

SS: One thing that came up yesterday was you said the club we went to was the only place in Moscow where it's like an alternative club, which was like an open place. Yesterday we talked about enclosures, how public spaces are becoming more and more enclosed and privatized. There are not a lot of open spaces for people to meet and discuss. The authorities, the KGB or whatever, are immediately there and control everything. What I'm wondering is from perestroika and after perestroika, there seemed to be this kind of movement of opening spaces, loads of new things started up. Do you have the feeling that over the last five or more years it's beginning to enclose again and it's difficult to organize actions because there's more of an authoritarian regime?

ALEXEI: There's now a backlash going on. It's like the revolution after 1968, which has been going on around with conservative force. It's a contrary action here. It's a contrary action against 1991.

SB: And that's seen by people like that, because it's the old guard who's really in power, do you think?

ALEXEI: I think people who are in the opposition, they realize that most people they want some stability. They are nostalgic with the Soviet Union for some good reasons. It's the same in the West. Many people are supporting the counterrevolution also. It's the same here. As for enclosures a good example would be message boards in the universities because it was a big fight in the 1980s to have these open places where everybody could put any announcement in the universities. There were usually places where students could announce anything but they don't exist anymore.

SB: That was an explicit decision made by someone, to keep them down?

ALEXEI: These kind of places don't exist anymore. It always gets taken off sooner or later. It can be around for one week without nobody recognizing it. If somebody tears it down, it's not the administration but the other students.

SS: What does that mean for the tactics employed now?

OLGA: In the tradition of social work similar to Europe people really don't like it usually because it's not some boring lectures or propaganda. It was organized always from a high level.

SS: When you say social work, you mean voluntary work?

OLGA: Yes, and places where people can gather. Nobody thinks that people really need this.

SB: Self-organized places?

OLGA: Yes, self-organized places. It can be the library but if you go here, they will be very suspicious what you do or why you went. You should be unpolitical.

SB: Who's they?

OLGA: The legal administration, or any clubs or universities. It's clear that some cultural are permitted, but there is a control exerted over time and space. This is tradition. It was a short period when state property wasn't very important, so you could rent those spaces easily. That was between 1991-1993.

SS: At and parks and camps, if they happened, as a temporary semi-public space?

OLGA: Yes. But at the same time there is a tendency to control all things which happen much more than before. Before if you had some initiative, it can be without any tension from power. Now there will be a tension.

SB: And what does that mean for the tactics now? Is there anything that you used to do in the 1990s that you can't do today? What kind of tactics do you think are appropriate today? What do you do in order to go against this kind of new authoritarianism?

OLGA: Several years ago you'd organize without any pressures but it's hard to say now that we don't do any kind of activity because of pressure. For example, for two years the person who published *Autonom*, the magazines, was under investigation and then he was in prison for half a year. Other people were afraid to do something. It was the local authorities who decided that anarchists may cause problems for the future.

SB: In the whole of Russia?

ALEXEI: No. There's a big difference between Moscow and other cities. In almost all smaller cities, there has been heavy pressure and threats by FSB. In many places it's impossible to be in the street doing something openly in the daytime with a flag or selling journals. In Moscow there's much more freedom but here also it's impossible to get permission to hold anarchist marches. We

were organizing support for political arts and music, but then the people wanted to organize more concerts with more funding, but then people wanted to organize them with a more explicit anti-fascist message, but it was closed down by the FSB. The club owners, the day before an event they get a phone call from somebody. Anonymous threats. It's the same thing to have things in the street or explicitly political stuff in some clubs, which sometimes works out. What was possible two years ago is maybe not possible anymore.


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Occupation Cultures. Squatting and Space for Autonomous Culture

How has squatting contributed to the production of art and culture? When rents and other living costs far exceed cultural workers' ability to support themselves in the metropolis, squatting is instrumental to the continued existence of autonomous art and culture.

This is a conversation that took place during an event at MayDay Rooms in London where people brought together materials and experiences of how occupations and squatting have contributed to the production of autonomous culture. From social centres to free schools, temporary galleries to combined studios and living spaces, people brought along materials from projects exploring these questions and connections.

CHRIS 56A: Most of us were squatters in the eighties. The material comes from us, just with a bit of digging. I contributed materials on how people organise, but then how things change. You can look through the material for yourself, but I want to bring out some points.

You've probably seen on the table the most famous document that's always in the media when there is an outrage about squatting, which is *The Squatter's Handbook*. It's fascinating to go back in time. There's currently not a version of

it because the law has changed. They're updating it. You go back in time… this is now in the nineties, and then in the eighties and all the way back to 1978. It was fascinating to see how similar these images are, all repeated, even to this day. In this one they're the same images. And then a friend of mine undoing a door with a screwdriver. He was in multiple handbooks. He asked "can you just stop putting me in the handbook please?" It's full of the positive aspects of squatting, like how your place could be really beautiful. It is everything that you need to know.

STEVPHEN SHUKAITIS (SS): When did the first one come out?

CHRIS 56A: I don't know when the first one come out. This is 1978. I'm not sure what edition this is.

ALAN MOORE (AM): The early seventies maybe?

CHRIS 56A: There were ones before that. In the sixties there was someone there doing it. Somewhere there in the archives I saw, some people marching over near Kensington, holding a sign that said 'Reclaim the Streets!' In the sixties! There are lots of people you could talk to who were involved in the late sixties to the seventies, Jim Patton from ASS. Pierce Corbyn from Freestyler. As a squatter and someone involved in a squatted centre, being around squats … the daunting thing is always the getting in. How do you crack a place? In the seventies when you were facing corrugated iron and wood it was quite simple, but in the eighties… the councils begin to contract out their security to private companies. This famous London Sytex door, which is a massive steel door: 'Steel 'em up!'

But there you get these leaflets that are all floating around. These are all from about 85-86-87. The Lambeth steel door. This is squatters coming to deal with it saying, 'fuck we can't get in because there's these steel doors.' This one's white and people were 'Ooh, have you come across the brown door it's really impossible to crack.' There's people writing these leaflets. They're mimeographed, gestetnered leaflets.

That notion of how do we get in, and it was quite daunting. People just learn how to do it. And one of the funny things in Southwark was if you took the steel door and dumped it, sometimes you could get done by the police for theft. Because people wanted to get rid of the steel door they were often burying them. If the police came people could say they were here. People were burying them, so that the company would have to invest in more steel doors.

Also similar is *Shock Horror*. This is a guide. It tells you how to bridge the meter but with advice that: 'this is fucking dangerous – please know what you're doing.' It's by Juice Bandits, which is lovely. And this is a guide that is

produced in our circuit, it's *How to pick locks*. It's a lock picking guide, really complex, and no one ever learned how to do it, to deal with all the pins inside a Yale lock. It's basically a lock picking guide for squatters.

I'm interested in that kind of street-level, street knowledge, and the giving away of the street knowledge, how the squatting community shares this knowledge to maintain itself.

I'm also interested in another history which I was privy to right at the end and feel that it needs to be discussed more. That was SNOW, the squatters network of Woolworth. But to backtrack a bit, in the eighties across the council estates of London there were many empty flats, public housing empty flats, because the maintenance of those blocks were so poorly managed by the councils that a family would move out and they would be empty for maybe six months, a year, two years. You had council blocks – which in Southwark alone there were 70,000 tenancies – which is an incredible amount of public housing, with thousands of empties. At a certain point in 1983, and this is the first edition of *SNOW Sparrow*, the squatters network of Woolworth, SNOW sets itself up as a squatting group. It was anarchists and socialists at this point, socialists in small left parties and anarchists and hippies… and they began meeting in a port-a-cabin on an estate. Pretty soon they squatted 362 Old Kent Road and had these premises for years. It was the SNOW offices.

What's incredible about SNOW is that for a number of years they produced, for 4 or 5 years, *The Wire*. The wire refers to the wire people were using to pick locks. Because they had the means of production, there was this tiny autonomous guy who's now living in London called Sergio, Gay Serge as he was called. He had a Gestetner in his flat. It was very easy to produce the magazine. Every fortnight they produced this magazine that went up and down between six and ten pages. With comics and legal advice and gig reviews and all sorts of stuff. But the most important thing was that it was a network across all of these estates: squatters in King Lake, squatters in Priory, squatters in Rockingham, all different estates across Southwark, across Woolworth. They had people delivering these all around the estate.

They would go around delivering these. It was an incredible organisation. On some of them they would follow the lists of which flats were up in court. They might go to Rockingham. They would pin a little thing on it saying 'Rockingham flats up in court.' They would put them through all the doors. Some people may not know, who weren't following what was going on. Some would people would just leave. They had this legal network as well. They became so good in court, at fighting the council, that the council almost gave up, because they fought so many court cases. They were so on it, that they were better than the actual council solicitors!

At a point in January 1985 it says, 'Official figures of squats in Southwark.' If you look at this graph, it just goes up from the hundred to about a thousand.

At a certain point, the key point in SNOW's life, there was about 2000 squatted properties in Woolworth alone. You're talking about an incredible number of squats, and an incredible squat community, both the hybrid nature of the council tenants working with the squatters, and the kind of antagonism as well. My experience of it was there was just a general working class acceptance of squatting. There were all sorts of contradictions. My favourite contradiction being the middle class squatters who squatted on King Lake and employed the council tenants below, a couple, to clean their flat! A totally amazing example of the class composition of squatting and a totally despicable act in some ways.

This is an interesting history and something that needs to be written up. What happened to SNOW. It is an interesting tale. At a certain point they were evicted from 362 Old Kent Road. Like many projects that exist there are one or two people who are able to keep it going and who have been there long term. They are sometimes problematic characters in that they are dictatorial. But there was a guy Nick Bannerman who was pretty much in the end the main guy from SNOW. They reconstituted themselves as a charity, Southwark Homeless Information Project. They got funding and then they got an office. Which was at 602 Old Kent Road. For about ten years Southwark Homeless Information Project, SHIP, was this essentially legally constituted charity but was a front for a squatting group. They basically did everything the same. They produced, not *The Wire*, but *SHIP News*, which I was involved with at that point, which was pretty much the same, but they were this charity with funding from homeless groups, such as Shelter. What they were doing was promoting squatting. We had photos on the wall of squats. We had a regular communal meal every Tuesday. We produced the paper. Slowly the councils were taking back control of the empties. We were fighting this losing battle. By the time I'd left in 1992, SHIP was pretty much reduced to advising people how to get hard-to-let tenancies, how to become tenants. There was no were else to go. You could not squat council tenancies anymore. They also encouraged people to squat private properties, which they did. They dried up because there was no remit anymore for squatting in council places. There was no ability to squat in council places.

EVENT PARTICIPANT: These were all about council tenancies?

CHRIS 56A: These were all primarily about council tenancies.

SS: Because in the eighties there was a large number of vacant council houses?

CHRIS 56A: Thousands across London.

SS: What was the prime driver behind that? This isn't just a political decision by the government or by councils. This is surely people moving back into London and there's the need for the housing. Also, why do you get this decline in squatting from the mid 80s?

CHRIS 56A: You get the decline because there's just not the number of flats to squat.

AM: Because the councils had decided to evict people?

CHRIS56A: The councils take back control and are able, when someone leaves a tenancy and gives it up, to put someone in there fairly quickly

AM: Why are they motivated in a way they weren't ten years before?

CHRIS 56A: I think they were just completely untogether. There was this incredible rate-capping going on, and there were all sorts of sector cuts.

SS: Didn't they get the Right to Buy out of that?

CHRIS 56A: Rifo was 1980s. Council buildings then you could rent. It relates to that experience I mentioned earlier on when I worked in housing. From the squatting movement to the short life housing co-op, which is just a quick jump. And then into the housing associations and being given this very batch of empties to house the council's list. What was interesting about squatting / short-life housing, there's a tale to be told about the links between those. Short-life housing could house its own list. You become a member of a housing co-op, you wouldn't have to go on the council list. That's another tale to be told. As to why these rundown properties that would have been squatted, would have been short-life, were being traded in relation to the waiting list.

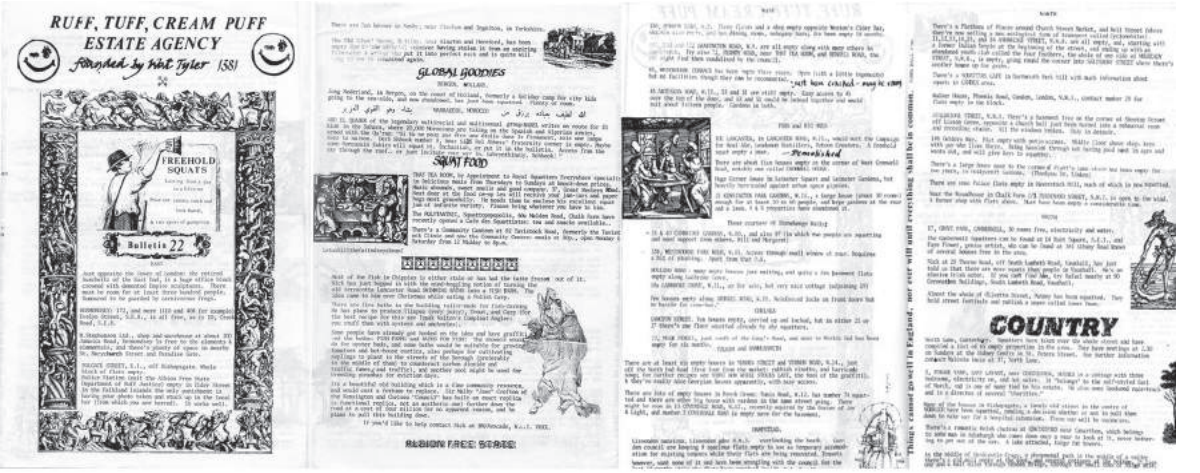
Interesting how many of those short-life housing co-op's lasted twenty or thirty years, and are now being taken back by the councils, like in Lambeth, so they'd be evicting all over the place, people who've been fairly secure and are quite elderly now.

EVENT PARTICIPANT: It's a contract, the housing association only gets the property for thirty years, right? They expect that during those thirty years for them to become self-sufficient and buy the property from the local authority, if they don't, after thirty years they come back. And what they usually do is, whatever opposition is in power, like the Tory Government, Thatcher was giving them money to refurbish the buildings. A person in Carol St, the Co-op, Tony Glor, ended up going and working for central government, showing people how to

set up housing associations, because they had squatted the whole Carol Street back in the 70s.

CHRIS 56A: The 56A is not squatted anymore, we pay rent, cheap rent, but we're part of the squatting movement still in that we run, twice a month, a practical squatting night, which is the most simple thing. For one hour we open the doors and anybody who's looking to squat comes, and we give legal advice. We basically say after half an hour, 'right, everyone just chill out' and hang out, look at the empties board, which is people looking for squats, leave a note or arrange for you to talk amongst yourselves. And often people say 'I know a house here, let's go crack it.' This is the legacy of what we do, but it's the only thing we do now. This is a document which is in a huge folder like this is in our archive. Basically we ran a public empties list for 5 years, which was very simple. It was one copy, which one of us would type up. A little bit of editorial on the front just explaining how it worked. Then it just goes down South London, Camberwell, Borough, London Bridge, and is anywhere that people said, 'oh, here's an empty factory, here's a pub', 'I've squatted this, I've been evicted but you can squat it again.' It's an amazing document, not only of how squatters organise themselves, and that local knowledge and sharing, but it's a really interesting document from the annotations, seeing the kind of things people were squatting, and the problems they had.

I was saying to Stevphen earlier, in some ways we inspired, because some of them have got little jokes in the name. There was the Rough, Tough, Cream Puff Squatting Estate Agency, which was run by Heathcote Williams, a quite famous poet.



Essentially SNOW and SHIP was that for people who would like to see a slice of late squatting period, post- all that council house squats. How it moves from just a very simple list to something with editorial and jokes. It

reflects upon itself. I'm just interested in that street knowledge, the techniques, this sharing, that squatting is mainly about. There are huge questions to ask about the class composition of squatting which I think is rarely really asked, and in this book there's a little article I wrote that says, 'a lot of people squat but they're completely invisibilised from the history of squatting' because the history of squatting, more or less, is through the organised squatting groups, which are either through anarchists or fairly middle class groups. They can historicize themselves, or they have access to publish books.

Through this practical squatting night we meet many people who are completely marginalized, who are either just looking for a place, or who have a different approach. They don't approach this as a political act, they approach it as shelter. They need something to get their head down. They're avoiding something. Or they just got a job and need a space. But they're not part of that very politicized squatting milieu, which also has its own mythologies. Its got a great history which is what we're looking at, but they're not organized squatters. And their histories, they don't exist. All there is is one book titled *No.1 Clapham Road: The diary of a squat* which is written by a group of homeless guys who squatted an old hospital there. And they produced this incredible book. It's about 1986. But that's like one of the few examples of very marginal people going, 'we're gonna document our history!' And they document very beautifully all the practicalities and problems they have of suddenly opening up a building for homeless people. They negotiate those things really well. But that's the difference from other histories that get written.

AM: You would think that organized squatting groups would be much more public and visible about 'we are doing this' but that other groups of people prefer to be unknown because then they're more likely to be left alone. They don't come at it the same way. They're not self-defined political people like many squatters are. The squat movement breeds or creates also different movements, different anarchist and autonomous social movements. They're much more interlinked. I met a migrant from Peru who said 'I just need a place or I'm fucked.' He wasn't going to get involved in all this stuff, although it's not a universal example. Of course there are many migrants that are involved in squatting and politics.

REBECCA CONROY: I really like that idea of the invisible squatters because there's certainly a level of exhaustion reached, just from a strategic point of view, that you really can't afford to draw attention to yourself. In Sydney that's very definitely the case. There's zero squatting. The last one just got moved out in the inner city. That had managed to survive for so long because no one knew about it. I was going to ask Chris about the regular meeting and the empties list – what does that look like now? As opposed to even fifteen years ago. What

does it look like? What does really stand out distinctions about that gathering as opposed to fifteen years ago?

CHRIS 56A: Nothing. I think it's the same in the sense that there's no empties list. It's quite primitive. For me it's the same. We always had a board where you go 'I'm looking for Squat Mates' or 'I've squatted a house and I've got space for four people'. That's never changed. That's in the same position it was in 1991. What has changed is the availability through internet. People always said, this is 2003, 'You should put this on the internet' or 'You should photocopy it.' We never did. We never distributed copies, because we're aware, our argument was, not only is it good to be around the social scene where you can get advice and chat, but if we distribute more than one copy, we'll miss all of the annotations that people put on it. It will get really confusing about the addresses. You just won't know. We have a lot of arguments about whether it should be a blog or whatever. It would be easy to trace as well it in the digital sphere makes it far more incriminating.

The thing you have to remember is that squatting in England was legal in some circumstances. That's why so many people came to squat. There are those estates and all the people squatting there. If you had a party, you would have twenty different nationalities in the room. It was really incredible. There wasn't fear. We're in a building that we rent from Southwark Council. We've always been completely oppositional. We were encouraged to squat all the places. They never came down heavy on us, unlike SHIP and SNOW. They were really heavy on us. They tried to get us struck off the Charities Commission. We got investigated by the Charities Commission. We were able to just dissemble and were fine. But we've never had a problem even though we've been there basically as a squatting organisation, or squatting point, for 24 years.

RC: We even get harassed for commercial buildings that are rented but are not being used in compliance with building code.

AM: What like living in?

RC: Even holding events. Obviously selling alcohol. It's just the whole building use doesn't comply with building code. It's quite heavy-handed in Sydney and Melbourne. That's the kind of harassment we deal with. We don't even deal with the squatting harassment. It's interesting, this street commune stuff we were talking about earlier, the same media themes come up again and again. I could give you cuttings that are 80s, 90s, 00s, 2010s, that are the same things about: 'Squatters are Preparing Weapons' and this and that in their squatting. It always comes before big demonstrations. It's an attempt to change ideologies again. To pacify and normalise society again. These journalists who follow the

line but their stories are placed in the media. If you were a media researcher you could just plot out following the names and the people writing. You could do that since the eighties as well. What you were saying, there isn't a great of stuff written about London squatting history. Think how many social centres there have been since the 80s, hundreds and hundreds, but very few times are there really systematic and historical accounts of all these scenes. Which is why these archives are really important.

EVENT PARTICIPANT: Squatters in in Den Haag… there's this huge building that's now a roundabout, all of it was covered. It was a school book depository. The whole building was covered in graffiti. What they did was they got two pieces of plywood and did photocopies, almost like a Chinese book, where they just taped and glue the pages together. It was an accordion, but it was everything about squat life. They made this out of a wooden top, wooden bottom, and scrawled on it or etched into it and then made copies. They were selling them for 5 euros, which was a bit expensive but it was unique, so I said 'OK, I'm getting one.' Now the buildings gone, the graffiti's gone, they've given up the property. In Camden, like the Dutch, we had somebody who was Health and Safety, who worked between Social Services and Housing Department, now they have access to all the vacant properties. We were very happy, in the 90s, to be given this list of empty properties which made our life much easier than the neighbourhood scouting that they have to do. We had a list. It actually brought the properties to the attention of the council. When they got to court the judge would say 'Well, is the money actually allocated for this financial year to refurbish this?' because they have to have it in to the Committee before the end of the financial year, or the beginning of the financial year, to allocate over thirty thousand. Anything over that thirty thousand has to go to Committee. The judge would say 'OK, you have no money to fix this property up this year, it's not in the budget … so these people can stay; they're homeless.' Then the council would take you to court. Judges now don't give a damn. You're out. You've got 24 hours. A lot of this commercial property is corporate, so you're not even dealing with owners. You're dealing with real estate agents, or representatives of corporations, who own the property.

CHRIS 56A: The last thing I'd say is how we notice in 56A that squat history, squatting is put on the internet, people are not producing the number of flyers they were. They're not producing the number of newsletters. It's all on internet. We can live with that. We're just not collecting those references to those social centres. There are many things that we don't now have around, convergence centres for political protest. A lot of stuff's on internet. Even worse, a lot of stuff now is on Facebook. None of us are on Facebook. We miss all of that. There's the question, 'do we then trawl the internet and print out?'

EVENT PARTICIPANT: Isn't that counterproductive, when the police are going to do the same thing? We squatted something in Camden Town, Camden High Street, a shop, and put on an art exhibit. When we opened it, we squatted it the night before, and cleaned it up. When we opened it the next morning and the debutantes were coming in with their artwork and the police were there. I said 'You're really here fast, you usually come a day or two after it's open', and he said 'oh, now we don't have to call … anymore, now we just have to look on the internet.' The policeman told me that when he showed up at the door.

SS: I'll throw up another interesting common contradiction of squatting. How since the rise of Anti-squat, Camelot, property guardianship – the notion that basically you have no rights but you're going to pay a company to stop people squatting. There are a lot of places now. There are squatters now who get a deal with the landlord and the landlord knows if you get a deal with squatters you're not going to pay rates. Are they essentially a form of property guardianship? Or are they squatting on it? It's really contradicting. Some of my friends were squatting, long term, had this kind of nightmare that they're doing the wrong thing, even though they're just doing what they've always done, which is squat a place. But there seems to be much more of a sea change where owners and developers go 'yeah, that's fine, we don't need the building, it's much better having you in there.' I know people who squat a building, and the owner says 'that's fine, and we'll charge you some rent, what do you think about that?' But they maintain them for six months instead of being out in two weeks.

EVENT PARTICIPANT: Have squatters ever confronted Camelot Guardians and said 'you can continue to stay but we're squatting this'?

CHRIS 56A: The one in Russell Square, Camelot was in there. For some reason the contract stopped. One of the people went there: it was squatted, they were evicted. Camelot came in, then they stopped paying them, or there was some dispute, so Camelot walked off. The squatters came right back in. The same crew, but a different crew, if you know what I mean. And when the representative came, with the so-called owner, the squatters actually said 'oh yeah, one of the disgruntled Camelot people gave us the keys,' even though they'd picked the the steel door lock. They said one of Camelot's people did it. They wanted to know "who did it?' And they said, 'oh, we can't tell you that'. Just a mind-fuck on Camelot. I've met people who want advice. They say 'I'm squatting,' then you find out they're property guardians. They're actually paying £80 a week to live like a squat. The thing to understand about squatting is that you don't pay rent.

AM: What's the future of squatting? If they criminalise completely it's going to be like Europe, where you have to defend your building, like other places where it's completely illegal.

SS: It's not criminalised completely?

CHRIS 56A: No, but here you can't now squat residential properties.

SS: So the commercials are still…

CHRIS 56A: The people who squat now in industrial estates and all sorts of places, but not really residential. It's a criminal offence.

SS: When was it made a criminal offence?

CHRIS 56A: Three years ago.

SS: How many court cases have there been in London?

CHRIS 56A: There was one or two right off the bat. There was some naïve new kid on the block up from Cornwall who moved up to London and went and fell asleep in some place. They threw the book at him. He just came to London, wasn't a squatter. There are actually hundreds that are squatting now.

There are people in South London, in residential units. But we'll never know. English law is subject to all kinds of precedents. There's been some interesting challenges, two instances I can think of are this: People were jacked into the sale of this expensive house in Bankside, which was a million pounds. They occupied it and said 'well, it is residential but this is a political protest, and this is nothing to do with us living here, we actually have places where we live.' The police went 'ok, that's fine.' And the other thing is when they squatted the Alyesbury Estate. The council said to the police, 'Can you get these out? This is residential' and the police said 'Look, this is a regeneration site. This is an empty block where you've just smashed all the toilets up. If you're decommissioning them it's nothing to do with us.' [Laughs] People are trying to get around this.

More Information:

Moore, Alan W. (2015) *Occupation Culture: Art & Squatting in the City from Below*. Brooklyn: Autonomedia.

Squatting Europe Kollective, Eds. (2013) *Squatting in Europe: Radical Spaces, Urban Struggles*. Brooklyn: Autonomedia.

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Collettivizzazione

Il nucleo familiare, nella società capitalistica funziona come mezzo di condizionamento ideologico; e così accade in ogni società basata sullo sfruttamento.
La famiglia, nel corso di questo ultimo secolo, ha poi perfezionato la suaforma di non-incontro, facendosi estrema negazione del lutto, della morte, della nascita, e di quel regno dell'esperienza che precede la nascita e il concepimento.
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Power, Knowledge, Hatred
Notes on Antagonism & Autonomist Epistemology

The worst of Italy! Not just merely slightly disreputable, but truly the *worst* of Italy…

These words are, of course, not mine. They were spoken by the Italian Minister of Public Administration on July 14, 2011 at a "Young Innovators" convention during which he was asked some questions about precarious workers, questions that apparently rubbed him the wrong way.

This really struck me when I read it at the beginning of Alice Mattoni's excellent treatment of recent mobilizations of precarious workers, *Media Practices and Protest Politics: How Precarious Workers Mobilise*. Mattoni thoroughly maps out the various dynamics shaping movements like the Euro MayDay, campaigns of direct action against austerity measures, protests against university reforms, labor organizing in call centers, and spectacular media actions staged to highlight precarity in the fashion industry.

Mattoni draws from communication and media studies to come up with a useful typology of media practices employed by the precarious. Most significantly she distinguishes between what she calls "relational media practices," or the media practices oriented towards working with media professionals, versus "activist media practices," or ones that are more concerned with the use of

media within the cycles and dynamics of movement composition themselves. A relatively simple way to think of this would be how it breaks down to internal and external dynamics of media use, in relationship to existing political movements and compositions.

This is all very well and good, and shows one of the better ways that the academic tools and disciplines, such as media and communication studies, can be made serviceable to autonomous politics. Mattoni describes a large portion of the cycle of movement composition, from the initial upswings and bursts of enthusiasm among the precarious that serve to create "a composite political subject able to act at the public level to express claims and demands" to the difficulties faced by organizers trying to mobilize precarious workers precisely because of how the fractalization of the labor process eliminates the common space of shared experience.[1] Or in workplaces where there is indeed a shared physical space, there could just as easily exist wildly varying contractual arrangements that serve to segment and divide the labor force.

Despite this and even with increasingly accurate sociological analyses of precarious labor's cartographies and composition, I'm still struck by a definite absence. And that 'something missing' returns us directly to the Italian minister so rudely calling out the precarious workers of the country as the 'worst of Italy.' This castigation is worth highlighting not only for its sheer pigheadedness, but for the very palpable dynamics of class hatred and condescension that are evident in such statements. The organization of a precarious politics hinges on a sensitivity toward these affective-level responses such as indignation or rage, which are as critical as is any analytical grasp of precarious labor's changing nature.

The minister's unabashed pronouncement restores our focus to the question of class antagonism, not as something to be described or theorized, or at least not just described or theorized, but rather class antagonism as a key dynamic for building and developing understanding. In other words, antagonism not as object of study, but rather as the intersubjective dynamic that structures/underpins and enables the subversive analysis and comprehension of capitalism. Antagonism is not an affective add-on, but rather a precondition. Toni Negri once made a claim (which came back to haunt him through the courts) about the warmth of proletarian community felt upon donning a ski mask. Perhaps it is time to assert again the necessity that responds with a raw antagonism to the class war waged from above with a ferocity building affective links among comrades.

Mario Tronti makes this point in *Operai e capitale*, a book that has been translated into English in excerpts, but not yet in its entirety. In the section published in essay form as "Social Capital," Tronti argues,

> Only from a rigorously working-class viewpoint will the total movement of capitalist production be comprehended and utilized as a *particular* moment of the workers' revolution. Only one-sidedness, in science and in struggle, opens the way both to the understanding of everything and to its destruction. Any attempt to assume the *general interest*, every temptation to stop at the level of *social science*, will only serve to better inscribe the working class within the development of capital.

Tronti here is working from what is usually referred to as the 'Copernican Turn' of autonomist Marxism, where it is the struggles of the working class that are emphasized and understood as the primary motor of history and determinant of capital's development. But here he's making a particular claim, not just about the importance of understanding struggles, but doing so in an explicitly one-sided manner.

What Tronti is warning against here is the disarmament of class antagonism, in other words the betrayal of class antagonism into social science tools. This cautionary note may seem counter-intuitive given that the early operaismo comes out of a very real engagement within Italian sociology, and can largely be understood as a process where industrial sociology was stolen back from the toolbox of management approaches and placed into the metaphorical working class overall's back pocket to be utilized in all kinds of sabotage, factory occupation, and so forth. Here Tronti is imploring us to keep the use of sociological tools as weapons, perhaps in the same vein that Pierre Bourdieu would constantly describe sociology as a martial art, as a means of self-defense.

Tronti is certainly aware of this. And that is precisely his caution, the warning he gives here: that any attempt to remove the antagonistic foundation from the analytical and political tools developed can only serve to reinscribe the working class within the development of capital. What Tronti is saying is that when you forget the invectives of the government ministers, of the factory foremen, of the agents of class domination who the very real hatred of sparked our first insurrectionary impulses – and replace them with sterile conceptual tools – is to lose the 'conceptual' class struggle, even if one appears to carry it on. For Tronti, antagonism, perhaps even full out class hatred, is the affective substrate from which any sense of theoretical and political coherence will and must be built.

This is a fragment of what one could suggest is a kind of autonomist epistemology, one that understands dynamics of class struggle and antagonism not just as historically, socially, and politically important, but also as critical to conceptual development, to philosophy. That is not as that working class movements are not just social configurations that concepts and ideas emerges from, rather they are also in their antagonistic formations precisely ideas,

words, made flesh in movement of uprising against domination and exploitation. This is what Ranciere gestures to when he comments that sociology, before it was an academic discipline or a denizen of universities, existed as "a war machine invented in the age of the aesthetic which is also the age of democratic revolutions," that existed as a project for the reorganization of society."[2] To develop an autonomist epistemology is to maintain a certain fidelity to these origins, even if moving and adapting with the changing situation. An autonomist epistemology then is not the deployment of concepts in order to fix and sanitize this antagonism, rather it is the movement of intensifying and extending it, deepening and developing the logic of antagonism as the foundation subversion against the nature of class society itself.

> The possibility of synthesis can only be unilateral… At the base of capitalism the whole can only be understood by the part. Knowledge is tied to struggle. Only those who truly hate, are those who truly know. Hence the reason that the working class can know and have everything from capital: because it is the enemy of itself, as capital. – Mario Tronti, *Operai e capitale*

Endnotes

1 Mattoni, Alice (2012) *Media Practices and Protest Politics: How Precarious Workers Mobilise*. Surrey: Ashgate, 42.

2 Ranciere, Jacques (2006) "Thinking between disciplines: an aesthetics of knowledge," *Parrhesia* Number 1, 6.

it is, now, the defense of the organizers and strikers [illegible]

A GOOD HINT; USE IT!

Sabotage

January 19th, 2015

To Frisk Flugt... to Fresh Escape…

Many apologies for my months of stalling, hemming, and hawing – and most importantly – not sending you the text I promised. But sitting in Café Oto waiting for a performance by Nommit, I've run out of reasonable excuses for not sending anything along. Nonetheless, my delays have not been entirely without basis. The problem is every time that I think I've come up with something interesting to say to yr initial question, then I find myself blocked and without another set of problems and contradictions. So what you're going to get is more gesturing towards these tensions and problems than anything that manages to magically solve them.

Sabotage. What would, or could sabotage mean today? What would sabotage in the social factory mean?

At a certain level it would seem obvious. Sabotage is clearly and extremely relevant in the history of class struggle. When you read through a book like Louis Adamic's excellent *Dynamite: The Story of Class Violence in America*, what you really have is a genealogy of different forms of sabotage, from the Wobblies to moment where more mainstream even found themselves embracing the practice, even if only tepidly and temporarily. I remember there being a lovely section of the book where Adamic talks about the ethics of sabotage, its reasons

and justifications, in ways that should defuse the many and repeated attempts to portray sabotage as mindless violence against the holiest of holies, capitalist property.

But as inspiring or valuable these histories are, the difficulty is transposing them into the present. Or to ask it again, what can sabotage mean in the social factory? This implies a number of difficulties. The most obvious being that if indeed we are at a point in time where the hegemonic form of value production and accumulation is based on knowledge, creativity, affect, finance, etc (in short in cognitive capitalism), then it would seem that sabotage does not work nearly as well within this framework. When subjectivity is put to work, how could one sabotage this production? You can lay down your tools, but can you lay down your life not as a suicidal defense, but as a moment of offense? Matteo Pasquinelli poetic treatment of the issue, *Animal Spirits*, is an evocative discussion of the sabotage of value production within the creative city. Fred Moten and Stefano Harney have been working through such questions with their concept of the undercommons, drawing from the black radical tradition. And I've approached these issues by revisiting the history of the art strike.

I remain ambivalent, but with several conclusions to offer. The first is that it's becoming clearer, and has been for several years (to say the least) that the cognitive capitalism thesis has been overstated. Put another way, even if forms of immaterial value creation are important, they are not the only ones operating. There are multiple and overlapping regimes of value production layered over each other, existing at the same time.

Precarias a le Deriva once wrote a nice piece where they analyzed changes in forms of labor, not by analyzing the labor forms themselves, but rather by studying kinds of refusal and resistance. That strikes me as quite important, and perhaps keeping closer to the original 'autonomist' Copernican inversion then much of the debates around immaterial labor. To quickly summarize their argument, repetitive and deadening work such as factory labor, tends to be met with pure refusal or exodus from the factory, which is very much what early operaismo analyzed through the concept of the "refusal of work." Conversely, forms of labor through which the worker tended to become heavily invested (for instance immaterial and symbolic work) tended to be responded to with critique rather then refusal. And stigmatized forms of labor (such as sex work) tended to be met with demands of recognizing the dignity of that work.

While Precarias a la Deriva only really address the first form as work refusal, all three fit the definition as forms of refusal, even if not in the same way. They are all demands to not be exploited in the same manner. Coming back to sabotage, my thought for the moment is that sabotage in the social factory would also not be one thing, but would more likely be three, four, or more things at the same time. Sabotage would rather be finding what can interrupt

the multiple forms of value production and extraction at work, and most importantly, finding a way to articulate linkages between them.

There are my thoughts for the moment. Cheers,
Stevphen

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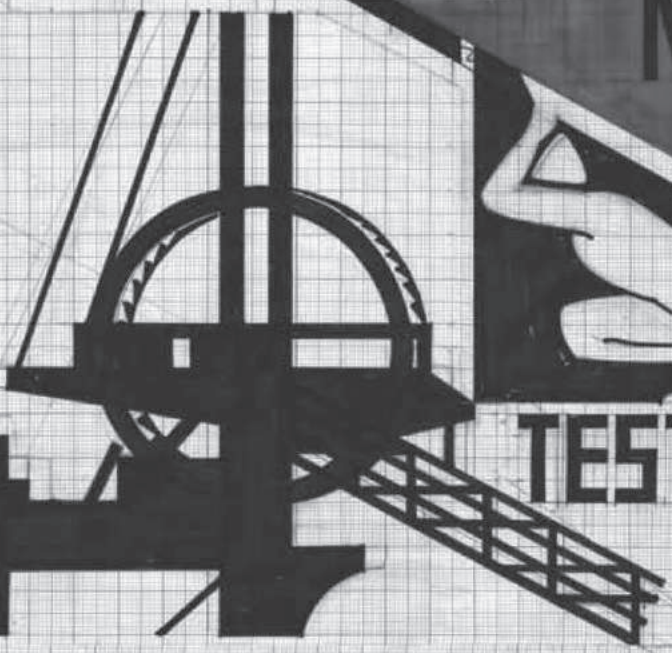

TEST DEPT.

SUPPORT THE MINERS

OUR WORK WITH HAMMERS

TOEIGHT

84 WINTER

Fuel to Fight
Conversation with Test Dept

Since their formation in 1981, the performance group Test Dept has been an amalgam par excellence for labor politics and industrial music and culture. Their performances and recordings bring together intense percussion and rhythm with constructivist aesthetics, but are designed to support ongoing organizing. This can be seen most clearly in *Shoulder to Shoulder*, an album they recorded with South Wales Striking Miners' Choir as a benefit in support of the 1984-1985 miners' strike in the UK. During the strike, Test Dept took inspiration from the travels of artist revolutionaries in post-1917 Russia. They journeyed around mining communities in the UK to build and strengthen forms of solidarity, encouraging people to find their voice through forms of creative resistance.

In 2015 Test Dept again toured across the UK to screen their film *DS30*. Marking 30 years since the miners' strike, *DS30* is a political collage of sound and imagery related to the miners' strike and its ongoing effects. The film is set within the monumental structural lines of Dunston Staiths built on the River Tyne in 1893 to ship coal from the Durham coalfields to the world. Featuring footage of mining communities and industry along the River Tyne and of the wider mining community together with footage and sounds from Test Dept's own archive for the strike, *DS30* reflects on the group's nationwide Fuel to

Fight Tour in support of the miners, during which they collaborated with local activists and mining communities.

This is a conversation held with Paul Jamrozy and Graham Cunnington after a screening of the film held at Firstsite in Colchester.

STEVPHEN SHUKAITIS (SS): The first thing I want to ask you about, even just in that small selection of films, it seems that over the time of Test Dept, you used a number of different approaches, from performing as a small group with percussion, or moving on to large theatrical pieces, or working with a choir. You were using many different kinds of approaches, and even where you were playing in disused rail stations or in disused industrial spaces. What motivated your choices to 'let's do this project here in this railway factory or let's do this project with this …'. How did you approach what you were doing?

TEST DEPT: First of all was where we started in South London in the early eighties. The landscape was kind of desolation, a post-industrial landscape of broken down factories, desolate empty docks, and miles and miles of scrapheaps and scrapyards. Our instruments came from there. And in a way our inspiration came from there. We always tried to look, from the beginning, outside of the mainstream, outside of the rock'n'roll norm, with our instruments, but also with our focus, our ideas, and inspiration. We tried to play in places of our choosing. Eventually we expanded that to larger shows. We used the building as an instrument, as part of our shows, an an actual piece of work. That was the initial push. We were always looking to work in different areas and try to expand our range of possible expression into all different forms. We worked with dancers, film-makers, political speakers, sculptors, gymnasts, from all over the arts.

SS: But I'm guessing when you started off it was a much different context, both politically and culturally. Or was it?

TEST DEPT: When we started off we lived collectively in South London. There was a lot of empty housing and therefore there were lots of squats. We were lucky enough to turn some of them into housing co-ops, so there was social living. Within those environments there were lots of young people who would meet up. Everyone was doing different things. It just became a natural thing for us to link up with different groups. As we got more adept at that, we expanded that into working with people outside of our local community. When we started off doing the first benefit for the miners we asked someone who is a local Labour Party activist in Deptford if he knew a Welsh choir, because we would like to play with one, and he had a real passion for Welsh male choirs.

We made phone calls to South Wales and found out that it's quite difficult. These choirs don't exist anymore. There wasn't a South Wales Miners Choir, because the South Wales choir is made up of magistrates, police… people who are on the other side of the argument. In order to do that they went around and they managed to form a choir, different choirs in different villages. The first time they rehearsed was when they got on the bus to London to do a benefit in Northern Deptford with us. That was a great experience for them and for us. It was a bit of a culture shock for them, coming to London for the first time. From that we developed it. We went down to Wales and we recorded them in their community. Then we went out on the road and performed all over Britain.

During that process, we invited other people from other mining communities to join up and play with us and use their creative abilities to put their voice out there as well. That's why we linked up with Alan Sutcliffe who you see quite a lot in that film. He's a Kent miner, and the Alysham community.

We worked with Alan from that moment. The track you heard, talking about when he was arrested and beaten up by the police, this was his statement he gave over time. That track we did after the strike actually, he worked on about two albums with us after that at different times. And he came out to Canada when we played at Expo on Britain Day representing Britain. We had Alan and various other misfits.

SS: If we go back a step, was the strike the first time that you got directly involved in a cause, for instance by doing benefits? Was it that you were political before, but in an abstract sense. Now this is absolutely concrete. What was it about the miner's strike that caused you to cross that line and get directly involved?

TEST DEPT: As you say we had been political before. We looked at manipulation, control, power, state power, and the way that society is manipulated to feel and think, whether that be advertising or whatever. We were going with those notions but it was more broadly looking at that without taking a stance. We started off with a kind of socialist or anarcho-socialist point of view, but the miners' strike, by that time it had become… we couldn't really sit on the fence on the miners' strike. We saw it, at the time, it was a fight for the future of the country, of one way of thinking or another. We were galvanised to do that by the importance of the event. After that, with travelling out to those communities, working with those communities, and the instant connection we had with them. We kind of carried on in that vein. Once we kind of nailed our flag to the mast we went on to more kinds of direct political action.

SS: And how did that work with your development of the visuals? And the films?

TEST DEPT: We worked with a film-maker Brett Turnbull. He'd been to film school and studied Vertov and Eisenstein and the early Soviet film-makers. We were already using visuals as a backdrop at the time but when he saw us he saw the potential there to make it into a more propagandist presentation. He projected us as these big propagandised figures or as tiny little drones within the bigger picture to bigger thing that was bigger than the individual and wasn't about egos or being presenting yourself onstage as a star. It was about a collective body that was presenting a big message. He'd already had these notions.

Our political life started sharpening during the Falklands War because we'd seen then how propaganda could be used by the state to really gain power for themselves. Thatcher, at the time, was one of the most unpopular leaders for a long time. After the Falklands War she elevated herself to this huge figure using jingoism. We saw that and thought the idea of presenting yourself to be bigger than what you are could work against the state as well as being subjected to it. Part of what we did when we went out on the miners tour was we'd had this idea. In the early years of the Russian Revolution, a lot of artists would go out on these Agit trains. Go to the countryside and link up with people, make films about what they were doing, project them back and have this kind of educational or agitated way of working with people. We had that kind of notion when we went out on the miners' tour. It developed from there really.

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SS: Public Enemy used to talk about how they were CNN for black people. In a way it sounds like Test Dept was taking on a similar role, but for working class communities.

TEST DEPT: We'd be filming stuff, what the miners and working people were seeing on the TV screens. The news was not a reality that they were seeing in their lives at all. It wasn't representing that at all. We see with the Orgreave decision yesterday about the Orgreave battle where the BBC turned it around. The BBC showed the first stones were thrown by the miners. The reality was that the police charged them and provoked. We were going out and filming stuff from the TV, from everything, all different sources, including a lot of documentary material which you saw in these two films. And we were projecting that onto the screens as well, doing a live news report. That was slightly different from the BBC's version.

SS: In the films there's lot of talk about for those villages it was like being under occupation, because you had police taking over villages. You've got that graffiti in the film *Living in a Police State*. How much of that did you experience? How much of it did you feel personally?

TEST DEPT: We saw it as we were travelling up and down the country. We had a big old black Leyland bus. And we painted it matte black. It looked quite like a police bus. As we were travelling around the country in that doing benefits for miners right up to Scotland, all over the place. The roads were just full of police blocks. There were just blocks everywhere, especially going up around Nottingham, but across all the tunnels and bridges in London. Everywhere in the country there were blockades. You'd go up the motorway and there'd only be one lane because the other two were mile after mile of police vans. We experienced it that way. We went on some of the picket lines. Easington is featured in the last film *DS30*. There's a photographer there who went there for a few weeks, Keith Patterson. He got a commission to go there by the *Observer* for a few weeks. He went there and got embedded in the community and just stayed there throughout the strike. He left a couple of times, but his pictures are very emotive. Easington was significant in that. The first miner to go back to work was in Easington. Three thousand police in this small village, to enable this one miner who lived outside the village to go to work. They occupied the village. You see the pictures there of the police lines and people just coming out of their doorways, women and children running away from the police. At one point they surrounded Easington completely, for three days, and the didn't let anyone in or out. It was occupation, completely like a war.

SS: One thing I was surprised to find out about, do folks know about what happened in Wivenhoe during the miners' strike? During the miners' strike there was a massive amount of picketing and police presence in Wivenhoe. When I read up on it, at one point there were two thousand cops in Wivenhoe, which is a tiny village. Two thousand police officers in a tiny village. And I was shocked by the way the miners' strike was used to vastly increase police powers. There were people getting arrested in Blackwall tunnel trying to come up here, very far away from any picket line. 'We suspect there's going to be a breach of the peace therefore we're going to have to arrest you' – two hundred miles away from where we think you're going! There was a police checkpoint at the Greenstead roundabout. The point being it wasn't just a labor strike, it was also a much broader conflict around police powers, state powers, and social structure.

TEST DEPT: Yes, definitely it was the start of the militarization of the police, which you can see now much more clearly. The police have always been the enforcers of the ruling elite, but the miner's strike was the open door. There was no attempt to make themselves seem neutral or anything, it was very, very much on one side. That was the whole point about the politicisation during the miner's strike, it was a very polarizing situation. It was hard. It was very difficult to not get really involved in it. Standing up for miners.

***

SS: How would you say these materials speak to the present?

TEST DEPT: *DS30* was part of a project that we were invited to do last year for the thirtieth anniversary of the miners' strike. The significance of that was that it was the thirty-year anniversary of the Freedom of Information Act. More stuff was bought into the public domain. There's obviously other stuff that was completely covered up and may never reach the light of day, only when it is safe to do so. What is important is that it is a reminder and it is a wake-up call for people, otherwise the history just gets forgotten and submerged. And it gets revised, it gets hidden away.

It is really important to keep the memory alive. The real important thing is that it is not forgotten because it's not only nothing's changed, but we've come full circle. We're in exactly the same place now. The new union laws, they've just announced they're bringing in, to absolutely to wipe out the unions again, which Thatcher started. The thing is people forget. People get older and then the younger generation come through. Unless you talk about it, you lose that history. And if you lose that history you lose your vision of where you are in the place. The miner's strike was the start of the neoliberal society that we're living in now in Britain. Thatcher and Reagan kick-started that in the Western world. I work with younger people and they know about the strike but they don't really know the importance of it. That's why it needs to be kept up. We were talking with Katy Shaw who's written a book on the strike with poetry and Q&As. She was saying unless you can remember the thirtieth anniversary but on the fortieth, and then in between it'll be forgotten. You need to remember thirty-first and thirty-second, and not in a nostalgic way. We tried not to be nostalgic with this film. The bleak ending didn't give it much nostalgia but it also said this is the reality of where we are. This industry was wiped out. If you don't watch out every industry, every working class block of power, will be wiped out. The villages there, you see all the mines closing, but the villages are still there. There's five million people living in former mining communities in Britain. Most of those have high unemployment. High drug problems. High crime and no shops, no cinemas and everything else is gone from those villages. There's nothing left and people still live in them and there's just nothing there. It's like they're still being punished. It's just relentless, no pity.

SS: It's hard for me to really comprehend just how much that has shaped the country, whether socially or in terms of the landscape.

TEST DEPT: In the village, mine was a mining village in South Wales, there used to be a miner's hall there, there's now a block of flats. There's no evidence. The

landscape's totally changed. What we were showing at the end is the thing is the erasure of evidence. The hills used to be slag heaps but are now grassed over. If you erase the landscape, it's a political act. It's like erasing the memory. If you go to the North-East, it's the same. You saw that at the end, that map of the mines, how many mines are closing. That was where mining started. There were so many mines and there's nothing left. There's two, or maybe just one, mining heritage centre, in which we set the film on for the installation. There's the springboard for the film. That's the only monument to any industry on the Tyne. The Tyne supplied the coal industry, the steel industry, and the ship building industry. It was the centre for all there. It was the biggest ship building industry in the world, biggest steel industry, biggest coal industry in the world. There's not one bit of evidence left.

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SS: Test Dept in the 1980s was performing in a period of music being intensely political. Sometimes it seems like that has changed, or gone away. Or maybe not. What do you think? Has subversion has been sucked out of our music?

TEST DEPT: It's difficult really. It has. It's still there but it's gone into different forms. The trouble is music was a real kind of magnet. It was a collectivizer, it could pull people in. A lot of it's gone to social media which doesn't do that. You can form really good networks. A lot of the struggles around Europe and Spain and the square occupations and the struggle in Greece and even here a lot of smaller strikes have been successful through social media elevating that. But people have to come together to do it as well, you have to be on the street because you can't just 'share' and 'like' things on social media. You have to get out on the streets and change things. There's not that music. There's lots of people doing political music. There's still people doing rap and hip-hop, artists who do quite political stuff. But there's not a movement. There's not an engagement in that way. You can't think, 'this is the soundtrack' to the square occupation in Spain. There probably is, there's probably flamenco stuff, I don't know. But the anti-Tory movement here, you can't think of a music that's absolutely the soundtrack to that. That's the whole kind of digital culture that's come in. People are more isolated, they're happier to just be in their own world and doing their own thing. They don't get out and there's no kind of tactile-ness. That collectivity has dissipated. It's far more complicated than that, but that's one of the reasons.

SS: Speaking of collectivity, can you talk about how you see the relationship between the aesthetic of the film, the music, and the political content. The film has an incredibly strong aesthetic. You mention Eisenstein and Vertov. Those

are directors coming from a current of political art, Russian constructivism, which is very focused on collectivity as an aesthetics, but also as a politics and model for a new society. How do you see the aesthetic choices that you make? How do you see those arising and converging with the political content that you're obviously very committed too as well? It just struck me that one of the ways that this works as a form of memory is because it's not just telling us what happened, it's transforming the memories into something.

TEST DEPT: We had a few conversations yesterday about that. There's lots of archives but rather than just presenting with news in a kind of way that's nostalgic it's trying to use that in a different way that's exciting and fresh. When we decided to make that film, we set out with the intention of it being a propagandist statement. The idea that it would be raw emotion, and make you physically feel what was going on as well.

I was talking about Vertov, and some of the early Soviet film-makers, Eisenstein, around that time there was a lot of people using composers who were composing music that was made up of noises, machinery, sirens, real life. The idea was working in the same kind of way using found-sound and using your environment, bringing it to life.

SS: Perhaps starting by turning south London into your factory to work from, through, and against?

TEST DEPT: We've always used our environment. We've always made music, in a way, from what's around us. The same way we make films, where we do everything in a way. Some of the aesthetic came from our archive which we filmed off the TV, so there's so very scratchy stuff in there. It's authentic, it's real, and was filmed then by us. Some of the interviews we acquire by us we filmed. The choice of archive material was what we found and what we felt told the half of the story. We went to North East film archive … BBC North East. Loads of different archives we kind of went through, and it was just what we could get out of that. We couldn't just use everything. We had to be quite picky because we couldn't afford to just use everything. And then, with this, the initial Staithes, because we were doing it on the Staithes, part of the kick to do it, the inspiration, was the Staithes, because they'd been forgotten as the only monument to their history in the whole of the North.

Now they're heritage protected. They just got that. They wanted to animate them in some way and to get them out there into the world. We did that with the story. The story came from the Staithes, to the mines, to the mining community, to the unity and the actual incredible vibrancy of life and cohesion of those communities. We contrast that at the end when that cohesion's gone and there's nothing left. It's the historian, the 'art of the story' is what kind of gave

the aesthetic, and what we could find, and what we had. Our music is always like that.

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SS: There was a story that you were telling about a few weeks ago. You have an early track called "Shockwork," which is a very propulsive, metal-sounding track. The interesting thing you were saying before is how you started rehearsing as a band, preparing by spending eight hours in a basement in Deptford. There was a literal 'shockwork' being undergone in order to produce what they were doing. I can't imagine how much energy it takes to play for eight hours with a bunch of pieces of metal you're beating the crap out of.

TEST DEPT: When we started we were just a bit obsessed and we did play for eight hours a day for a year and a half or something. Anger management and work out the testosterone. When we started off, we weren't drummers, and we wanted to use metal. Originally the idea was for a band to use rhythm and voice, and nothing else. We were disillusioned with the death of punk. We were punks in a way, not exactly but sort of. That promise of revolutionary music, but it wasn't it was just another rock'n'roll phase in a way. As you can see by the new Sex Pistols credit cards. With the death of that, we wanted to make revolutionary music, that was revolutionary in every aspect of what we did. It was rhythm. And then we ended up in South London with these materials. We couldn't really play and we weren't very strong. We had to get strong and that just developed over time.

More Information:

Cunnington, Graham, Paul Jamrozy, and Angus Farquhar (2015) *Total State Machine*. Bristol: PC-Press.
Test Department: https://testdept.org.uk
Test Department DS30: http://www.testdeptds30.co.uk

We hate the users
Interview with UBERMORGEN

Several decades after the birth of artivism and net art, UBERMORGEN continue to make art with and about networked society. But where net art 1.0 was largely critical of capitalism's use of networks, today UBERMORGEN's tactics work through an aesthetics of affirmation.

UBERMORGEN are nothing if not a little contrarian. Operating mainly as a digital and net art project since forming in 1995, their work cuts stridently against two quite prominent clichés in the way digital media and art is discussed: first, the celebration of the utopian potentials of digital media and technology; secondly, how participatory dynamics in artistic practice are argued to form the basis of political engagement, whether in relational aesthetics, social practice, or some other framework. And these two ideas often converge, where the alleged democratizing potentials of digital technology and participatory artistic practice are supposed to converge into wonderful net art that will liberate us all.

UBERMORGEN however have focused their work much more on exploring the dark sides of technology and the net. While this focus may seem incongruous in the various cycles of new-economy fuelled tech fetishizing,[1] today it makes all too much sense. The approach has varied across their many projects, but tends to focus on exploring the formal properties of technologies and systems, as well as the more antagonistic elements found within them. At

the run up to the opening of their first exhibition in 2013 at Carroll / Fletcher in central London, I interviewed them as the exhibition was being set up.

STEVPHEN SHUKAITIS (SS): One thing that strikes me is how one could see how your work over the past ten to fifteen years has focused on the dystopian, dismal side of sort of technology – the workings of technology and its power, in a kind of Ballardian way. But it seems is that over recent years the dark side of the net, rather than being something that needs to be revealed or drawn out because it's obscure, has become really obvious. If that is the case how does that change your work and approach?

UBERMROGEN (U): Indeed, many things changed. They always do, but after 9/11 you could still ignore legal situations that had been put in place, at first. But over time, from around 2005, the so-called terror measures from the US started creeping into European legislation, such that you can't just work anymore as you did before. We just didn't care about the legality of it all, it always used to be okay. But when you're suddenly confronted with all these anti-terror laws, it's not just the laws themselves that govern your work, but it's the implication that these laws really have.

Because we're not just talking about getting sued, that you might have to stand in court or whatever, but they don't need any courts to apply their terror laws. Terror laws operate without courts, and that's a huge leap. For us with most projects it's never the question 'why should we do it,' it's mostly a question of 'why should we not do it' – because it's interesting, let's just go for it. But when you're confronted with the possibility of getting into serious, deep legal trouble, then it's not fun anymore. It just really spoils the party.

SS: Indeed. One could think of the impact on someone like Steve Kurtz from the Critical Art Ensemble. How would you say this has affected your work?

U: Take a project like Vote-auction, now you couldn't do it. You could, but we'd have to set up a whole different technical and personal scenario in order for the project to be working – but then it's not the same project anymore. Because with a venture like Vote-auction, it works by using the impetus of the moment. You're not trying so much. You do have a plan in the back, and you can always outsmart possible opponents, but it's not laid out clearly. And that's why you would have to go do it in secret, to protect everything about yourself, and have everything done anonymously. That is a different question and so you can't work the way we did in the beginning of the 2000s. That's just not possible anymore.

SS: How does that dynamic feed into your current work and this exhibition? I'm thinking in particular here of pieces like "Do You Think That's Funny?" Would you rather have something publicly displayed then – even though in that display you have something that can't be seen being transmitted going back and forth between two cables. Or basically you there's some information that is exhibited, and you know it's there, but you can never know what it is.

U: That's all pretty much always the case, right? Obviously we understand that for a large public these revelations, whether by Manning or Snowden or whoever, may be news – but of course they're not news to us and they're not news to lots of other people. They're not news to anyone who has any knowledge about technical aspects of the internet, plus some psychological intelligence. It always tells you anything that can be done, will be done; thusly this is not all new. But how do you visualise something that's illegal by now to visualise, even though it exists out there in the world? Everyone knows it. Whole societies depend upon this shit, you know, but don't show it. And so that's why we have to do projects in secret. That's why we started kind of doing our secret project where we installed Amnesia machines at home.

And so we did a few test runs of secret projects. We showcased them once in Amsterdam. It was kind of bizarre because we were actually planning a complete project but knowing if we do what we want to do, we can't do it as UBERMORGEN. That's when we said 'okay, let's do a secret project.' And then the idea was to install the machines and the whole setup… but not showcase the content, just the formality of it. What we've come up with here, where it's all very formal if you look at it, because you just have the machines and just the hardware. The data is there. In Amsterdam we didn't have any data. Here we do have data, but it's not accessible.

SS: Is that an overall shift in your practice where the focus is not as much as showing what's happening, but rather what gets hidden?

U: Yes, because before we go into hiding… you can do that once in a while, it's fine, but as a mindset it's stupid. You go into hiding. You're just defining yourself as a loser that way. Of course sometimes it makes sense. We always like using affirmative approaches. When you say 'it's secret, this is all very secret so let's keep it that way,' that means that you can't show any work anymore. Then that's the way it is because that's what society wants. So let's totally embrace that. Yes, sometimes it's even less work for us. The only downside to it is basically a market problem because for certain projects we cannot attach to our brand anymore, so it's kind of anonymous. But this very much plays into the current situation. It's not a coincidence that Anonymous became so important because that's the logic of the moment. It's the logical conclusions from 9/11

up to now, that basically you are only able to operate in an anonymous capacity if you want to do what you want to do: if you want to enjoy and live the freedom you are entitled to as a human being.

SS: This is quite interesting the way you're framing it. Previously I had thought there were two main strategies in your project. One would be to finding ways to intervene in particular assemblages of technology, power, and social relationships. In other words, to ask 'What are our options? What could we do with this arrangement?' The last time we talked I was struck by the emphasis on coming into a situation without a preconceived notion of what you want to accomplish, to conduct research into them by transforming them, but without a preconceived goal in mind. This is quite different from the vast majority of 'political art' or 'activist art practice.' And then the second strategy is taking things that are already happening, already in motion, and seeing what you can make out of them. And that's something more evident in projects like the oil painting and Deephorizon project, where you declared that oil spill to be the world's largest oil painting. It's not that you're actually necessarily doing something yourself. You're taking what's already there and asking, 'well, what is this?' How can we aestheticize this or understand it in a different way?' Based on our conversation here it sounds like there's a third approach where the focus is more about creating formal spaces for the exploration of what can't be said. And it seems impossible for that space to exist, why is that?

U: That's right. We did a workshop in Damascus a few years ago. There were a few people who had project ideas that were rather critical of the 'Powers That Be' at the time, but they said 'well, we can't publish it this way.' So we suggested they try to go the other way, don't criticise, just find holes where you can kind of dig into it. You've got to be affirmative about it, but just pick something that doesn't make any sense in the society but is, you know, positively sanctioned by the government and then just overemphasise it. And there was one project that did this, it had to do with Assad's being an eye doctor and just talking about this incredible aptitude in seeing things. We just started talking about it and it was clear they can do something with this because he's an eye doctor, he knows what he sees, and that way you can talk about stuff you're not supposed to talk about.

And this works really well with any kind of suppressive authority that in place because you're not criticizing an authority. And sometimes it just really doesn't make sense to criticise authorities, because if an authority is set up like the one in the US or the UK, so they have ultimate powers, what all the criticism will get you is in prison in the end. You already know up front that you're going to lose, unless you kind of set up a revolution. Unless you want

to prove the point that 'I'm doing this and already going to prison for it,' but that doesn't make sense.

SS: That seems fairly tactically nonsensical indeed.

U: In Singapore we're seeing the same thing. You know, if authority or government or dictatorships, they always have a few big advantages to them, right? Safety, for example. Criminality tends to go down a lot because you have… but…

SS: Or the continued existence and construction of public housing.

U: Yes, that's clearly very positive. But then the question becomes asking which dictatorship do you prefer? Do you prefer the dictatorship in Syria or the democracy in Kenya? The situation we're in right now, we have these very authoritarian laws in place. If any country has laws that allow the state to put you in prison without any courts, then it's a dictatorship by definition in the end. You can still vote, but we all know what that has become. It's all freaking mayhem. We're all occupied in our consumerism and freedom to consume. That's awesome, isn't it? At the moment it's really important to kind of look at what can be done and what can't be done and, as you point out rightly, it's also important to look at what cannot be done. Yes, it's not as flamboyant but, yes, we think it's important.

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SS: One thing that I wanted to ask you about is previously UBERMORGEN has been described as a kind of digital Viennese Actionism. Could you talk a bit about that and how Actionism influences your work?

U: The first time we made this connection was around the time after the Vote-Auction project, basically because we suddenly felt that it's all about the body. It's just the body is the medium in the end, even if it's a completely mass media digital project. Because in the end all the energy, all the informational data, all the pressure, all the fear, the aggression, everything is going through your body and you're like a membrane. So all the things we do, as we see it, there is a consistency there, even if it doesn't look that way. It's socialization and artistic socialization. This aspect is always part of the work.

SS: That's quite interesting in the sense of highlighting how digital, rather then being dematerialised, is actually about material effects on the body: how

media affects you, how everything comes back to, yes, back to the body ultimately, right?

U: Yes, it's physical. It's a very physical role. Even if the networks have become part of our reality, the networks are very physical. We've always been majorly fascinated by cables. Complete cable fetishism, deep-sea cable fetishism. That first infected us by Neil Stephenson's 1996 article in *Wired Magazine*.[2] It's like a thirty or forty-page essay where he travelled for two or three months along cable building sites and with ships laying cable in the oceans. And if you understand this and then if you're close to the hardware – that's why we like to work here also with hardware and we want to show the routers and we want to show the iPhone-sized servers and shit like that. It is physical, it is about hardware. That's also where there is this link, because in the end the Actionists were also kind of stating that in the end it's all about excrement and sex and body and violence and love and shit like that: that it comes down to the basics. And you can go anywhere you want; you can go to space, you can go into the cable, into what we did with etoy in the 90s, complete digital emigration. You use drugs along with it and you lose your body, but your body fucks up. You end up in a psychiatric hospital to get better, you end up as a chemical cyborg.

SS: Exactly. And in a weird way that's kind of the point. Or at least that's the argument that Bifo has been making for the past few years: that the entire net economy and its multiple bubbles was held together by this illusion of unlimited productivity largely fuelled by various chemical substances. And thus the economic crash can be understood as a kind of exhaustion, what occurs when the body is depleted, and with it the hyper-productivity which was providing the illusion of unlimited growth. There's only so far it can go before it collapses, and quite spectacularly.

U: We like the idea of exhaustion, although we haven't come across Bifo's texts on this, but, or this idea, but actually exhaustion is something we have come up with. There's a quote in the 'u s e r u n f r i e n d l y' publication for the gallery in an interview with Tobias Noebauer – he's an Austrian physicist. And I used the quote by this Austrian researcher who says that basically what's going on now, this massive surveillance by entities like NSA and other such organizations has led to the impossibility and in consequence the total exhaustion of the surveillance apparatus.

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SS: On another topic, how did you start doing the sort of pixel painting images, because it seems the first was a very sort of strange process to have sort of hand painted versions of heavily pixelated images?

U: The shopping cart images were first… they are basically the original pixel paintings or grid paintings because it's the original resolution. So what you do is you just blow it up and you make a pixel. You have to do the right pixel repetition, then you can blow it up and then it'll be exactly the same thing, just in large, and that's it. We were doing live grid painting while 9/11 happened, we took thumbnail sized images from online news sources. We used thumbnails because that's kind of the information distance we are at. So you've got like 60 by 40 pixels and that's about the information you get. So in the 256 websafe colors that's all. What you see is what you get. And this is a very nice, if you want to put it in this way, it's a very nice comment on mass media and how we, how… what the information depth is we get out of these channels.

It's the same thing here we've done with Singapore Psychos. The other thing that it offers you, like a therapist offers himself as a blank page for your projections to be mirrored back to you, to be reflected on. Something like that, with a title like Singapore Psychos, or then with the 9/11, it offers you a chance to fill in the empty blank spaces. And another thing is really interesting; if you do that on the image, you see much more. So there's it's, and there you have another effect, it's the brain. The brain creates an image that is not actually there. The image is underlying but it's physically actually not there, but it creates… by you tweaking your eyes together, suddenly you see more of the person than there actually is, so that's another level of these paintings where the observer has to operate with a reduced mass of information. We as human beings can't process every molecule in the universe, but our brain has the capacity to close gaps, essentialize and then individually complete fractional information… it seems as if our senses, our interface… have a very limited resolution but we seem to be able to work around this limitation.

SS: By leaving more out of the image you actually demand more of the viewer to look at it.

U: Well, the thing is just, I mean, it's not talking about reality versus virtual reality, but mediality. What we refer to as reality very often is just mediality, and also because that's how human nature very often prefers to observe reality, you know, by some media. And it happened during 9/11: we very often heard that people watched TV in order to confirm reality. It's not really surprising, but then it makes itself precise. It's still interesting to see how mediality is stronger than reality. But what we get via the media is usually just really small thumbnails. The way that we perceive our society is by thumbnails. In real

life you zoom into something and you get more detailed information. In a mediality-driven world you zoom into something and all you see is that there's nothing there, or then your brain and imagination kicks in and starts to do weird things…

SS: That seems to be a sort of general aesthetic strategy you have across multiple projects, the use of heavily pixelated images. But it's clear from the way you're framing it here that it's much more than just an aesthetic approach, but is a kind of political claim itself, or a structuring of a claim of the political.

U: Yes, it's part of what we're setting up right now on the floor below. There's this partially printed canvas of bare chested Putin fishing, which will be outshined by the projection of an Animated GIF onto the canvas But he gets taken out of the image, and then the background is re-constructed. Putin dissolves into the forest. And even though it doesn't matter if this pixel is not dark grade and the other one… because it's a forest, it doesn't change anything. But on the other hand, it's not… it doesn't exist. It just looks totally fine and you couldn't tell that it's fake because it's such a low resolution. You can only tell if it's high resolution that something has been faked. In one sense it doesn't make a difference if the trees now grow this way and not that way. But on the

other hand, it's really not there and it doesn't… and if it's just a forest maybe it doesn't make a huge difference, but with lots of other things it does make a huge difference.

SS: But that's a different kind of approach rather than, for instance, doing a project where you say 'we're being blinded' or rather than just saying like there's very little information, but actually then just sort of working, engaging with that low information level on its own terms, rather than critiquing it.

U: Yes, absolutely. That's why we use them. You referred to that in the beginning about the non-agenda or the non-intentional or non-goal strategies of how we work, yes, so that's one part of it and we're not… it's rather an affirmation of existing systems and technologies. We'd rather embrace it because there is a lot of beauty in it. If you look at it from an aesthetic point of view there's a lot of very beautiful or very interesting visual content. And then you can use the technique of over affirmation if you want to make a point, but you don't… we don't have to make a point. We don't want to make a point.

We don't want to make a point because if you… because the point is there is not one point. You cannot fix it down to something that you can visualize, things that you like or that you find interesting. That is something we consider as our responsibility – sharing, free, all our findings. That's the only thing. Openness is our only responsibility, so that's what we do.

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SS: On the way here I was talking with a friend about some of your previous projects and about this aspect of not having any particular politics attached to them. My friend was quite befuddled by this, as she seemed to think there was quite clear political meanings and intentions in them, that for instance Voteauction was really about democracy. But this makes me wonder, if your intent is specifically to keep open a space not having to be fixed by your intents, how do you stake out that space? How can work keep open that space without having to commit yourself to some notion of politics, even if it's just the politics that justifies that space itself?

U: It's a fundamental misunderstanding. But having said that, the intention of the producer of a work and the reception, the user, are two completely different things. They have nothing to do with it and we don't want them to have to do anything with each other because we don't want to know. We hate the users. And we love the users! But we don't want to know. They can do whatever they want with this. That's our philosophy. It's like information, the moment you release it, and this applies for our work, as well as for an interview, as well

as for any kind of information – the moment you release it into the wild, mass media, online, whatever, it's… it'll be used. It'll be used by people, by journalists for their own agenda, by people who'll be manipulated, etc, and that's good so. We can't control it anymore. So we're only the producers and our intentions are ours. They're private. They don't have to… you don't have to know. We don't want you to know. So there is… that's a fundamental misunderstanding that people… that's why we try to make the point. Every lecture we start off with saying 'this is not political art.' We are not activists; we're actionists. Yes, we work with our body, we work with certain contents, but we're not politically motivated. There is no goal.

SS: But even staking out that as a sort of claim is something in a context of the past ten to fifteen years when the virtual religion of participatory art as salvation become so widespread, as some of attempted redemption for the sins of art or something like that. The argument you're making here is not just about not having intentions, it's going against the conflation of ethics, aesthetics, and participation in a direction that is almost militantly non-intentional, militantly almost non-participatory.

U: We don't care. We're opportunists, and don't give a fuck. We have our personal, private, political or social views, but they don't have anything to do with our art on this level. Why do you think, yes, a work that we produce together has one political vector and wants to make a point? What the fuck? For Vote-auction we were pretty much in favour of what we actually didn't do, selling and buying votes, because it was obviously on one level what's already happening anyways… it was only afterwards when we opened up and reported that it was a complete fake. We didn't during the auction. Instead it stayed 100% straight and we posed as Eastern European business people. And nobody in the art world understood that this was an artwork. Everybody thought that this is just some weird businesspeople doing weird shit.

Honestly, of all the media for that auction, CNN was the most professional and that maybe shows you how fucked up the mass media world is. CNN was the most professional media partner we had. They were really trying to find out if this was a kind of fake or not. 99.9% of other journalists from *Le Monde* and *Frankfurter Allgemeine* and *New York Times*, *Washington Post*, they didn't even bother to research. They just copy pasted. They just bought it, which is unbelievable. We lost faith in mass media. Their unwillingness to carry out basic level fact checking. And that applies to other government agencies, like the FBI, who at that point in 2000 still did not seem to grasp the very basic facts of how the DNS system worked.

SS: Strangely enough I find the concept of an evil system run by idiots who don't know what they're doing even more terrifying. I actually find this really horrifying. If there's a horrible cabal of menacing people running things, well, as long as they have some clue of what they're doing, it seems less worrying then if they really have no clue. That's genuinely terrifying.

U: We don't find it terrifying because there's a few things that really work, like aviation. They know what they're doing. But politicians and the system and, you know, the engineers all in between it, they're fucking idiots. Most of them don't have the technical knowledge. They're designing stuff they don't understand at all. It's ridiculous. But on the other hand, the world has always existed even though there's that many idiots around. Nature can deal with that apparently. But, but on the other hand look at Fukushima; really a disaster happened just because you build a nuclear plant on a fault line, which tends to create earthquakes that leads to tsunamis. That was just bound to happen. Why were they that stupid? And the answer is, because it is that stupid. We're human beings. We're not smart in a group. We're stupid in a group. But it has not killed all of us so far.

SS: I guess that just creates like pockets of openness within the various social and technical assemblages.

U: There was one interview we did from Vote-auction that was with a five o'clock show, one designed for the closing of Wall Street. It was a live radio show. It was the nicest interview because it all focused on numbers. 'Where do you think things are going in Wisconsin? Do you think you have reached top gains for buyers' markets in New York yet?' And more of these detached money market questions. We talked about all these numbers that were output by our scripts for the project. We could give them precise answers for their dada capitalist questions and that was super. It was super dada and, on the other hand, it was the most truthful interview. By the way, the 'Do You Think That's Funny – The Snowden Files' project shown at the Carroll / Fletcher gallery also got its title from a journalist's question – asking for the fun aspect of the project in such an aggressive manner, that was by far the most stupid question we have ever been asked, because of course, it is not fucking funny and if you care about entertainment go read Perez Hilton and don't consult global art terror groups. It's stupid to ask questions like this because… of course it's real, just not in this instance. But it is partly even in this instance. That's the problem with having too much agenda, especially on the legal front. Your own thinking just creates so many borders and then you can't think because you're trapped within your own preconceptions.

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2 Stephenson, Neal (1996) "Mother Earth Mother Board," *Wired.* Available at https://www.wired.com/1996/12/ffglass

Do Cybernetics Dream of Digital Resistance?

This is a series of exchanges between Maxigas from the Horizon Research Institute in Hungary and myself around *Escape the Overcode: Activist Art in the Control Society* by Brian Holmes. We used that as a starting point to discuss the ambiguities of cybernetic art and resistance, the conditions of knowledge production, and innovation and cooptation.

MAXIGAS:
Please picture me sitting at the top of a suburban house running on champagne and nicotine. Reading through Brian's book I realized that he is homing in on the topics I find most inspiring, his payload exploding in the last chapter, the 'Dark Crystals.' Therefore, I propose that we start at the end, with a passing quote from the very last piece that I will promptly hijack:

> The problem with the overcoded societies is that they do not leave you in the face of your own questions. The frame of the answer is sketched out in advance: not the exact contents, but the abstract parameters. In art as in politics, the serious discussions always go back to the 1960s and 70s. Maybe our chronologies need reevaluating.

In the next sentence he pulls the focus on the present and the future, which I will not follow, trying instead to push a bit methodologically what he also tries in a way throughout the course of the book. What if – specifically as revolutionary intellectuals of sorts – we root our historical consciousness not in the 30s and 40s of the authoritarian personality, the 60s "cultural shock," and the 70s autonomy, but instead in the cybernetic turn of the 50s, the 80s and 90s cyberpunk, and the alterglobalization movement against neoliberal globalization in the decade that Alex Foti once called the noughties? Can we shift the frame of the answers that Brian is writing about in this way, by the way of a detour. If we fail, we can still look at these decades as engendering the waves of resistance in the 60s and 70s which lead to the reorganization of capitalist relations of production as much as culture, and creating the conditions for the crisis which caught us by surprise, deepening since 2007. After all, we are looking for new grounds from which to spring new beginnings, aren't we? That is, the present and future that Brian wrote about.

Cybernetics has been interpreted brilliantly both as an all-prevailing ideology – all the more because the right and the left, or what was left of it, embraced it – (in the Cybernetic Hypothesis of Tiqqun), and as a lost occult teaching (in Andrew Pickering's *The Cybernetic Brain*) which we serve as an antidote for modernity, and finally in *Escape the Overcode* where two separate essays trace diverging genealogies. I wonder if we can entangle this mess. While Brian is conceptualizing cybernetics and coding as the engineering of control wielded by the Cold Warriors of the 50s, he also points to Guattari's ideas developed in the 80s on escaping these capture apparatuses through working transversally with flows, affects, territories and abstract machines. He also points to hacking (especially reverse engineering) as exemplary for this operation.

Anonymous could be analyzed as a veritable instance of how such a movement works. It developed into a kind of war machine that interlocked with the institutions of the state and capital, able to produce stochastic responses that diverted flows and proliferated affects ("Expect us"), invoked territories ("We are from the Internet") and used logical machinery-like software. In his 2006 presentation of cybernetics and counter-cybernetics, Brian explains that for Guattari, the defining characteristic of an escape mechanism is that it produces multiplicities (difference) rather than overcoding such as "centering, unification, totalization, integration, hierarchization, and finalization." As Gabriella Coleman explains lucidly in many places, the very difficulty of speaking about Anonymous is exactly that despite capable of collective speech, it is ridden by a continual process of bifurcations and convergences. Brad Troemel argues that these collective enunciations, as practiced at 4chan – the image board hold to be the breeding ground of Anonymous – serve as an emerging model for artistic production.

STEVPHEN:

Sorry for my slowness in responding. I'm currently on a family vacation, and it seems there has been less time for reading and thinking then I had thought there would be. There is so much work involved with being on vacation there is precious little time for relaxing, which I suppose is deeply ironic. At the moment we're in the village of Walsingham in Norfolk, which is an important site for Catholic shrines and such things. My partner and her parents are at some shrine at Mass, and I have managed to sneak off to a local pub for a quick pint of pear cider and to write down some thoughts for you.

Rather than start at the end, for my first set of thoughts I'd like to start at the beginning. Or perhaps even more accurately, before the beginning. Sitting here looking at my copy of *Escape the Overcode* there is a very real risk, as I suppose there is when approaching any book, of thinking about it as a bound, complete, and autonomous object. For people who are involved in elaborating critical theory, theorizing social movements, and so forth – there is a tendency to think of a book as the product of some long and labored process, one that is usually quite isolating. The image of Marx working away in the British Library for years to write *Capital* springs to mind as an archetypal example. At the end of the process of thinking and writing, maybe some editing or revising occurs, but in the end the author's name is slapped on the cover and it circulates out in the world where the author can claim rights, whether legal or moral, for what is contained.

Now this is a somewhat flawed understanding of knowledge production and book writing in general, one which is even acknowledged by most authors in the lists of people that are thanked in most books (even if this more diffuse and cooperative nature of knowledge production typically does not extend beyond that). But this is an especially flawed way to approach the writing of someone like Brian Holmes. Why is that? Looking at a book like *Escape the Overcode* it's very easy to think that it was composed as it appears, as one coherent block, as a united effort and composition. But that's not simply the way Brian works, and that it is not his way of working gets to the heart of the value his work has a thinker and a catalyst of various forms of collective becoming and thought.

Most people will not encounter the ideas contained in this book first when they are in book form. It is more likely that they will first come across some small intervention he has made about a particular collective or project, or about a political or economic situation. Perhaps it will be on an online listserv discussion, as Brian has for years been a constant and one of the clearest voices taking part in debates on such forums as nettime and constant others. Or perhaps the first encounter will be in one of the almost innumerable events and seminars Brian has taken part in, whether through the ongoing *Continental*

Drift events, or at any number of art or political events. And that could be in New York, Croatia, Paris, Chicago, or almost anywhere.

This observation is not meant to portray Brian as some sort of jet-setting theory guru or cyber-magician, but rather to point out that is necessary to approach Brian's work from the idea that he is always working in between, within an always growing and evolving network of cooperation and ideas. Brian's ideas develop not in scholarly isolation, but in the wealth of expanding circulation. And while these patterns of circulation stand in some negotiated relationship with the institutions of academics and art, they are not bound by these organizational forms. This is very important as there is a much greater degree of autonomy afforded to the kind of extra-institutional practice, extra-disciplinary practice.

We could say that Brian's work emerges from a context marked by network flows, or in the space of cybernetics, as is the main focus of this book. And that his analysis is not caught simply in an analysis of how cybernetics functions as a system of control, or a way for thinking beyond current conditions of domination. Brian does both, which is completely necessary, as otherwise the end result is something very naïve: either an understanding of control that does not see any possibility for disruptive agency (critical theory pessimism), or an elaboration of forms of escape and political becoming that neglects the ways in which those very social energies could indeed become part of perfecting systems of control. In the conceptual language of autonomist theorists this is the interplay between the force of technical composition of capitalist relations and organization, and the political composition of insurgent social energies. When Brian suggests looking towards the decades of cybernetic development (rather than of creative rebellion or of authoritarian control) he is making a key claim.

Well, what is the claim? It is that to find new moments and spaces of autonomy, of escaping the overcode, the point is not to look to outmoded forms of social domination, or to recapitulate previous forms of creative rebellion. Rather, the task is to understand how more flexible systems of dispersed social domination have found ways to utilize the insurgent energies of social movements, the creativity of radical arts, to engineer new forms of control. This is what Brian does in his vast discussion of various political and artistic projects: finding what kind of compositional potential they hold, what kind of relations they animate, how they interact with the systems of governance structuring the space within the work, and how they enable escaping from them. But, using the same autonomist concepts, the approach is that it necessary to work from the conditions of political decomposition, the state where insurgent energies have been rendered into other forms, precisely in order to be able to find new possibilities from within and against those conditions.

That's all for now. I'm out of cider and I need to go pick up the rest of the family. I will write more later and pull out some quotes and discussion.

MAXIGAS:

We will see how it goes. It seems logical, especially from a committed autonomist perspective, to claim both an outside of cybernetics – largely based on errors? – and a potential for reverse engineering control structures and behavioral models.

That's even more refreshing because in the midst of my research into the history and reception of cybernetics I tend to fall encounters many deterministic and dystopian characterizations and narratives. On that side I still recommend the *Cybernetic Hypothesis* that I was referring to in the first message. Tiqqun's position meets with Baudrillard on the point of the remedy where they recommend disrupting the control signals and signatures with introducing noise to the system in order to disrupt it. The reaction of the Italian radical technology collective called Autistici/Inventati is an attempt to go beyond such a pessimistic view. They have set up a privacy-aware activist blogging platform under noblogs.org. On the cover is a statement from J.G. Ballard: "The environment is so full of television, party political broadcasts and advertising campaigns that you hardly need to do anything" and answer the challenge by counterposing their own slogan: "Noblogs – [because] Information disorder was not enough."

Attaching to your rant about (inherently) collaborative knowledge production, do you know I referred to your article in EICP about the necessity for strategic considerations in the anti-systemic movement, of going beyond tactical answers? I was reviewing the 'Face to Facebook' project by Paolo Cirio & Alessandro Ludovico for the Hungarian tranzit blog, arguing that it opens the possibility to go beyond tactical media towards a strategic media? Conversely, I am reminded how we discussed tactics vs. strategy when you stayed in our commune in Budapest. Finally, the project itself surfaced on my screen while browsing the nettime listserv, where all three of us are subscribers. So yes indeed, lines of thought are intertwined and individual subjectivities are but points of crossing and gathering.

When you and Brian write about the recuperative and co-optative tendencies of cybernetic society, and the compositional potential of various political and artistic projects I remember that what was interesting for me in the 'Face to Facebook' project was exactly how they stage a counter-cooptation, a détournement carried out with the tools of symbolic logic. They basically scraped a million or so profiles from Facebook and used facial recognition (neural networks!) to select the smiling ones. In the next step they set up a dating website with the data of all these smiling users. Using the modeling of affect to release real affect.

Which brings us back to two points set out in the first texts of the Escape: "The Affectivist Manifesto" and "Network Maps, Energy Diagrams." I quote from the first:

> In the twentieth century, art was judged with respect to the existing state of the medium. … The prize at the end of the evaluative process was a different sense of what art could be, a new realm of possibility for the aesthetic. … The backdrop against which art now stands out is a particular state of society. What an installation, a performance, a concept or a mediated image can do is to mark a possible or real shift with respect to the laws, the customs, the measures, the mores, the technical and organizational devices that define how we must behave and how we may relate to each other at a given time and in a given place. What we look for in art is a different way to live, a fresh chance at coexistence.

Funnily, it's like reading my CV: from studying aesthetics to anthropology, from doing avant-garde art to activism. And where these meet is the F2F project that manages to turn into a real possibility and an affective event what the recent wave of critical social theorists can but describe about Facebook as a machine of affective capture and an instrument of soft(ware) social control. At that time what I meant by referring to the project as 'cybernetic art' was that it is operational and performative rather than representational and illustrative. It works. They made the shit hit the fan through redirecting affective and information flows where they were not supposed to go.

Engineering flows while mapping out the process publicly and transparently produces a 'battle plan' of sorts, pointing out the attack vectors for subversion. Actually it could be radicalized further by designing "attack trees" – a methodology used in computer science to map out possible vulnerabilities of a system. Here is an example from a class at the University of Denver:

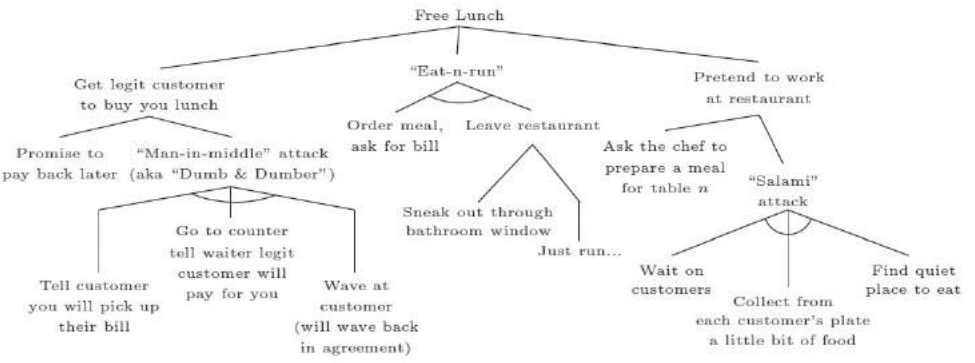

Fig. 1. Example attack tree.

Of course these are probably too deterministic and hierarchical for us, we need a more topological approach that can lead to the discovery of novel possibilities. In any case, both diagrams above manage to break away from the mapping of oppressive powers and move out in the direction of the energy diagrams described in "Structure and Agency in the Global System":

> Thus we can distinguish between a determinate *network map* – a geographical representation of structures of networked power, which attempts to identify and measure the forces at play – and an undetermined *energy diagram*, which opens up a field of possible agency. Deleuze describes the diagram of power as "highly unstable or fluid" constituting hundreds of points of emergence or creativity. His aim is to indicate the openness, the possibility for intervention that inheres to every social relation, because of the limited but real power that flows through each of the participants. Thus at its point of application, where individual behavior is molded into functional patterns by the convergence of mutually reinforcing constraints, power can also fold in upon itself, producing resistance and alterity through its own redoubling in the subject, then its subsequent dispersal.

The last line, stating how "power can also fold in upon itself," reminds me of a puzzle you could perhaps help me to solve. The title of a recent *Mute* issue, 'Double Negative Feedback,' is still haunting me. Norbert Wiener treats negative feedback in his 1948 foundation book on cybernetics as a form of error correction. Double negative feedback, then, is when correction mechanisms run amok, fed by their own output, making the situation worse, potentially leading to a phase change? Amongst other things, *Mute* seems to apply the concept to the crisis and its political backlash, the proliferation of popular resistance. It could also apply to the F2F project which only grows as a result of the negative attention it receives from Facebook, Inc., highlighting its contradictions. In general, it could be a notation for a political strategy that aims to turn repressive mechanisms against themselves, engendering a growing wave of disruptive tendencies. But maybe I am mistaken; tell me if my concepts are slack.

STEVPHEN:
Thanks for that. In general I quite agree with your formulation, particularly where you end up with the idea of forming political strategies by turning repressive mechanisms against themselves. But I'd like to work back a bit before getting there.

What we see in Brian's writing, in this book and more generally, really moves past a binary of optimism and pessimism. And this is quite important, since when discussing techno-politics it's really quite easy to fall into some form of techno-optimism (a la *Wired*) or techno-determinism in a more negative sense (cue here almost any science fiction work about the encroaching and controlling effects of technology). It's quite difficult to move beyond these positions, or constant movement between them, given how ingrained they have become. You can also see this is Bifo's recent writing, in which he seems very much to switch back and forth between a hyper-optimism about the possibilities for resistance today to a near suicidal pessimism. And it's interesting that he does through re-engaging with Baudrillard and Guattari, drawing out connections and tensions between their arguments. Bifo argues that a kind of naïve hyper-optimism, or belief in unlimited potential, whether of the body or the commons, inevitably leads to forms of collapse when the conditions supporting that disappear. What he elaborates is less a manic depression in theory, although it can read like that, but trying to hold together, but trying to hold together widely divergent ideas and outlooks at the same time rather than constantly moving back and forth between them.

It's important to point out that when we talk about politics of technology we are always more than just engaging with the objects and systems themselves. There is always a mediating function of dispositions to the technology, which one might call the ideological technological apparatus. And this seems to be the case even where you might not expect it. Take for instance the anarcho-primitivist John Zerzan, who is at this point most widely known for this total rejection of technology, language, civilization, and so forth. Well, how did he get there? Strangely enough not through some sort of Rousseau-ian idealization of the pre-industrial, as you might think, but through a heavily Marxist analysis, working through Adorno and negative dialectics and reaching ever deeper and more complete forms of totalization he wants to reject. One could joke that the one technology that Zerzan cannot do without would be Hegel. And this is the point, that the mediating dynamic for Zerzan's approach to technology is not just his appraisal of its worth or tendencies to domination, but an underlying dialectical structure of thought that only approaches particular technologies as expressions of an underlying and inevitable unified progression.

But what if there is always an assemblage of ideas and approaches that mediates our relationship to technology, and thus shaping techno-politics? It's probably enough just to acknowledge that and move on with that understanding. The problem I would see is when that theoretical assemblage becomes overly detached from the realities of what is attempted to be theorized. This can be seen in the autonomist debates that have taken place over past ten years around immaterial labor and the politics of network, at least in the most

widely circulated forms. They have come with lots of lots of hyper-optimism: great expectations of new political subjects that would emerge from these new conjunctions of labor, technology, and communication. Here I'm thinking primarily of people like Hardt and Negri, but also many who have taken up their ideas, of which I would include Brian and myself. The problem then becomes when you engage with the grounded realities of particular technologies, or particular laboring practices. It becomes messier, and doesn't fit the theory as well. A glib version of this would be: "you think immaterial labour produces communism? Try working at a call center or at McDonald's."

Or you can take the work of Alex Galloway, such as his writing about protocols and distributed systems of control. Network forms can seem to offer great new realms of uncontrolled freedom, but when you engage with the particulars of the form, a much different story emerges, one marked as much by control as subversion. But this is not to recapitulate to an optimism-pessimism divide. My point is thatresistance comes from an engagement with the particulars, rather than in an overarching conception that neatly explains things. Having said that, however, sometimes the poetic force of an idea is the most valuable thing in. This is how I would tend to approach folks like Tiqqun. If we subject their ideas to critical scrutiny in terms of their analytic accuracy I doubt they would hold up very well, but that's not their purpose. Their purpose is a call, to action, to inspire, and thus this is less important. And I would suggest that you could make a similar argument about many autonomist ideas from the 1970s, or the ideas of the Situationists for that matter.

This brings us back to Brian, who does a very good job at developing politics from the particulars of artistic practices and technological forms. But he does not do this by forsaking theory, as if it would no longer be needed if you brought together enough examples. That would be naïve empiricism, one that would declare "truth is concrete" (which ironically enough is the title of a large arts and politics gathering happening next week in Graz) but would rather, in the Marxist sense, "rise to the concrete." And thus it makes even more sense when you look at Brian's network maps and charting out of flows and relations between projects and practices. It shows that he is working from the particular and potentials of various practices, but through their relations in overall systems. Something similar could be starting an 'affectivist manifesto' – affect is relational, created through interactions, rather than intrinsic attributes without context.

As for what you raise about "double negative feedback," one could put an interesting autonomist twist on that in relation to the current crisis, or ongoing crises. From the idea that capital has a tendency to draw from the energies of resistance and working class rebellion, several inferences are possible. Resistance and rebellion generate not just forms of organization, knowledge, and energies for political movements, but also for capital, which draws these

energies to drive itself forward. If we have reached a stage where that dynamic of resistance and absorption no longer works in the same way (as Bifo and others have argued), this is not only a problem for radicals looking for new ways forward, but also for capital itself. Why is that? Because it would then be the case that capital is not only dependent upon forms of labor which it does not directly control, but is also dependent on forms of political antagonism directed against, precisely as these generate a constitutive outside based upon which capital modulates and mutates. An end to the resistance-absorption dynamic could thus lead to a kind of blindness for capital. Crisis, as a form of negative double feedback, could thus result not from the overwhelming power of working class movements, but rather from their absence, that they are not there advancing capitals contradictions and into new directions. There are many people who thought that green capitalism and ecology was going to be this new constituent force, but that seems to have not happened, at least to the degree expected.

I've already rambled on too long, but I'd like to end back at the beginning with a quote from Brian that brings together these ideas in the direction I think you were headed. In Brian's discussion of Mario Tronti, he comments that Tronti's ideas evolved in a Taylorist and Fordist context. But these conditions have changed multiple times over since the 1960s. Thus Brian argues

> In our era, when knowledge management and the endless quest to identify and channel innovation represent the dominant strategies for exploiting the educated postindustrial labor force, how could one see crowd sourcing, corporate networking technologies or the codification of the creative industries as anything but the enemy of the multitudes? If something is to be done with "creativity" today, it must first of all escape from the protocols of capitalist control.

For Tronti this was quite clear: the working class finds itself becoming a part of capital's self-valorization, and from that position has even more capacity to sabotage its domination. But the organizational form of this overcoming necessarily takes the mediating form of capital's interests and in turns renders them into antagonistic form, as the terrain and struggle for the dissolution of capital. Brian argues that this insight is still valid, but needs to move with current conditions:

> In our time, this translated into a struggle against the definition of a "creative class" by capitalist sociology, and above all, against its functionalization for strategies of corporate, urban and financial profit. Artists, writers, actors, painters, audio-visual

> producers, designers, musicians, philosophers, architects, all have had to find ways to refuse to let their subjectivity become the mere medium of capital flows, a stepping-stone between money and more money. Anyone who feels the inordinate pressure that direct management now exerts on the intelligence and expressivity that it demands and continually solicits, and anyone who can see those same pressures reiterated in the tight stylistic, financial and temporal constraints of the freelance markets of creativity, will find in Tronti's writing both an incitement to resistance and exodus, and a keen analysis of the governing structures of capitalist society, of its dynamic equilibrium. Yet this analysis needs to be updated, where both the objective structures of contemporary society and the subjective dimensions of creative labor are concerned.

I would heartily agree with this perspective, and suggest that it is the core of the book, not only in struggles over creative labor, but in working through the particulars of cybernetic governance and the transformation of the social world, to develop new tools for changing it. And this is why Brian argues for moving away from typical avant-garde gestures, which he suggests no longer produce a "liberating effect" (75), but rather modulating intensities and patterns, creating new escape routes from overcoding, that add up to playing a significant game:

> The question isn't one of dodging the magic bullet, or of constructing some fantasy space where you could survive unsurveilled. The question for artists, intellectuals and technologists is how to play a significant game, instead of reclining and declining in a gilded cage, as the PR and development wing for yet more corporate spin-offs of the mainline military devices. The question is how to engage in counter-behaviors, able to subvert the effects of cybernetic governance.

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Now is the only place where things can actually happen
Interview with Joe McPhee

Joe McPhee has been recording and performing for fifty years, playing both as a solo artist and in an impressive number of collaborative units including Peter Brötzmann's Tentet and The Thing. In recent years he appeared with regularity at Café Oto in London, one of the key venues for free jazz and experimental music more generally in the UK (and beyond). On any given night McPhee could just as likely be heard playing a tenor, alto, or soprano saxophone, or the trumpet, flugelhorn or valve trombone. In December 2013 McPhee was scheduled to perform at Café Oto with Survival Unit III, one of his longest running projects. I welcomed the opportunity to interview Joe about his approaches to collaboration and the politics of music and improvisation.

STEVPHEN SHUKAITIS (SS): The first thing I wanted to ask you about is collaboration. How do you approach collaboration, not just in terms of particular projects, but in the way projects affect your approach to music more generally?

JOE MCPHEE (JM): I really like a lot of what different people do, people whose music I really appreciate. But collaboration, it starts with a real personal kind

of relationship. For example I've played for long time with a guitarist in France, Raymond Boni. I was in a trio with Raymond Boni and Andre Jaume. I've had a longtime relationship with another trio in the States called Trio X; we've been going on now about fifteen years, it's been almost ten years with Survival Unit III. And each one brings a different perspective to the music; different instrumentation. Tonight you'll hear Fred Lonberg-Holm with the cello and the electronics.

I really like electronics and in the early and mid 70s I was playing around a lot with synthesizers and guitar effects pedals. That really interests me. I'm also interested in different drumming styles. The Michael Zerang (from Survival Unit III) style of playing is not typical jazz drumming. He brings another very unique aspect of drumming to the group, gives it a very different flavour. And then I have to adjust too; what instruments I'm going to bring. This time I brought the tenor. And sometimes it has to do more with what can fit on an airplane than, you know, really what I want to play. But that's the way it goes.

SS: Taking a bass saxophone would be more difficult.

JM: Well, I don't have a bass saxophone. That's Mats Gustafsson. He just got one and I don't know how he's going to travel with that. The tenor is the biggest one I've got. But I've been playing a lot with a plastic alto that I like.

SS: Is there a different kind of a tone out of the plastic alto?

JM: Yes. Early on Charlie Parker played one, it was a Grafton made here in London I believe. And then Ornette Coleman played one and they were made with a kind of moulded plastic that was quite brittle. And it doesn't have the same sound as a brass saxophone, it's a darker kind of sound but it's one that resonates with me that I like very much and so I've been pursuing that. The instrument I have is really designed for children to learn how to play the saxophone but I don't see why I should limit myself to what I'm playing because of what somebody else does or says.

SS: Do you think the kinds of collaborations you have change as they continue for ten or fifteen years? Another band that has played Café Oto a number of times and impressed on that level of long term collaboration is the Sun Ra Arkestra, where a number of the members have been playing with each other for 30, 35, 40 years. And when you watch them you can sense they have this immense repertoire of material that they play, as well as a depth in flexibility in playing developed over those many years. Do you find that you can play differently with people that you play with in longer-term collaborations?

JM: Yes, each collaboration brings its own, unique qualities. It's quite different, for example, playing with a cello that's amplified and with electronics and also with Fred Lonberg's extensive musical experience. It's very different from say, playing with a bass player, or when I have a collaboration in a trio with a guitarist, it brings a different kind of thing. In the trio with Raymond Boni we didn't have a drummer because he's so rhythmic that it wasn't necessary. And I got a reputation for hating drummers because of that. It wasn't true, not at all. And then when I change instruments – if I play the trumpet, valve trombone, soprano or the alto, it brings another dimension to whatever that collaboration is. I don't come with a set of fixed ideas because I hope I'm learning all the time.

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SS: In a recent issue of *Wire* you had an article about the reissue of *Nation Time* (1971). And at the end of the piece you're speculating that perhaps Parliament and Janet Jackson might have been influenced by that record.

JM: Could have been! You know, with music of Parliament-Funkadelic. Yes, why not? In terms of speaking about nations, *Rhythm Nation 1814* (1989) and so forth. Why not? It was talking about community, that's what I was getting at.

SS: Could you imagine, musically, what a collaboration with Parliament or Janet Jackson might look or sound like?

JM: Yes – because I played for many years about the time when this was made with a group locally where I live that was called Ira and the Soul Project. It was soul, jazz and Marvin Gaye, James Brown, all that kind of stuff. We had an organ, a B-3, Hammond B-3, a guitarist, a vibes player and a drummer and another saxophone player. We'd be very comfortable. And I don't see the difference between that and playing with Sun Ra or playing with Archie Shepp's group at that time or Ornette's double quartet. In fact, one of the tracks on *Nation Time* called 'Shaky Jake' is played by a double quartet, which certainly comes right out of Ornette's idea

SS: In the different projects you've been involved in, how much do you see yourself as influenced by the context you're in? And I mean that both musically but as well as more broadly, the political and social context.

JM: It's all a part of it. Probably less focused and orientated as it was here. This was about a period of events that were happening in the United States at the

time in – the 70s – with the civil rights movement and all that kind of thing, and black nationalism and so on, like that. But it's expanded now much beyond those kinds of limitations to thinking about a larger human community.

SS: It seems as though your early recordings from the 70s are very much coming out of the political moment. Would you say that has changed for you or is it just a different moment? What was the relationship between your work and the politics?

JM: The politics and all of that? It's absolutely essential. There's no separation. It's a part of who we are and a bit of why we exist. We've got to be involved. It's a process, it's about change. It's about flux and so on. But I think my music, no matter what has transpired since then, it's always involved some aspect of politics and history. The early recordings that were titled, for example, the first one that I made was called *Underground Railroad* (1969), which had to do with this network which brought slaves from the South in the United States to the North, to freedom. And I thought if I never get a chance to make

another recording I wanted it to be about that. And that's why the second one was about *Nation Time* (1971). But after that it began to expand. *Trinity*, which was the fourth in this series also touched on the blues but another way of looking at the blues. There's a piece in there called "Delta," which is not a twelve-bar blues but is blues in feeling. And then the fourth in the series of CJR recordings was called *Pieces of Light*, which had to do with a bit about knowledge and also a bit of Zen philosophy and introduced me to electronic music, which opened up a whole new world... outside of jazz, into a larger room of music and sounds.

SS: It's interesting that on the cover of *Nation Time* you're standing in a Zen garden.

JM: Yes, that was by chance. It was a great place. It's a curious coincidence and there's a lot of food for thought in that. I hadn't given it as much thought as perhaps it deserves. Yes, it was a very peaceful place.

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SS: What was it like growing up in rural New York? And how did you find your way into playing experimental and improvised music? Just thinking personally I grew up in rural Pennsylvania and growing up it didn't seem like much interesting was happening musically, or culturally for that matter.

JM: I was a big fan of Miles Davis and I collected every Miles Davis recording I could. And a friend of mine, we were listening to the music one day and he played *Pithecanthropus Erectus* (1956) by Charles Mingus for me and I said "oh my God, what is that?" So I traded my Miles Davis' *Bags' Groove* (1957) for *Pithecanthropus Erectus*, which opened up all kinds of doors for me. And then I began to listen to Ornette Coleman and to Eric Dolphy and of course Coltrane. And that's what kicked it open for me. I thought Ornette's music was the blues. I don't know why at the time people were having so much trouble with and saying that it wasn't real jazz and that Coltrane was destroying the planet, that Coltrane would be the death of humanity. It was horrible what they were saying at the time; the end of Jazz, anti-Jazz and all that. What does that mean? I thought, well, that's the direction I want to go.

SS: Would you say that the artists who have the most influenced you have changed over time, over the past forty years? Or are there periods when you go back to certain things?

JM: I think it's a natural progression in the music. It has flux and changes and is the essential aspect of jazz. Then you listen to some really early jazz pieces and they sound like the avant-garde. Of course, in their own time, they were. What does avant-garde mean anyway? Of its time? You can only be in your time, whatever time you're in. And you do whatever you can do and you have to break rules. It's good to learn the rules before but you don't have to; do whatever you want as far as I'm concerned. And out of that, you know, you can discover something.

SS: When you were doing the PO music, were you influenced by Arte Povera?

JM: No, it was a concept of PO music coming from a kind of philosophy of Edward de Bono, who wrote a book called *Future Positive* (1979). And it was a way of rethinking one's approach. One example he gave was: say you're driving down a road and you know your destination is north of where you are, but you come to a hole in the road, which means you have to change your direction. You might have to go west or sometimes maybe even south – in the opposite direction from where you're going – to get around that hole to get to where you want.

Now when you're making this detour you're going to make a whole other bunch of discoveries along the way, which will perhaps influence you and change your original ideas about where you wanted to be. And that's what I wanted, that's PO. The PO is a language indicator to show that it's provocation: don't take things to be what they seem to be. I used that to say, well, if I'm playing something that seems to be jazz (whatever that is) maybe by going in some other directions with other collaborations, I can discover something else: new instruments, new ways of approaching the music, new ways of listening. So that by the time I get to this destination I'm a different person, and the music's different.

SS: One thing I'm always amazed by, coming back to playing together, is when I would watch the Tentet play, I couldn't actually understand how it was working. How does it work?

JM: No, we never know either.

SS: Clearly something is working but how it actually builds, ebbs, and finds it's own form of movement is very mysterious.

JM: Well, we're an organism. At one point when we started we had all kinds of written music and people would bring in all kinds of compositions and it began to sound more and more like an American Big Band. But Peter Brötzmann's

not American, he's middle European, and one day he said to us "you know, this is not my aesthetic, I don't want to do this." So we took all the music and we threw it in the trash and we never rehearsed again. We only would appear on a train platform or at an airport, all of us would get together and we'd come to a place and then we'd play. But we were never really sure exactly what Peter wanted because he would never tell us. When we saw in Peter's extended interview in *Wire* we said "uh-oh, that's the end of the band." We said "oh my God, we didn't know," and that was really the end of the band. He decided he wanted to do something else. After we left London we went to France and that was our last concert with the Tentet. But in the meantime I've played with Peter in duos, Fred's been playing with Peter and so has Michael but it's very mysterious, we'll never know how it worked.

SS: Perhaps that's what made it so exciting, the not knowing – because if you know, maybe it just wouldn't work?

JM: Well, we never did. We'd try things and not everything worked. There were some nights were successful and some nights were not and Peter would only tell us what he hated, he would never tell us what he liked. I don't know if he ever liked anything, we don't know. But then we just say "fuck it, we don't care, we just do what we do and that's it; we're here, we're alive and tomorrow's another day and we'll play some and we'll try again and we'll keep doing it and doing it again." How long did we play together? Fifteen years? That's a long time.

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SS: Did you work up a conception of politics from improvisation? I don't mean politics, like a capital P sense, like elections and all this, but some sense of community as formed through improvisation, or a form of being social which isn't so fixed. Do you think you can get that out of improvisation?

JM: Yes, but you know, it's on such an individual basis. I don't know how it would work for everyone. Everybody would take from it what he or she would like to find. I don't know. I don't look at it like that. I don't examine anything too closely except after the fact when we have a recording – and I have a hard time listening to my own recordings, a really hard time. Because that's something that happened. I'm off somewhere else by then.

SS: So for you is there a sense that if it's over, why go back to it?

JM: No, not so much why go back to it, because you can always learn from what you've done… but I'm just in another place and that was then and this now. In the process of doing it, it's very interesting because that's a time when everything is really live. Now is the only place where things can actually happen. The past, it's over, and the future we don't know. Now, when it's happening. And you have to be really fast, and slow at the same time because while it's happening it's… someone said to me it's like trying to repair a car while it's rolling down a hill: dangerous and difficult but it can be done.

SS: That does sound more than a bit difficult especially when you're mechanically challenged. Another thing I wanted to ask you about is, how do I phrase this without being off-putting… There are certain artists like yourself who have received a better reception in the UK and Europe more generally than you have in the US. How has that affected you? Was that unexpected or how do you relate to that?

JM: No, it wasn't unexpected. In the US there was less opportunity to perform, there's very little money. The country's very big, it's difficult to get around. In Europe you can be anywhere in a short time. It was a matter of exposure and also a matter of education. I think that young people are exposed to more varied kinds of music at early ages in Europe than in the United States. Also it had to do with what radio was. FM Radio now is a mess. But there seems to be more variety here. I'm not interested in satellite radio so you can get a station that plays everything from the 60s or everything from the 70s. I don't care about that. I like the music but I don't want all of the same thing of anything.

SS: Well certainly when you get those kind of stations there are no surprises.

JM: Oh God, you know, I've been there once and I don't want to go back there. At the time disco was happening I hated it but now I like it because I like to dance.

SS: What it makes me think of is the way that conditions for musicians have changed over the past forty years and thinking it seems much more difficult to make a living as a musician maybe today than it was in the 60s or 70s.

JM: In that period for me, I was working for 18 years. I worked in an automotive ball bearing factory. I mean, that supported me, not that music supports me all that well now but I get to play more and I get to travel a bit and I get to play with people I like. So in that respect it's much better for me now. I'm exposed to a lot of different situations and contexts and I like it a lot more.

SS: Do you think the factory influenced how you play?

JM: Yes because I wasn't going to do that forever. Once the people I worked with asked me about my music and I had made some recordings. They said "oh, can we hear it?" So, I said, yes and let them hear it and they gave it back to me and said "you mean people actually pay you to play that shit?" So I said, okay, then I don't do that anymore. I hardly ever play where I live. If you want to hear me play you can come where I rehearse, in my toilet, or you can come to Paris.

SS: Maybe this is a cheesy question but if you were talking to young artists today who wanted embark on a more experimental musical or artistic career, what sort of advice would you give them?

JM: Just do what you're doing and don't stop, no matter what. You have to keep at it, there are going to be a lot of reasons preventing you, for why you should stop, maybe so you don't disturb the neighbors or whatever. But don't stop, just keep doing what you're doing. Do what you do, know who you are and yes, make no apology: just do it. It's all in the doing. I don't do it because I want somebody's approval, I couldn't care less. I just do it because I like it. If it's cool with me then I'm fine.

SS: It's interesting just thinking about the way you're emphasizing the importance of the present and of doing. I can see how maybe sitting in a in a Zen garden was not so coincidental.

JM: You know, after the fact, I would say that's true. A friend of mine, in fact, the gentleman who took these photographs, after the music had happened, took me to this place and I think he might have known something that I didn't realize at the time. But he said "that's the perfect place, that's where you have to be." Someone knew a whole hell of a lot more than I did at the time and thought that the right setting, that was the place.

In the expanded box set [of *Nation Time*] there are a couple of ballads. There's one ballad called "Song for Lauren," which was a piece I wrote for a goddaughter of mine, but there's also a piece by McCoy Tyner called "Contemplation," which until now had never been heard, because the music was in my basement for forty years. There are things like that. And I am a big fan of ballads and my reason is because you can't hide there, you can't play tricks in a ballad; it'll be sloppy and it'll be overly sentimental and stupid if you don't do it right. Or it can get to the heart of the matter. I like stories and ballads. I make up ballads all the time. Do it on the fly and then whoever's

listening to it can make up their own story and say "oh I thought it meant this." I don't know what it means.

SS: Are you still living in Poughkeepsie?

JM: Well, yes, I grew up there and it's close enough to Manhattan, to the airports, to get out when I want. I almost never play there, there's no point. People who I first started playing jazz with are still playing the same music they were playing back in 1962. And they're content with that, that's fine. They wouldn't be so happy playing with me because they think I make noise, which I do.

SS: How has Survival Unit survived and changed and gone through different iterations?

JM: The original Survival Unit came out of the fact that in the late 60s and I had been playing with a local band for a number of years and it began to atrophy. People would leave and it dwindled down to a quartet and finally the bass player decided he wanted to go into politics and the pianist wanted to [...] He was raising a family and he needed to make money and the music we were playing was not going to make any money. So everybody disappeared. But there was a little bar where we would play and I would take a record... well, a record player and 33rpm LPs on a Sunday afternoon, and play jazz for people. I would play anything. And they would have something called a 'drink downer' and pour something from every bottle in the bar and put it into a big punch bowl and give it to everyone free. So everybody got completely drunk and they didn't really care what was happening. That was my first Survival Unit because I just sent around and played music for people.

And then I started making tapes so that I could play along with them because that was my intention. One was called "The Looking Glass Eye," I made multi-track recordings or sound on sound recordings and I would play with them. That was really the first electronic Survival Unit. The second Survival Unit was a group where for a time bass players wouldn't play with me, I don't know why but they just wouldn't so we played in New York City at a radio station, it's called WBAI. There's no bass player on that, and so Clifford Thornton is on it.

Yes that was that. And then we were invited to make a recording in 2004 and the producer wanted people who I hadn't recorded with before as a group. And I thought of Fred and Michael and I called it the Alto Trio as I was only going to play alto sax and alto clarinet and so we started like that. And just before we were to go into the studio the producer decided to cancel the session. He decided to cancel the recording, for whatever reason, financial reasons I

was led to believe. So there we were and we had a little tour and decided to carry on and the next year we got a tour here in Europe and we changed the name to Survival Unit III. And it has to do with the fact that this is the third iteration of the Survival Unit, not that there are three people, because it could expand at any time to whatever number. But this has been the longest running group. I'm very happy with it, it's great. We haven't killed each other yet. I don't think we will.


Find your
work-life groove
Fly Emirates Business Class to over
140 destinations worldwide

From *Nation Time* to Management Time

Recently I was struck by an advertisement on the London Underground. "Find your work-life groove," it proclaimed. It pictured a man sitting back and relaxing with a saxophone in a spacious airplane seat, accompanied by a few books and a whisky. But what does being able to play saxophone on an airplane have to do with negotiating the demands and stresses of daily life? And why would an airline company, striving to promote an image of luxury and abundance, use an image of a musician?

To paraphrase the Artist Placement Group, context is half the work in this advertisement: a constellation of assumptions and associations attached to the figure of the artist as a creative self-organising and self-actualising worker, the artist as an entrepreneur of the self who has left behind restraints like employment and found another path to personal fulfilment through his or her craft. In this advertisement we can see the shift from the insurgent 1960s and 70s free jazz demands for Nation Time to today's channelling of those energies into calls for management time.

This advertisement reminds me of "loft living," the process where integrated work and living spaces emerged in former industrial spaces in lower Manhattan in the 1960s, providing the template for aspirational middle class lifestyles modelled on the figure of the artist.[1] It is the shift from when "four artists in a mansion," or in Fluxus housing cooperatives, could achieve some

freedom in their situation, into advertising copy for estate agents. The cool factor of an artistic lifestyle acted as a convenient proxy for the gentrification of the area, with artists enhancing its image. The ad also relies on tropes developed since the 60s in political theory, philosophy and sociology. These used the figure of the jazz musician and improvised performance (the two are often conflated) as a model for a particular kind of self-actualising labor: the worker who will labor ceaselessly motivated not by monetary reward but the intrinsic joy of the task. Working for the love of it.

Over the past fifty years jazz and improvised music has come to mean wildly different things to people. These interpretations vary from jazz being understood as an organisational form to be used in political action or broader social changes, to being used in management theory as a metaphor for organising without institutional, top-down structures. Coming out of the political ferments of the late 60s, sociologists like Alfred Willener stressed a more politically inflected understanding of jazz.[2] In a more managerial vein, one finds people like Mikhail Csikszentmihalyi and John Kao who connect notions of musical jamming to entrepreneurial activity – or managing without the constraints of formal structures.[3] The apparent spontaneity and freedom found in improvisation is what management theory desires to put to work, harnessing self-motivating energies and capacities within a networked and flexible neoliberal economy.

This is all part of a broader process of the development of the "new spirit of capitalism" where formerly challenging social and artistic endeavours become integrated into the workings of the economy and management as a new business jargon. It's what the Situationists would call recuperation.

So, standing here on the Underground platform, I'm left to wonder how we got here? How did we move from a time where jazz and improvisation could be invoked and employed by someone like Joe McPhee as part of a call, paraphrasing Amiri Baraka, for nation time, to a situation where airlines employ the image of the musician as part of an invocation of management time?

Joe McPhee's 1971 Nation Time is, I think, a rarely acknowledged free jazz masterpiece. Granted it has received more notice of late, such as in pieces by McPhee himself in The Wire (issue 358, The Inner Sleeve) and was recently reissued in an expanded edition with previously unreleased materials by Corbett Vs Dempsey. However in histories and discussions Nation Time is more often than not overlooked or, at best, relegated to a footnote. In 2012 The Guardian included it in its list of 101 strangest records on Spotify, describing it as a "grinning punk cousin to Miles Davis's brutal and brilliant Bitches Brew." The recording brings together the convergence of a number of influences, mixing the energy and explosive force of rock and proto-punk with the free form virtuosity of free jazz. It starts with a call and response pattern borrowed from Baraka –"What time is it? Nation Time" – before moving through a core of

a four note, 24 bar pattern, which then mutates into a maelstrom, before reforming itself, calming, and building again to a crescendo.

The album came out of a black cultural nationalist movement in the arts that McPhee channelled in his tribute to Baraka. But perhaps this fusion of improvisation, jazz and the civil rights movement was not simply a matter of accidental historical conjuncture, but about something more profound in the nature of improvisatory music itself. Nation Time could show how improvised music might prefigure broader forms of collectivity. When McPhee calls out "What time is it?" revolutionary potential is not in his declaration, but rather in the audience response it elicits, how it moves them. This idea of music as social organisation has a long history. In The Fierce Urgency of Now, Daniel Fischlin, Ajay Heble, and George Lipsitz trace the links between music and wider struggles for change, arguing that musical improvisation is not just an approach to artistic creation but also a foundation for politics – for mutual recognition, dignity and rights through shared dialogue and performance.[4]

There's a large number of intermediary steps between the explosive refrain provided by Nation Time and the creation of a new organised political or social form. But what seems most relevant is how these particular moments enable new forms of interaction. The artistic performance prefigures a broader shift in the political realm, developing out of the apparently unstructured and spontaneous freedom of improvisation.

Many of the critiques made against the Occupy movement were also previously made against black power, feminism, ecology and other social movements. The complaint is the same: the movement was doomed to failure because it lacked the proper organisational forms. Where are your sound bite-sized demands? Or mass-media recognised leaders? This makes the proposition of improvisation as a basis for politics all the more interesting. When posed with the question of whether the Harlem Renaissance movement failed due to lack of institutions, Ralph Ellison famously responded, "[w]e do have institutions. We have the Constitution, the Bill of Rights, and we have jazz." In one sentence Ellison encapsulates how jazz plays the same role as recognised legal and juridical forms. Ellison suggests that for the Harlem Renaissance jazz performed the role of an institution, even as it was not understood in that manner. The success of all of the above relies on their adaptability rather than their continuity. Here, improvisation and jazz become part of what Richard Iton calls the black fantastic,[5] the surreal and always renewing…

Along this train of thought I decided to interview Joe McPhee to ask him what he thought of such questions, particularly given that many years have passed between when Nation Time was recorded and now. McPhee performs at Cafe Oto in London fairly regularly, in various groups, including the Brötzmann Tentet, Decoy, Universal Indians, or on the particular night I interview him, one longrunning project Survival Unit III (with Fred

Lonberg-Holm and Michael Zerang). I asked McPhee about Nation Time and his understanding of the relationship between improvisation, collectivity and politics. For McPhee Nation Time remains connected to the politics of its time, to the ferments of black power and civil rights of the 60s and 70s. This can also be heard clearly in his first album Underground Railroad from 1969. But while these links between art making and politics are evident in McPhee's early recordings, he more or less moved away from that in the late 70s and 80s, venturing into more abstract territories and spiritual themes.

Most intriguing was how McPhee disagreed with the idea that improvised music could provide a basis for the political. While McPhee agreed that improvisation could provide a way to explore the forming of a community, for him this is different than providing a basis for politics – in his interpretation our relationship with music is highly individualised. Because of this variation improvised music cannot form a basis for politics. McPhee's argument echoes a tradition of analysis that is wary of attempts to form a politics around an aesthetic.

During our interview McPhee mentioned that a key influence for him as he moved away from more overtly political themes was the work of physician, psychologist, writer and management consultant Edward de Bono, whose ideas have been widely used within management and organisation theory. This was especially the case in McPhee's development of 'po music' in the early 80s. 'Po music' was McPhee's way of translating de Bono's writing, most famously known for his development of the idea of lateral thinking, into musical form: as a positive, possible, poetic hypothesis.[6] The concept of lateral thinking has become a popular way of understanding indirect and creative decision making processes, forming the basis for so-called out of the box thinking. For McPhee de Bono's helped in finding a way to rethink his approach to music, to make an apparently unnecessary detour to somewhere new:

> Now when you're making this detour you're going to make a whole other bunch of discoveries along the way, which will perhaps influence you and change your original ideas about where you wanted to be. And that's what I wanted, that's PO. The PO is a language indicator to show that it's provocation: don't take things to be what they seem to be. I used that to say, well, if I'm playing something that seems to be jazz (whatever that is) maybe by going in some other directions with other collaborations, I can discover something else: new instruments, new ways of approaching the music, new ways of listening. So that by the time I get to this destination I'm a different person, and the music's different.

McPhee used de Bono's work to get lost again in the unfamiliar, but to find something new through that. In this intersection between free jazz and management theory something unusual happens. Rather than McPhee's music being possessed by a 'new spirit of capitalism,' the circuit goes the other way. A performer adapts concepts developed by organisational theory and applies them in a lateral and open-ended fashion to their own work.

As McPhee suggests, the relationship between music and politics in improvisation can vary widely. To get a sense of the variety of interpretation, even just staying with other players of the Brötzmann Tentet, compare McPhee's understanding of this relationship to how Peter Brötzmann has suggested that free jazz emerging in Germany in the 1960s was more intense and abrasive compared with the UK because it was necessary to respond to the legacies of fascism and its horrors.[7] Compare this with Ken Vandermark's theorization of his own work borrowing ideas from Guy Debord, Chris Marker and experimental film. Or contrast it with John Gruntfest's synthesis of Zen Buddhism and communism which inspired his epic-sized ensembles for improvisation.[8] More broadly, compare it to Sun Ra's combination of mysticism, theosophy and futurism with the imagery of escape from the realities of this world into a better existence in outer space. Or the extended elaboration of this relationship developed by Cornelius Cardew and Eddie Prévost. In this sense it seems unsatisfactory to declare that improvised music could have an inherent politics to it, or that our relationship with the political can only be worked out at the individual level.

Back on the London Underground platform, where does this all leave us? Does this exploration into possible relationships between improvisation, jazz and politics give us any clearer sense of this absurd billboard? It does seem that this figure of the musician contains a grain of truth. Improvisation arguably does help develop how musicians (as well as people more generally) relate to each other, to be creative and adaptive, and to develop their music outside of formal structures. These are celebrated by both the political and the managerial readings. The difficulty in this particular image is that lack of context. The musician pictured here is not in a context of ongoing collaboration, but rather one of individualized potential, as the figure of the entrepreneur. This ad does not call out for a music that could be made together by a group of people, but rather celebrates spaces in which financially successful individuals can enjoy greater comfort and space if they manage to adapt themselves to the demands of capitalism.

And this is precisely how the promised freedom offered to the creative worker ends up as a model of labor discipline for others. Today we are not simply offered the ability to be flexible and adaptable with our life/work time: it is a demand indifferent to our desires. This distinction is only appreciable

by discerning the ideological celebrations as such, with respect to images of improvisation and jazz. Music is never just a model for labor, it is labor itself.

The improvising artist gets used for their idealized ability to make something out of nothing, apparently spontaneously. But this is inaccurate at the most basic level. Musical creation is not an isolated moment, but part of a broader context. Finding a live-work balance in any meaningful sense does not ignore this broader and messier context, but emerges out of it. Improvised music comes out of years of rehearsal, preparation to find new ways to experiment with sounds and materials, to welcome the unexpected. In this sense the new does not come out of nowhere, but rather emerges from all the preparation, as well as the social relations, that make it possible. And this is precisely what is left out of the image.

In this sense McPhee's recalling of Baraka and his invocation of nation time as it reverberates through the decades is even more relevant today. The problem is that attempts to work out a relationship between art making, labor and politics have been forced into a highly-individualized model where the artist as entrepreneur is called upon to develop their practice in a largely illusory situation, one where winning the game entails being able to stretch out your legs, alone. To re-invoke the call for nation time is to ask what makes possible the forming and reforming of community.

Endnotes

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Spaces of Collaboration
An Interview with Ken Vandermark

Ken Vandermark is a musical polymath. Since emerging from the Chicago music scene in the 1990s he has taken part in a huge number of projects, constantly expanding the boundaries of free jazz and experimental music. His approach varies by project, managing to merge a keen compositional sense with passionate and fiery improvisation. Vandermark is one of the few musicians who works seamlessly across musical genres and approaches, managing shifting full-out post-punk improvising, to challenging forms of jazz composition that led Mark Corroto to compare him to Duke Ellington. Vandermark plays in his own ensembles (such as the Vandermark 5, DKV Trio, and the Resonance Ensemble), as well as collaborative projects such as Lean Left (with drummer Paal Nilssen-Love and members of the Dutch punk band the Ex) and Peter Brötzmann Tentet.

I first came across Vandermark's work through the frequent performances he has made at Café Oto in London, which has become a major venue in the past five years for experimental music. This interview was conducted in September 2014, when Vandermark was in town for a residency performing with Eddie Prévost and John Tilbury from the pioneering free improvisation AMM.

STEVPHEN SHUKAITIS (SS): Your performance last night with John Tilbury and Eddie Prévost was really amazing, especially for all the kinds of subtle nuances

of sound and texture explored. But with how hot it was, and with the windows being open, the dance music filtering in added another layer to that which was more than a little unexpected.

KEN VANDERMARK (KV): Normally that stuff kind of annoys me because you're trying to concentrate and you're trying to be specific about where you do things, whether it's completely improvised or not. And you have to listen very acutely to recognise all the components of what's going on, especially if it's completely improvised. And the environment has a big hand in what you choose to do, the acoustics of the space, the interaction with the audience, the presence of the audience. And then the sound in the room, not just the acoustics but what's happening in the room. I find it extremely irritating when photographers leave their click on their shutter on, especially on digital cameras where that's absurd. There's no reason for it.

But to answer your question, with the music that I play in a context with John and Eddie and other improvisers who work in a more… ambient is the wrong word because it implies too much status and too little motion, and there's a lot of motion in the music that Eddie and John do. But I think of it more in terms of a "John Cage experience." When that background stuff was happening and these noises were happening, I let it go because these long stretches of silence that sometimes happen in the music that John and Eddie do that unless you're in some super rarefied environment, which is basically non-existent, there is going to be sound happening in those spaces. And I learnt to enjoy that aspect. That's part of what's happening in the music – and you let go of the control issue on that.

I find it worse, actually, with other kinds of improvising because there's another dynamic… not a dynamic in terms of volume, but another set of interactions happening. And the environment, even though it affects the music, it's not so much a part of the music in some ways, if you know what I mean. There's so much space in what John Tilbury and Eddie Prévost do together that the environment is going to be present in that space. Whereas other kinds of improvising where there's a lot of activity, a lot of volume. Let's say if I'm playing with Lean Left, if we stopped and suddenly someone was taking a bunch of pictures in that gap, it would be like "ah man, you've just undermined all this activity that we've done." But with John and Eddie, it's like "okay, that's the environment we're in right now. That's part of the space and the space is part of what we're doing." The nature of the music is incorporative of the space, if that makes sense.

SS: That's really interesting. It reminds me of a performance I saw by Keith Rowe a few years ago at the Stone in New York City. And similar to last night it was quite hot, and the venue didn't turn on the air conditioning. At the

same time, outside the venue door there was a really drunk woman who was being asked to be quiet but her response was to keep yelling, "fuck your performance!" In some strange way I think Keith Rowe actually really enjoyed this, and he started responding to it, and making it part of the performance.

KV: There's nothing else you can do in that situation. You've got to interact with them on some level. To be antagonistic to it just… it takes everything out of the music at that point. In those situations… an ambulance going by and all these kinds of ambient sounds when you're living in the city and playing in a room like Café Oto or The Stone, which have, kind of, equivalent spaces. It's a storefront, you're on the street, that stuff is going to be part of what happens sometimes. If you've got a drunk, belligerent person screaming "fuck you" right outside the window, if you get frustrated by that and say, "okay, well, now I'm not going to play until that stops," you're not facing the reality that you're not in a pristine concert hall. It's more realistic to just contend with the environment if you can. I'm not always good at doing that but last night, I was enjoying myself so much I said "okay, fuck it."

SS: In certain ways what you're describing sounds like a different approach to composition, much like John Cage, through embracing that indeterminacy, seeing what happens, and following those flows.

KV: Yes, exactly. And if you incorporate that stuff then it becomes another element, another layer of what's happening. And that can be really useful. Years ago John and Eddie they were playing with Keith Rowe and sometimes he had the radio going and it would pick up some almost random pop tune in the middle of a performance with AMM. I found it to be akin to that last night, where you've got this heavy beat going and it has nothing specific to do with what we're playing, and yet it has everything to do with what we're playing because it's all to do with the environment we're playing in. And that's very conditional music, it's about the condition of the space, the environment itself I think, in a way that some other kinds of improvised music are less so.

SS: In that sense it makes the space itself seems much more important than often thought, or at least that I've thought of it. During an improvised performance it's almost as if musicians don't just collaborate with each other but everything around them. It sounds like you're talking about collaboration with the space itself.

KV: Absolutely. If I'm playing solo, the space becomes the duo. The environment, the acoustics of the space, what I can and can't do on the instruments becomes a major factor in how I play. And that's true in duos or trios

or ensembles, whatever size. Those elements of the environment are going to change my choices. In some rooms, if they're really dry acoustically, there's a lot of overtones that I can't utilise that I was able to utilise yesterday. If the music is extremely loud, there's a lot of things that I can't do that I could do yesterday at the concert. Those conditions completely change my choices and that becomes a big factor in how I play, what other people are hearing me do, how they bounce off it, what they're going to be doing too with the space.

The environment is the extra element that's a big contributor with completely improvised music. When you're playing pieces, you're almost imposing the compositional framework on the environment and you're trying to navigate the implications of the pre-composed materials in a performance that involves improvisation and meets the needs of the composition, whatever the environment is about. I've played in spaces with large groups where the acoustics are unbelievably reverberant and it's really hard to hold the music together because with a drummer, it's bouncing all over the place, all these people playing. It's like a chaos in the room. But you're supposed to be playing these written pieces and you've got to adapt to that. And in a sense, you're imposing the requirements of the piece on a space that's not suited to it because that's where you got booked, that's where the gig is. If you're doing something completely improvised, even if it's the same group, the way that group would play in a totally reverberant space to a completely dry space, the music would be highly different.

SS: Then how does that influence you in terms of large ensemble improvising? Let's, for instance, take the Brötzmann Tentet. I've been trying to figure out how it actually works because I've seen having seen the Tentet play a number of times both here and elsewhere and I just don't understand it because it seems to me, following from what you're saying, there's so much happening that the space would affect what everyone would hear, and it would affect how everyone was playing. And that would seem to complicate what must already be a very musically complicated performance.

KV: Yes, and with a group that big, the truth is, you can't hear everything. If I'm on one side of the stage and you've got Fred Lonberg-Holm on the other side of the stage when the band was together and, I don't know maybe Joe McPhee was over there, there were times when I couldn't hear what Joe was doing at all. But there's an element of the implication of trust that if Joe's playing, he's hearing something and he's contributing to what he's hearing and I think the best improvised music is all about spontaneous content and editing. It's not just about playing and being able to hear. Ideally you can hear everything, but in a group with ten to twelve people all improvising at the same time with no predetermined framework to deal with, you just walk on stage and discover the

music at the time. At least in principle that's what it's about. You basically have to deal with selective hearing. What I can hear around me and if everybody's playing at the same time, I've got to pick up parts of that to focus on, to relate to, because I cannot hear eleven other people and everything they're doing, all of the detail of that.

And then on the other side of the stage, realistically from the standpoint of audibility, I can't hear what's happening. I can see them playing, I know they're doing something but my understanding, and when I've heard recordings afterwards, we can hear the whole group, they were making choices about their framework of what they're hearing and their participation. And by the nature of content, if the content is true and it's not just playing for the sake of playing but a specific set of musical decisions that contribute to what's happening in real time and that's going on, things can be side by side and totally unrelated.

I think one of the highest levels of that and one of the best examples is the trio that Peter had with Fred Van Hove and Han Bennink in the 1970s. That trio is still one of my favourite groups. And when you listen to that music or you can see the video of them on television, I think there's a German performance in particular that's completely amazing, you've got three people working independently in parallel. But what they're doing has so much content to it that it creates new relationships between each set of material. You've got three lines running vertically and on a horizontal, chronological scale, if you follow me.

And what Han Bennink does on his own is self-sufficient as an individual performance. I wouldn't say that he's not listening, that's too oversimplified. But it's self-sufficient, the same thing Peter, the same thing with Fred. There are points where, to use that example on the German TV, where Han Bennink just walks off stage in the middle of something. He doesn't even finish what he's doing, he just gets up and leaves, which under normal, cooperative improvising circumstances, that's a radical move and maybe rude. Peter doesn't flinch, Peter keeps doing exactly what he was doing and you can't hear Fred Van Hove. He's playing the piano but he's being buried by the volume, especially when it was Han and Peter but even with Peter. And every time Peter would stop to breathe, you would hear this very quiet, maybe… it could have actually been a classical piece of music but… something in that style, just very piano/mezzo piano, that would suddenly appear for a brief moment and then be buried again. So, they're all working independently and each of those independent sets of activity are self-contained but then they also are taking a stance with what they're doing, maybe in some cases antagonistically but also in reference to and in relationship to what the others are doing, both as pairs and as trios.

So you've got a very complicated interaction, in a trio situation, a highly complex set of interrelationships that are based on listening, ignoring, self-contained playing and the development of new interrelationships that are,

let's say, irrational, that we look for relationships for because of the way the mind works. If all that stuff's happening in a trio and I would say at its best the Tentet was working in that principle with a dozen people so you've got very, very, very dense layers of activity. And there was also a willingness in the Tentet to co-operate. I think that the trio, Brötzmann, Van Hove, and Bennink, they created a new paradigm of un-cooperative improvising and created amazing music from it. When I watched that… I knew a little bit about their history and knew their records because I'd never got to see them live but when I saw that performance, I was hanging out with Peter at his place and he showed it to me on a videotape. I asked Peter, "Was this your last concert?" There's so much palpable tension, not hostility but just musical tension. Bennink leaves and he comes back with a giant box and throws it at the drums. It's almost chaotic but so much electric tension. And Peter said, "It was one of the gigs in the middle of the period of the group together." And I thought, "Jesus, every time you play, it was like this kind of thing?" They created a whole new way of working which I think is highly informative about how you can make music now, that it wasn't really picked up by a lot of people and developed. And I think you can also develop that in a context with used composed elements… pre-composed elements with these totally improvised elements which is something I'm pretty fascinated by, personally. All those things were going on with the Tentet.

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SS: Do you believe it would be possible to build a sense of politics from the process of collaboration? Could you build a sense of politics from improvisation?

KV: Yes, for sure.

SS: The reason I ask is because I asked Joe McPhee about this and he was quite hesitant because… his music, he doesn't like to theorize what he does so much and doesn't want to add that approach to it.

KV: Yes, and I completely hear him and respect his point of view on it. What counts is the result and I think that the interpretation or subjective thinking about music and politics, you can make an argument for it and against it but the end result is if the music's any good or not, not whether it's political or not. And I think there's been some really terrible music made that's highly political. The politics don't give it quality. If the music is great then maybe the political stance of the players becomes important to the person listening but it doesn't mean that the music's good or bad. I don't think you can divorce art from its time period. I think it's participating in its time period and maybe projecting a lot of things that are forward in point of view. People talk about innovators in the music or in the visual arts, writing, whatever, and they were ahead of their time. I think that there's a good description to say that they're actually so of their time, no one could really realise it because when you're in the middle of a time period, you don't really even see what's going on.

Great artists are more accurate and astute – by the time the society's caught up with them, we're in another paradigm. What I've found, without going into it in a heavy way, is that music is part of the politics of the time, whether it wants to be or not. It depends on how the makers of it want it to be perceived. But I think the real central thing is the quality of the music. The first Liberation Music Orchestra record, that's one of the rare examples for me of music that's very specifically political which is also an amazing document of music. That's an incredible record. Or Coltrane's "Alabama." Those are obviously very politicized pieces of music and yet, if you knew nothing about the context or the background for those pieces or that album, in the case of the Charlie Haden recording his taking inspirations from songs associated with the Spanish civil war, the music is still extraordinary.

SS: Is that something to do with comparing the different, let's say, context where music is created as opposed to actively responding to and trying to intervene in that context? For instance there's an interview with Brötzmann where he talks about his playing in the context of Germany after the second

world war, and how its intensity and even possible brutality is a necessary part of responding to that context. Thus his style of playing is not simply an aesthetic choice, but very much an ethical response that comes out of attempting to deal with the horrors of that situation.

KV: Yes, that's the kind of thing I mean. I think it would be strange to think that if you had lived through that process and seen the things that had happened, that you would not, somehow, even from an intuitive, organic standpoint be affected by it and have that affect your work. Even just psychologically, to not be affected by it, you would have to do something so severe to it, it would be an artificial result. It would be a contrivance to say "the war didn't happen." And I think it's the same thing… I haven't had to live through a war situation at home. But definitely, there is a war situation going on related to the United States right now. That affects me. I don't know… I can't say specifically how it affects the music I make other than I'm very aware, or as aware as I feel I can be of what's going on related to that set of conflicts that the US is involved in… the other conditions that are going on around the world. I travel a lot, I see a lot of things, I talk to lots of people. All of that information affects the music I make. But it's not so simplistic as a cause and effect: "I heard a horrible story today so I'm going to play a sad, angry improvisation." That's ludicrous. It's much more complicated than that. On one hand it affects me but I would like to think that there's more going on than just a simple cause and effect. A versus B equals C. There's a bunch of things happening in there.

SS: It's more like something operating subconsciously or by affecting your overall approach, how you understand the world and interact, more than a clear and direct effect.

KV: Yes, I would say it's the way I consider the arts in general, that it's an organic process. There's conceptual aspects to it, there's a lot of thought, there's a lot of discipline, all these things, but the things that I've worked on and the things that I enjoy, there's an organic way that the creators deal with inspiration, things that have influenced them and how they process that and transform it into original work. In the case of some people like Ornette Coleman and Charlie Parker, it totally changed the kind of music I've been involved with. In some cases, it's not so radical but they still make really unique music. I like to use the example of Stan Getz, I love Stan Getz's music but it's certainly not as radical as Evan Parker's music or Jimmy Giuffre's music. Well, without Stan Getz living, there would have been this whole way of playing the saxophone that never existed, you know what I mean? And that's important too.

A real artist processes all these kinds of things, influences and inspirations in an organic and intuitive way and using their intellect, using all their facilities.

The cultural and political environment is a factor too. You can't just say "I'm about art and only art. I examine the history of art and I practice my instrument and I play music and I'm here in this narrow, little world and then all this stuff happening outside of that doesn't exist." That's really artificial. Rather it's a multi-layered set of experiences that affect what happens.

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SS: I find it quite interesting how on your website you include a list of influences, and there's not just musicians but also painters, artists, theorists, and film makers. And you've brought together a whole set of different quotes you've pulled together from various people who have inspired you and that you work from.

KV: I see it as all interrelated. It starts with the music coming up. I was, and still am, really fascinated with the history of jazz. I've made the necessary choice to not associate myself with jazz anymore because the word jazz has been so denigrated by its usage in the United States connected to the media and the Lincoln Centre definitions of what it is and what it isn't. But I learned really early, especially when I went to college, people didn't listen to the kind of music that I was listening to that I met that were my age. They all listened to rock and mostly SST bands and the bands on Sire and Slash. I didn't know any of that stuff, I didn't know about the Minutemen and what not. And I found that if I wanted to talk about music, I needed to find out about that stuff. I found out that what I was really a music fan, not a jazz fan. And then once that happened, it also opened up a lot of doors in terms of all these different kinds of genres that are connected to music. But then that opened doors to the realization that it's not just about music, it's about creative activity and I get lots of inspiration from filmmakers and writers, painters, photographers and the way that they deal with solving creative problems and how they went through the process of figuring out what they needed to do as artists, as individuals.

And that's been a big part of my passion, finding out all these kinds of things because it's all interrelated. The medium is different. I work with sound. Samuel Beckett is one of my biggest heroes and he worked with drama and text but the way he worked really has affected the way I think. And getting to work with John Tilbury is a perfect example of the impact of how Beckett's methodology, particularly in his theatre work, and talking to John Tilbury about it was really illuminating. John has built performances around his work.

SS: I saw John give a performance of some Beckett works here at Café Oto last year.

KV: I didn't realise that, he talked to me about doing that.

SS: He did last year. I was here for the performance of Worstward Ho that was really good.

KV: I have utter admiration for John Tilbury and to get to talk to him about his relationship to Beckett and think about the musicality of Beckett's theatre work and also his literature, but also in particular the plays and how that relates to Morton Feldman and how that relates to John Tilbury's improvising strategies. There's a direct correlation there for John, very specifically, and maybe me more gently, those kinds of relationships about reducing means sometimes. Last night I played very differently than I do with a band like Lean Left. Both of them are completely improvising ensembles but the materials are absolutely opposite in a lot of ways. That's an example of how another way of working, another medium, theatre, has affected my thinking and the world of sound, of music. And that's true of other things as well, especially cinema, because I think there's a lot of correlations in the way I think about music and the way I think about cinema and looking at film and my interest in that.

All these things are interrelated. I do try to represent that as much as possible which is really the whole meaning behind all the dedications on the pieces that I write. It's not that these pieces are supposed to somehow replicate the work of another artist with musical material, it's more to say, "hey, this person had tremendous impact on me and maybe with the hope that someone would check them out too," which I learned from researching Anthony Braxton. In Braxton's work, he talked about all kinds of stuff I didn't know anything about and I went and checked it out. Like Stockhausen. I knew of Stockhausen but I hadn't really looked at his music very much. And Braxton cited how important Stockhausen was for his own work and I'm thinking "well, I'm into Braxton so I should check out Stockhausen," which was revelatory and totally amazing. It's like those kinds of linkages, those kinds of connections, in that case with music but it works through other art forms too.

SS: You can see something similar with other artists who take the same approach, for instance like Mats Gustafsson or the Ex who start from a particular genre or style, but then bring in all kinds of other influences and develop them into something new.

KV: Yes, I mean, the connection between the Ex in Ethiopia and music, I wouldn't have anticipated, not knowing about Terrie's [from the Ex] history specifically. I knew he had travelled all over the continent of Africa, but the impact of seeing Ethiopia on that trip transformed a lot of his thinking about music and what he wanted to do and the way the Ex have incorporated those

ideas into their own music as the acts and how they've worked with Getatchew Mekuria over the years. And the success of that music is really a hybrid that is the Ex and is Ethiopian music, somehow it's in balance… that kind of thing is so rare.

Usually "world music" is the worst of both worlds. It dumbs down the source material from another place and also dumbs down the people that want to explore it by "westernising" it. And somehow, the Ex were much different in how they approached it. I have loved that band for years and when I saw they had made this album, Moa Anbessa, before I heard it I was kind of nervous, not knowing that they were… all the work they'd put into it, I was ignorant of all that and then when I put the record on, my response was "holy shit, this is a complete success."

SS: Maybe it works so well because they're developing ideas with Getatchew rather than just tacking him on to what they do.

KV: Absolutely. It was a collaboration. I know that they were interested in his music and that's why they brought him to Amsterdam, I think it was for their 25th anniversary and Getatchew played with the Instant Composers Pool. But the stuff that he got really excited about was hearing the Ex and he went to them and said, "I want to work with you." There was like a meeting of minds right from the beginning there.

SS: It sounds a bit like the story about Anthony Braxton seeing Wolf Eyes play for the first time and thinking they were great and going to buy all the records off the table, chatting with the band after the performance. Then a week later he goes to a gig and says "can I play with you?" And the album of that performance is really interesting. I wouldn't think to put together Wolf Eyes and Anthony Braxton but it actually works really well.

KV: When you think of Braxton's background going back to the 60s and all the stuff he's seen and done and all the electronic music he's been involved in and his own experiments… maybe it's not that a stretch after all. He's got a radical mind, in the best sense of that.

SS: Sorry if this is a silly question, but I'm curious why you've never played with Tortoise.

KV: I've played with guys in the band but never with the group. I've worked primarily with Jeff Parker and John Herndon but a lot of the guys in the group, I wouldn't say that I know them well. But I know them a little bit to varying degrees. But I think their interests in music are really different than mine and

me working with Jeff and John in Powerhouse Sound was connected to me hearing them in a project that they were ideal for, in terms of John's drumming and dealing with grooves, which was what group was about, and Jeff's guitar playing and his… the variety of possibilities in the way he approaches guitar was perfect for the ensemble. But I think that my interests in music are really divergent from theirs and so it's not surprising to me that they Tortoise wouldn't work with me… even though we live in the same city and we're aware of each other.

Like John McEntire, I think he's an amazing drummer. This goes back a ways but I remember seeing him play with Gastr Del Sol and his whole approach to time and… it was so fascinating. He's amazing but I usually ask people to play with me when I "hear them" in a context. As great as John is and as generous as he's been at times… I've borrowed equipment from him and he's always been helpful to me whenever I've asked, but there hasn't really been a proper context yet. Maybe that will change. And I can't speak for them but I'm guessing it's… they maybe feel the same way. Hopefully they like some of what I've done but they don't necessarily hear it in the context of what they make which, of course, makes sense.

SS: It's always seemed to me that there was something quite special that happened in Chicago in the mid to late 90s, both in terms of the music played and how it brought people together across different kinds of music. But it also seems like that has moved on, or maybe moved around, to a different, perhaps more international context

KV: You mean the kinds of activity that were happening there? Just the interactive collaborations between different genres of music and that. Okay, I understand what you're saying. Yes, I would say that's true. That was a really great period and I don't like to look back because I'm more interested in what's forward but in my own activity… the perfect example is working with the Ex and them inviting me to play with them. That's a perpetuation of activity that I was doing in the 90s but it's just not happening in Chicago now, it's an international thing.

But in the 90s it was a really great period in Chicago because lots of the 'rock musicians' were going and checking out what the improvisers were doing and vice versa and it was a situation… a central situation in Wicker Park, it was like a gentrifying neighbourhood, not unlike this neighbourhood around Café Oto which is already changing radically in the last couple of years, the same kind of thing happened in Wicker Park in Chicago. There were a lot of musicians living in that neighbourhood and a number of rock clubs… not just rock clubs but also an improvised music club called The Hot House; they also had 'world music' too. They were all in one set of a few blocks and that's where

a lot of stuff took off. It was all in the same backyard. It was like, you just went to the corner and you checked out what band was playing. It was a very easy set of influences or interactions happening and that's how I ended up playing with the guys in The Jesus Lizard because Duane Denison kept checking out the Vandermark Quartet and asked me to play with them because we were doing a weekly gig. And it was just this proximity factor. And now I think that's really changed. The people that were open to those kinds of collaborations got maybe more focused on what they were doing. Like the guys in Tortoise for example. They're still doing music and doing things and playing with different kinds of people but their net of activity, maybe like mine, has expanded outside the realm of Chicago.

And I think you're right, there's less direct… there's still lots of collaborating going on but I think it's more within genre rather than cross genre. And for me personally, the most exciting stuff is completely open door and I like working with as many different kinds of situations as possible, as many different aesthetics as possible. And I guess in part, me being fortunate enough to come to Europe a lot and play with Europeans and establish relationships with European musicians, most of them connected to improvised music on some level, that's sustained that kind of excitement for me. And because I've been away from Chicago for the last decade in particular, seven months or more per year, my "back yard" is much bigger. And I've found those kinds of interactions that I found in Chicago in the 90s when I was there all the time on a different kind of scale. But I still pursue those things because I think they're really rewarding and create very interesting new kinds of music and new hybrids of music.

But I see your point and I think that kind of activity happens in certain periods, like a flash point, and that flash point moves to someplace else. And it depends on open minds, a lot of intensity, in proximity. You have to have a tipping point, you have to have a critical mass of activity, of super creative people. If they live on their own somewhere or off in the boondocks, they may do great work but it's not going to rub shoulders with other people doing the same thing and upping the ante. One of the good things about the 90s in Chicago is that in addition to what was happening there, that was the beginning of a lot of cross pollination with Europeans coming to Chicago for the first time, in a large part because of John Corbett who was booking stuff and knew all those musicians. For the first time on a regular basis Peter Brötzmann came to Chicago; John was really, really early in that whole process and when the Empty Bottle improvised music series started on Wednesdays, John and I were booking that and John was the connection to all the European musicians and a lot of the North American musicians who hadn't played in Chicago very often and certainly not in a rock club. And he convinced them to come and the experience was so positive, they kept coming back and the word got out.

That was a really great decade, an amazing decade in retrospect but there was a duration limit on that. John could only do it for so long, the interest of the club only lasted so long, and then things change. Activity like that, at that time, you're right, it goes to different places. Berlin's been amazing for a long time but that's changing. Now in Amsterdam too. Now there's a lot of young stuff going on in Amsterdam which is super exciting. So yes, it moves around and you've got to follow it where it goes.

SS: I'm guessing that's part of why you collaborate with so many different kinds of musicians and push yourself. One of the things you said last night is that when you play with Eddie and John, you feel like you're almost in over your head but that sort of challenge is really enjoyable.

KV: Yes, I feel like I've tried to do that my entire life, if people are willing to work with me. AMM, now with John and Eddie, they're specialists in a very deep field of activity in a way that I am not. When I'm playing with them, it's like… it's a tightrope walk for me. And then there are people who work with electronic music like Christof Kurzmann who are specialists and know things I don't know. And when I work with them, again, I feel like I'm in over my head. But by putting myself in those contexts and working with the best people in their field, if they are willing to give me the chance to try to wrestle with it, it pushes me the hardest and I learn the most. And I am not a specialist, I'm a generalist… I don't know what the correct word is. I'm interested in way too many different things and I'm not… not to suggest for a second that John and Eddie or Christof Kurzmann aren't interested in a huge amount of things either. I love getting a chance to play with the Ex and work with their music and then a week later, play with John Tilbury and Eddie Prévost. And I like everything in between

SS: An interesting comparison might be between your playing and Mats's. Mats's has a particular approach of trying to see how hard he can musically hit you, in terms of intensity of playing, while I would say your approach is much more agile and adaptable.

KV: Of course, yes. The expression of my curiosity and the path of it works in a different way than Mats's. And I think there's a lot of range of what Mats's does but it's also a different set of interests and aesthetics that he wants to work with and he… I wouldn't hesitate to say that he would be more effective in those areas, the high-volume intensity. He's developed a lot there that I haven't worked with in the same way. But I like loud things too, I love playing with Lean Left. I always feel – and I'm not being disingenuous about this, I'm being honest – I always feel that I'm at a disadvantage almost always with the groups

I play in and that's a good place for me to be because it forces me to come up with new things to do.

I remember a few years ago, playing with Lean Left here at Café Oto and after the first set I had to go for a walk because I just… all the resources I had as an instrumentalist and as an improviser, they just would not work in that setting because of the nature of the playing. Andy and Terrie, they come from such a different background and the way they approach improvising is so removed from the histories of 'European improvising,' like out of England or even out of Holland with the ICP, or out of the German school. It's a totally different thread that incorporates rock aesthetics with open improvising and radical sound and volume. Everything I would try, it just didn't work, the phrasing didn't work. It was really… what's the word for it? Shattering. I was like, what am I going to do? I have to play another set with these guys and I have to tour with them. And I just had to start from zero. I had to just re-think the whole thing, re-think the instrument, re-think the way I approach the instrument. And that's how you learn, that's how I learn, through that kind of confrontation, and that was a real confrontation.

SS: There's a quote from Deleuze where he says that creators create their own impossibilities and then basically deal with them.

KV: That's a great phrase. That sums it up much more effectively than me. That sums it up perfectly. That's a great statement.

It takes about four years to get really good asparagus

Conversation with Gee Vaucher

Gee Vaucher is a leading political artist. Her work has been widely circulated, though not always appreciated in its own right. While primarily recognized in the visual art genre, her works are also of great importance in studies of political philosophy and creative practice. Vaucher is best known for her work with the band Crass, but has an extensive range of work from the 60s until present. Her oeuvre of collaborations includes working with members of Fluxus, paintings, film, collage, sculpture, design work, and extensive collaborations that have helped to facilitate and create Dial House, a collective home and arts space in Epping, for over 50 years.

While it is easy to place Vaucher's work in relation to protest art, it is more than that, particularly in how it employed ultra-realistic gouache painting techniques to affect a kind of Surrealist displacement. Vaucher's work during the past twenty years has explored more personal themes, as well as the relationships between not only humans but also animals and humans. It is only recently that it has become possible to gain a fuller sense of the scope of Vaucher's work through important and timely re-printing and re-releasing of some key materials that had been previously unavailable.

Vaucher's work within Crass and Dial House helped foster a DIY spirit in artistic performance and political organising. Rather then relying upon large corporate records labels to distribute their productions the members started their own production and thus were able to exercise much more influence over the conditions of their work and its distribution. This was hugely influential and took place before the rise of independent record labels in the UK. Vaucher's work is an amazing and inspiring example of the ability of groups of people working together to find ways to communicate and express themselves, and thus to find new ways of organising and living.

STEVPHEN SHUKAITIS (SS): You've worked with a number of people on various projects, and with some people, like Penny Rimbaud, for many years. How do you approach collaboration?

GEE VAUCHER (GV): Well, it's not unless somebody asks me, otherwise I just get on with my own work. But if somebody asks me to collaborate with them, then I consider it in every way, you know, the person, the project, the time, what it's trying to say, and then we move from there. I don't look for collaboration; collaboration comes to me. It's kind of easy in that sense. It's very rare that... the only time I really seek collaboration is during an exhibition where I will ask Penny to perform. But he collaborates with great sensitivity even though he performs his own thing, obviously it relates to what's on the wall, but it adds to and broadens the voice of the show. But it's rare for me to initiate collaboration. But I suppose you could say that Exitstencil is a way of collaborating.

SS: How does the context in which your work circulates, affect your approach? Is that something you consider?

GV: No, I don't really. Obviously, there's my own work. I do what I like in terms that I choose the subject, or it chooses me, and it gets translated by using the best medium that will convey the work. It can evolve through sculpture, print, paintings, drawings, film, whichever way I feel it's going to say it the best. Then there's work in the past that I've done for a living, where the subject is given. But even then I have to have free range once I have the basic subject matter. Once I have that, especially now. People ask me to do a job because they must know how I work, what they're going to get, which is not a 'pretty picture.' I don't even accept the job unless I can see the words first, especially if it's for a record cover, though I rarely do them these days. I can't spread myself that thin anymore so I have to say no, but in the past I would say, yes, sure. I'll think about it. Send me the words. If the words rang a bell, I would do it, but if it didn't, I wasn't interested. That's the way it usually worked.

SS: Was it more possible to take that approach in what work you chose to do, or didn't do, because of living in Dial House?

GV: Yes and no. Yes because I didn't need to earn a lot to survive, and no, I chose who I worked for on my terms. There's been a couple of times where it's been big money, because it's a big band, but then I liked the people and I knew that they were genuinely trying hard to say something in a world where it was very difficult to do so, because they were signed to a big label. So I think, okay, I'll try and do my best for you but you're going to have to pay the price, because they can afford it. They are on a big label. I'm not going to do it for nothing. Most of the time though it's been for small bands and it's a fundraiser and I don't get paid, but I don't mind. If I really like the words, if I really like the people and think they're trying to do something, which is all judgmental of course, I don't mind doing it for practically nothing, but usually I ask for something ridiculously low because I think it's quite good for the band to have to find the money. But then I think in a way it helps people to deal with money, money can create enormous problems between people and enormous arguments, it's vicious.

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SS: One thing I was surprised about when I arrived to Dial House, it wasn't what I expected. I grew up on a farm and yet I always associated punk and political arts with an urban context. But arriving at Dial House it actually looked a lot like where I grew up.

GV: Yes. I don't think we could have operated Crass without having somewhere peaceful to come back to after each tour. I personally could never have done Crass out of a squat. I certainly needed the peace. My ideas come to me when I'm gardening. I love gardening, that's where ideas flow. I don't think I could survive very well without the garden.

SS: It is one of the most wonderful gardens I've ever seen because it doesn't feel overly manicured, everything has an organic order to it, but one that seems like it evolved like that rather then being planned.

GV: Yes it has evolved, and many people have contributed to it, which is nice. And not only people who are still alive, there's a lot of ashes of friends scattered in the garden through the years, there's a lot of good energy around, good spirits.

SS: I can imagine that. I was listening to an interview that Penny did with V. Vale,[1] and he was talking about being able to see a particular piece of land, develop it over fifty years, and how through that you get a sense of a place that you never have otherwise.

GV: Very much, it's our spiritual home. We've been here for nearly fifty years. It was found abandoned. Everything has been built and designed, well, it designs itself really, it's very demanding. You follow the landscape, follow what's there and see what happens. Yes, it's a place where we feel at peace. Even as a kid living in the East End of London, we had a small garden, and that's where I spent my time, touching the earth. It's very important for me. I had two years in New York, but even then I started a garden on the roof. Because it's life isn't it? It's about sowing life, and seeing life grow, especially if you're down and depressed for some reason. That's what we find with a lot of people that visit Dial House with problems. I give them a job in the garden because it helps them to ground themselves again. It's meditative. It's hard work. It gives you time alone. There's no argument with the Earth, it only gives.

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SS: When I first saw your paintings in person I was struck - for years I had thought of your work as collage and thus didn't realise that actually a lot of the work was done in gouache. It's so detailed, hyper-realistic, and small scale. Seeing the work in person blew my mind. How did you develop that particular approach to your work? Is it something that you developed when you were in art school?

GV: Not really. I don't know why I developed it like that. The very first paintings that I did in that manner, in that tightness, were for a children's book. You can see some of them in the newest edition of the *Crass Art and other Pre-postmodernist Monsters* book. I think it was then that I went on to develop it for heavier subject matter because I could see people were very attracted to it. They would be drawn in to the technique without seeing the subject matter, so didn't have a chance to say "oh, I can't look at that." I don't paint like that now. I can't. I can't in lots of ways. I don't have the patience. I don't want to restrict my head in that direction any more. I've moved on. My eyesight wasn't so sharp, so I couldn't physically do it anyway. My eyes are better now, but I still don't want to paint like that again.

SS: It's sometimes suggested that there is a shift in your work during the 1990s, a shift in approach and subject matter, where it becomes more metaphoric and more personal.

GV: If you say so. When Crass finished in 1984, three members of the band were faced with ailing parents. Three eldest members in the band. We all had parents that were getting very frail and needed caring for. We all had to deal with that in our respective ways. I personally had come to the point where I couldn't say any more about war and governments. I didn't want to continue in the same way. I thought "Well, I've said it, I can't say it any better than I've said it already. I can't and I don't want to try and reach out to the rest of the world at the moment, I just want to deal with what's in front of me now, ailing parents, local village disputes etc, what's on my doorstep now. I wanted to focus on things that I could possibly have an effect on locally, because I didn't feel I could say anything more about the global situation. It's always the same old shit anyway, isn't it?

SS: It's interesting to think that there is a parallel in that to some of the early Public Image Ltd materials, which are about John Lydon dealing with the death of his mother, and thus are much more personal.

GV: Oh, yes. I think you have to. Having spent nine years projecting and taking in the whole world to try and understand what the hell is going on? You can only say so much and felt I couldn't do any better than I'd done. That's not to say I couldn't now or that I'm past caring, but at the time I just wanted to

bring it closer, look at what was in front of me and demanding attention like ailing parents.

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SS: One thing I find most interesting about Dial House is the many different projects that have come in and out of it over years, each with different collaborations developing over time, then reforming and moving in another direction.

GV: Yes, and some people have run with that and gone to the other side of the world to develop their own voice. It's all very interesting and very rewarding in that sense, that people have run with ideas and taken it places we would never have taken it, lovely.

SS: It's a bit like the garden then, let's see how things lie, how things develop?

GV: Yes I suppose it is. People come into Dial House and you give them a job to do, and they do it – but often go about it in a very different way to what you might. Living somewhere like we do, it's something you have to learn and allow people to go about things differently. I'm not always good at it and poke my nose in! Obviously you have to give some directions especially about gardening and make sure that people understand what is a plant to be left, and what is a plant to be taken out. We've had many accidents. Because for me it comes as second nature with plants, you forget that people don't know one thing from the other, they really don't. Somebody dug up the whole asparagus bed, which was twenty-five years old. It takes about four years to get good asparagus again. I had one plant left. I said "okay, well never mind. What's done is done." I put a new lot in last year.

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SS: How do you understand the potential of political art to change the world, to change the way we relate to each other? It seems that often, people expect social conditions to change quickly rather than being transformed over time, like in your garden.

GV: I think it goes without saying that creativity of any kind has enormous influence, from the obvious, music, theatre, photography, to the less appreciated. But you can start with a populist artist like Banksy who makes political statements on walls. For me I think he makes it too throw away sometimes, too much of a joke, it becomes entertainment, too easy to laugh at and just walk on by, plus of course, the added hysteria that now goes with it. I'm not sure

what to think, I don't know what lasting influence this sort of graffiti on walls will have. Then you get propaganda posters promoting war and a reaction of posters calling for peace, so obviously it must affect people. Images with words can have great power and can either move mountains for the good of all or destroy. Yet people seem to forget that everything we look at, we make use of, has been created, designed, from a bar of soap, to a building. That's what successive governments understand, the power of creativity and how it affects the way people think. Maybe that's why they try to crush it out of schools. When you look at creativity in schools in Britain now, you know you couldn't obliterate it more if you wanted to. I know it will change, but a whole generation of young people are being forced into learning stuff they have no interest in or aptitude for, for damned exams. They are not taught something useful like how to survive, how to realise that creativity has many forms and could save their lives. It's absolutely tragic to impose so much dead matter on a child and then expect them to find their place in world. No wonder people feel lost and incapable of dealing with so much in life. The government knows that and it can sway people's minds very easily to it's advantage.

SS: That's what I find most compelling about punk, more so than the music itself, is the DIY aspect. It inspires people to say "oh, I'll can do something myself, together with my friends we can make something" – and that's important, regardless of what's produced or whether it's the most aesthetically compelling outcome.

GV: That's right. That's what punk was to me. Who cares if you can't play an instrument, just have a go. Only two people in Crass could play an instrument. Andy didn't even know how to hold a guitar, and he never did, but what did he do? He held the guitar his way. He couldn't play different notes so strings were all tuned the same so he just played chords, sliding his hand up and down. Whatever it was, he had great rhythm, and he made that rhythm the way he could, but he couldn't play guitar in a traditional way. That's what the whole movement was about for me, just do it, find your own way. Until you try, you don't know, do you? Make it your own. To me that's still the most important thing, because it's so easy to put yourself down and be put down by government, school or by family. It's so easy for forces outside of you to stop you in your tracks and then you lose confidence, you lose your way, and you end up not creating anything. Everybody's creative. Every child is creative. Find your true love and gift, even if it's making a fine cup of tea for others.

SS: In a certain way some of the ethos of DIY punk was trying to recover a sense of community and belonging that existed before, but had been fragmented.

GV: Yes, that's right. That's a major problem for a lot of people, that they don't feel they're part of anything any more. They don't feel they belong, they have no use. That is the uprooting of people. That's why some get into terrible things, terrible trouble, and then a physical problem arises on the streets. Drugs, drinking, violence – anything to obliterate the pain of not really belonging. That's one of the biggest problems in many parts of the world now, this sense of not being able to contribute and having no community. And Thatcher had a big hand in that, especially in the working class areas. She started selling off the council houses. Suddenly the worst aspect of council house ownership became "Oh, we own ours, let's put up a wall." The row of terraced council houses where my mother lived and where I was brought up, had back gardens, There was a gate in the fence, to the next garden so you could walk through and chat with your neighbour. "Oh, you need some sugar, hang on a minute, I'll get some." The street I lived on was filled with people who had been moved out of London during the war. As you can imagine there was a lot of comradeship and sharing, if you didn't share you didn't survive too well after the war. But suddenly in the 70s, people had an opportunity to buy their council house, they put tall fences up and somehow the separation began not just of gardens but of people and you didn't know who your neighbour was any longer. I'm not saying that people shouldn't have had the chance to own a house, but the way it was done by the government was at fault in many ways.

My mother was very upset one day when I was visiting. She was in tears. She thought that because the neighbours had bought their house and then put in a high fence, they didn't like her. She couldn't understand why somebody would want to do that because nobody had ever done that before. Neighbours were always popping across the garden. She just couldn't understand it.

I said "mum, it's not personal, they're newlyweds, they just want to be private, that's all, it's not a comment on you." But she couldn't understand it and the newlyweds had no idea what they had done. It's sounds a small thing but it changed a way of life for many. I thought it was so sad. It's another example of where a generation doesn't understand the reasons for something happening and perhaps the importance of knowing those around you.

It's very different for young people now. What is the fascination with Facebook? What's the fascination of being on your phone twenty hours a day? What is it? You think a lot of young people are already fed up with it, they don't want to be on demand. They don't want their parents checking them out every five minutes any time they want to, or their friends sending inane messages that they feel they have to answer. It will be interesting to see how things change in the digital world of communication and the actual world of communicating with flesh and blood.

SS: I used to have a screen dependency issue myself, but I tried to change that when my son was born, because I didn't want to naturalise the idea he should spend most of the day looking at a screen, or to always be on call. It's like that at the university where I teach. If a student emails and if I don't write back in an hour they will send me another message asking why I haven't responded. Now I'll tell them that good asparagus takes four years to mature, so you can wait a little more time. And perhaps that's what's most interesting today, projects where people can find the space and time to slow down, to find some calm and perhaps themselves, much like you do in the Dial House garden.

GV: Yes, that's right. They just get on with. I don't think it's necessarily what scale but just get on with it. Some of them are big, like the project up in Todmorden. That's a big project. That's well known throughout the world now. It's been going for seven or eight years I think? It's a project where every tiny bit of land in that town is used to grow vegetables, and the community is invited to help themselves. That's been an amazing project, because nobody has taken advantage of it. Each family take what they need and they help with maintenance. And it's grown, and grown, and grown. I think that's a lovely project, and people have been going to that place to see what's happened and how it's been done. I believe it was just a group of women thinking, "sod it, you know, this town could do better, food is expensive" – it's a very beautiful town up in Yorkshire – but let's see if we can take over bits of land and start growing food for everyone. They took over the land in front of the railway station that was just weeds. Took over a piece of land in front of the police station, which is full of vegetables now. People bring their green waste and they collect the resulting compost and take it back to their gardens. It's lovely. They've now got a dairy in the town. They've got organic local meat, and they are now supporting the restaurants in the town. The local community has learnt when to pick the various crops and they only pick what they need. The whole project is lovely. Fantastic. It's called Incredible Edible and has taken inspiration from the towns history to create what it has today.[2]

There's a lot of projects up and down this country where people have just said "we're going to do it ourselves." Council estates where it's just been junk cars and everything has been spoilt and where they've asked the council to clear the space, but who don't do anything because they have no money and no interest, so in the end they've done it themselves. They've planted an orchard. The community has got involved. The children can now grow vegetables and realise peas are not only in tins. The change that has happened in those communities is amazing. Eve Libertine is part of a group in London that has made a project for the local community. Just down the end of the street she lives in there's was a small park, but to get into the park you had to go through needle alley. It was just crap and dangerous, especially at night. They finally got access

to that tiny piece of land and they've created a community orchard. It's small, but it's got ten beautiful fruit trees that are now mature. They have started a tradition of holding an apple festival every year. It's much safer to go into the park this way now and local people have formed new friendships.

They are tiny things. They don't make the news, but it makes a profound effect on the area you live in. That's where my interest lies, in undermining the accepted state of things. I'd like to undermine the whole system in some way, because the system is forever trying to keep us apart. Keeping you apart stops you sharing your energies and ideas. I love projects to do with the land, because I think children especially, feel part of something. Young people have a chance to feel they belong, and they don't have to kill the pain by jacking up or all the rest of it, consequently it follows that they may grow older feeling at peace, confident and fulfilled with life. They may even end up asking themselves "Why do I want to go and look for a job?" I always encourage people to create their own way of making money. Why don't you create something yourself? If you can't do it on your own, find somebody you trust, or you love, or you enjoy, who has the same interest, and start a business. It's not that difficult. If you want to make a million, yes, it's very difficult. If you want enough just to live with, and be happy, it's not so difficult. I think it's easier, especially now with the computer around, there's online marketing, online websites where you can sell from. It's not difficult. If I can do it with Exitstencil Press, anyone can do it and I'm not that bright at marketing. I'm a terrible business woman anyway and end up giving half the stuff away, but I'm happy with what we've got, it ticks over. No, I think life can be very exciting if you choose to have a go and not take the regular route, certainly a challenge and you'll find hidden depths of strength and capabilities you never knew you had.

More Information:

Gee Vaucher: Introspective (2016). Colchester: Firstsite.

Vaucher, Gee (1999) *Crass Art and Other Pre Post-Modernist Monsters*. Oakland: AK Press.

Endnotes

1 This interview was broadcast in August 2013 as part of V. Vale's series *RE/Search TV: The Counter Culture Hour*. Transcriptions of this interview, and others, both with Penny Rimbaud and Gee Vaucher, were later published in 2014 in *Penny Rimbaud: Interviews by V. Vale* (San Francisco: Re/Search Publications).

2 For more information on Incredible Edible / Todmodern Community Team, see http://www.incredible-edible-todmorden.co.uk


PRECARIOUS
WORKERS BRIGA
RICH PARENTS FOR ALL!
INTERNSHIP
THE COMMON
DEMOCRATIC

Watermelon Politics and the Mutating Forms of Institutional Critique Today

In recent years there has been a rise of social movements and political formations raising questions about the operations of contemporary art institutions. These have ranged from activist groups such as the Precarious Workers Brigade (PWB)[1] and Working Artists and the Greater Economy (WAGE),[2] among others, questioning the functioning of unpaid labor in the cultural and artistic sector, to Liberate Tate's engagement in ending the relationship of public cultural institutions with oil companies, focused on BP's sponsorship of Tate Modern.[3] While the PWB is actively engaged in the issue of unpaid and often exploitative internships within the arts and cultural sector in the UK, as well as critically examining and deconstructing dominant narratives around work, employability, and careers, WAGE made its mark on the art world by exposing the issue of non-payment of fees for artists working within New York's non-profit arts institutions sector. Given that these groups are acting in response to similar pressures and ethical and political conflicts they may be seen as direct descendants of those originally engaged in the birth and rise of institutional critique. On the one hand, the fact that similar conditions – despite being recognized as problems for decades – continue to affect those working in the arts and cultural sector today is a somewhat depressing

realization. On the other hand, however, it seems that we are seeing a renewed, and somewhat mutated, institutional critique emerging in new forms today.

This chapter explores the proposition that recent developments in new forms of institutional critique, and their transformations, could be thought to exhibit a kind of watermelon politics, which is to say having an outward concern with issues of ecology and sustainability, but one that also contains – on a deeper level – concerns about issues relating to labor and production. That is to say that doubled, if not trebled, layers of ethical and political concern are central to new forms of activism around art institutions. The metaphor of a watermelon is a convenient and humorous way to describe layers, however, to be clear, these are layers of containment, not concealment. Rather, we are seeing a different layering and embedding of questions around ethics, labor, sustainability, precarity, and the nature of the institution all working with and often against each other, providing new perspectives and problems for the ongoing question: who runs the art world, and for whose benefit?

Strike Art, or Not

In our view, the best exploration of the most recent flowering of institutional critique is Yates McKee's recent book, *Strike Art: Contemporary Art and the Post-Occupy Condition*. McKee's intention is a "strategic address to those working in the art field more specifically to consider how the various kinds of resources at our disposal might be channeled into movement work as it unfurls with ongoing moments of political rupture."[4] By framing his work in this way, McKee immediately re-opens the question of institutional critique not just within the framework of art history and the art historical canonization critiques of art history, but within a genealogy of moments of political upheaval and contestation. If there would be a renewal of institutional critique today, the reasons for it would not be found within the logic of institutions but rather in the spaces formed by active revolt against them, or what McKee describes succinctly in the subtitle as the 'post-Occupy' conditions. These involve and include, beyond Occupy as a discrete movement or moment, all forms of related political upheaval ranging from the Arab Spring to Black Lives Matter, also drawing from a renewed political grammar of repurposed space for moments of encounter where other forms of subjectivity, and thus hopefully other forms of politics, can emerge.

One noteworthy aspect of McKee's work is how it shows that the art world's engagement with politics moves beyond just art or political contestation. This is evident for example in his exploration of the Gulf Labor Artist Coalition, which operates mainly as a coalition of artists concerned about the working conditions for migrant workers in the construction of museums on Saadiyat Island in Abu Dhabi, but extends beyond that.[5] The initial call for a boycott

in 2011 was specific to workers' rights and safety in one location, but the Coalition's work goes beyond this singular instance. Due to various favorable conditions including the organizing of highly visible and mediagenic forms of conflict, the involvement of high profile artists, and the support organized through these actions galvanized largely through post-Occupy social movements networks and connections, the action was fairly successful. Channeling the visibility generated through this outburst into a form of political antagonism that can move and mutate through that movement. Or as McKee describes it, Gulf Labor created a new form of artistic organizing, one that moved from the group's initial concerns to encompassing

> the inequities and complicities of the global ultra luxury economy more generally. This includes the role of art institutions in the process of gentrification, the cooperation of museums with banks and fossil fuel companies, the exploitation of the legions of precarious and low-wage workers who make the art system run, and the persistent hand-wringing on the part of artists and institutions.[6]

Arguably this dynamic where one form, or mode of conflict in the art world spills over into other issues and areas, is not confined to or unique to the dynamics of Gulf Labor. Far from it, there is a much more general dynamic of embedding layers of ethics and politics upon and in relation to one another. Today's conditions are more than a single watermelon where the green outside contains a red and black center, and more aptly imagined as an entire watermelon patch, where a constellation of different layers and ethico-political assemblages is cultivated. For examples one could look at the way Liberate Tate's demand to end the role of BP's oil sponsorship at the Tate (and more broadly) overlaps with the Precarious Workers Brigade, and the Carrotworkers' campaigns against the art and cultural sectors' reliance on unpaid or very poorly paid labor in the form of internships.

These connections and overlaps are also quite literal in the involvement of many of the same people and their mutual support of each other (if not direct involvement). At a more conceptual level, both campaigns address a common concern about sustainability, whether in relation to ecological sustainability and climate change, or in terms of livelihoods given the hyper-exploitative conditions of cultural work. Similarly, one could look at resonances in the conversations brought together in the 2009 Temporary Services publication *Art Work: A National Conversation About Art, Labor, & Economics* with proposals made by Gustav Metzger during the 1970s.[7] These include Metzger's famous Years Without Art, the withdrawal of labor to reshape and change the power of institutions, or his demand to reduce the amount of flights taken for the

continued functioning of the art world, to reduce the climatic impact of the arts. Here, a point of resonance could be teased out more systematically drawing from Brett Bloom's project *Petro-Subjectivity: De-Industrializing Our Sense of Self*[8] that looks at how oil shapes our experiences of the world. Marx once observed that men make their own history, but they do not make it as they please. Today, we could similarly conclude that while artists attempt to write their own histories, the constraining factors of labor, resources, and myriad forms of social domination are just as present, if not more than ever before.

Conceptually, links between various forms of sustainability can be made beyond using the same word to address different areas. One could turn to the work of Jason W. Moore in formulating an emergent approach to world ecology, particularly where he explores how a devaluing of key resources, or the development of what he describes as the 'four cheaps' of labor power, food, energy, and raw materials accompanies new cycles of accumulation and dispossession.[9] However this does not mean that these resources are cheap in and of themselves. Rather, they have been made so, systematically de-valued. This process of systematically devaluing a resource – whether in the form of access to the apparently infinitely abundant natural resources of colonization or the apparently free resources of unpaid domestic labor – underpins changes in the modes of production and accumulation of capital. Beneath the mystifying growth of new riches lie the supports of the same devalued, old forms of work and human activity that have been disappeared and subsumed.

We could make a similar argument about the shifts taking place within the art world. What Greg Sholette describes as its 'dark matter,' underpins the apparently magical shifts in form and approach that are usually celebrated in retrospect.[10] In other words, the condition of global cultural ecology depends on the creation of such 'cheaps' within the artistic and cultural production. While in Moore's framing the production of such 'cheaps' is mainly the outcome of conquest and colonization, in the arts and cultural world much of the dynamic of invisibilization or 'darkening' of the matter of cultural labor is willfully embraced. It is what Pascal Gielen describes as the 'artistic murmuring of the multitude,'[11] or where post-Fordist work practices – characterized by highly subjective involvement yet little to not job security – were developed within the cultural sector during the 1960s, before spreading to other sectors.[12] Initially, such practices appeared, or were presented, as a relief from the usual constraints of wage work: the formality and rigidity of the '9 to 5' workday. This 'new spirit of capitalism' first appeared as an escape from work, but such an escape was only temporary, and came at a higher cost that only became apparent later.

Re-launching Institutional Critique Today?

It was in this conjunction that institutional critique first arises, at a moment during the 1960s and 1970s where a new round of accumulation by dispossession is just being launched, where shifts in global ecology and patterns of social power are beginning to accelerate in a serious manner. Boltanski and Chiapello argue that at this very moment, the 'new spirit of capitalism' is born – born from separating the artistic and social critique, and separating politics based on the reduction of alienation from politics based on ending exploitation.[13] Or to continue with the image used to frame this chapter, the moment where the 'new spirit of capitalism' is constructed through the carving up of a watermelon – and the declaration that one can only really be concerned with either one or the other issue: either labor or the planet (or gender, or race, or any other particular 'issue'). While the history of institutional critique is usually narrated around a series of proper names, much like the post-Occupy condition that McKee describes, it would be much better understood in the context of the politics of the 1960s. While these kinds of broader movement demands and politics might be left out of art historical scholarship, it is likewise disappointing that histories of social movement politics likewise can be prone to leave out concerns that are more traditionally art world concerns, or ones that tend to stay within the art world.[14]

We can see different waves of institutional critique, where the relationship between institutional form and social movement politics shifts and unfolds over time. Hito Steyerl suggests that the first wave of institutional critique in the 1970s "questioned the authoritarian role of the cultural institution. It challenged the authority that had accumulated in cultural institutions within the framework of the nation state."[15] And seen within the context of the time that is quite sensible, as this was before the neoliberal turn and the process the dismantling of such institutions really took place. Artists were confronted with cultural institutions that may have achieved some degree of autonomy from market pressures, but were nevertheless entangled into other forms of questionable power and patronage, such as through the arms trade and other problematic economic activities. These connections between boards of art institutions and the arms industry, implicating cultural institutions in the dynamics of war and oppression, initially led campaigns such as the Art Workers Coalition to call for an art strike.

The irony which Andrea Fraser points out about this process, which may not come as a surprise, is that this first wave of institutional critique then shifts from attempts at dismantling the institution of art towards defending the very institution that the institutionalization of the avant-garde's self-criticism had created, underpinning the potential for the very institution of critique.[16] This was in some ways a double bind: the acceptance of some forms of critique within the institutional space helped, even if a small way, to take concerns

raised about ethics, power and representation more seriously, yet in doing so reduced the depth at which that critique operated. Or to put it another way: the institutional response would thus be to accept the grounds of critique, but to delimit them in a more circumscribed and controlled manner, so that the main issue becomes one of representation (i.e. who can appear within the institution) rather than control, power, or organization. This overlaps with the argument Steyerl makes, as she suggests that while the first wave of institutional critique produced integration into the institution, the second wave (mainly developing during the 1980s) achieved representation. From there she adds:

> now in the third phase there seems to be only integration into precarity. And in this light we can now answer the question concerning the function of the institution of critique as follows: while critical institutions are being dismantled by neoliberal institutional criticism, this produces an ambivalent subject which develops multiple strategies for dealing with its dislocation. It is on the one side being adapted to the needs of ever more precarious living conditions. On the other, the need seems never to have been greater for institutions that could cater to the new needs and desires that this constituency will create.[17]

Here Steyerl makes a number of important points, beginning with the idea that in a current third phase of institutional critique there is only integration into precarity. The critique of institutions has been weaponized against those institutions, however ambivalent, that previously might have provided some modicum of security (even if only for limited populations and in manners that were far from fair or representative). But most importantly, she gestures towards the idea of an emergent ambivalent subject, one that has to relate to institutional contexts, but does no longer believe that such spaces could provide a refuge. The institution has become a space that one might be temporarily within, but not a place that one could be of. It might be a resting place, but it cannot be a home.

A New Wave of Cooperativism?

This moves us from understanding institutions as specific spaces, or organizations, towards rethinking them as a kind of social field. We may be inside or outside the institutions, but their operations are continually shifting – especially as institutions, in the art world and beyond, increasingly turn into networks rather than solid and fixed forms. This can be seen clearly in how artists today face equally uncertain and precarious conditions both within and outside of institutions. What is then possible within these changing conditions?

The shifting possibilities of institutional critique are not gestured towards here as an indication these histories should be discarded, but rather to indicate that as conditions change the question is how to interact with institutions today. What would it mean to cultivate a new crop of institutional critique within and without these changing conditions?

Of course the answers to this question are already being developed starting from watermelon politics this chapter begins with. The strength of these emergent forms lies precisely in how they move between labor and ecology, or more generally between and around different areas, of struggle. If the new spirit of capitalism separated antagonistic demands into compartmentalized issues to be addressed, then a renewed institutional critique begins from a refusal of such separation. And so, we would suggest that the best way to create a space for maintaining such collectivity without separation would be returning to / reviving practices of cooperativism in the arts.

There is a long history of cooperatives in the arts and cultural labor, which we won't explore in depth here. The point is not to attempt to revive any particular model from this history, but rather to suggest that there is much to learn from it, that would require adapting and reconfiguring for the present. Such rethinking is largely necessitated by the broad changes in the working of art institutions and the cultural economy, and the social conditions in general. Rather than returning to the question of being inside or outside of the institution, the question is how to deal with constant negotiations with institutions and the shifts in the networks of how people work together and collaborate. Here we could look to examples of cooperativism in projects like the Justseeds Artists' Cooperative or the Laboratory of Insurrectionary Imagination, which have adopted such flexible models of cooperative practice and solidarity in how they organize.[18] Or perhaps we could look to the Co-op program developed by the Substation in Singapore.[19]

Platform cooperativism, as proposed by Trebor Scholz, attempts to take the best processes from the sharing economy and adapting those to create a more just and equitable economic arrangement, rather than a platform for further corporate plunder.[20] That is to say, the precise point of platform cooperativism is not to retreat to earlier forms of cooperatives or unions, but to develop new dynamics of cooperation from within and despite the sharing economy. What would it mean to develop a form of platform cooperativism for art and cultural workers? In *Inventing the Future*, Nick Srnicek and Alex Williams make a similar argument to Scholz: a utopian left politics can be found not by retreating to past forms, but rather through a politics articulated around a series of shared and interconnected demands: embracing full automation, developing a basic income and reducing work hours, and ending the domination of work over our lives.[21] Importantly, all of these elements must come together, as a kind of 'watermelon politics,' rather than being separated into individual concerns.

The separation of any one of those would just lead to yet another, 'new spirit of capitalism' where one form of social improvement is met by a re-articulated form of social control.

As McKee observes, today we witness a dual process where artists are withdrawing from the contemporary art system and finding ways to reinvent art as a tool of "radical imagination and direct action that in its deepest dimension asks us: how do we live?"[22] Historically, the art world and its institutions have played many roles: good, bad, and often indifferent. The question of institutional critique, of who runs the art world today (and for whose benefit) is how to occupy such spaces, even if ambivalently and briefly, but also to develop forms of cooperation and collaboration that can sustain themselves above, below, and beyond institutions, even while maintaining some relationships with them. The multiple embedded labor and ecological focus of a watermelon politics is not a solution then, but a proposal to rethink ways to cultivate such a garden of cooperative practices as more essential today than ever.

Endnotes

1 For more information and recent publication PDF download see https://precariousworkersbrigade.tumblr.com/

2 For more information see http://www.wageforwork.com/about/1/womanifesto

3 Evans, Mel (2014) *Artwash: Big Oil and the Arts.* London: Pluto Books.

4 McKee, Yates (2016) *Strike Art: Contemporary Art and the Post-Occupy Condition.* London: Verso, 7.

5 For more information on the timeline of their organizing efforts here: http://gulflabor.org/timeline/

6 McKee, *Strike Art* (2016), 179.

7 Although you could trace this back further to the Salon de Refuses in 1863, if not before then.

8 Bloom, Brett (2015) *Petro-Subjectivity: De-Industrializing Our Sense of Self.* Ft. Wayne: Breakdown Press.

9 Moore, Jason W. (2015) *Capitalism in the Web of Life: Ecology and the Accumulation of Capital.* London: Verso.

10 Sholette, Gregory (2011) *Dark Matter: Art and Politics in the Age of Enterprise Culture.* London: Pluto Books.

11 Gielen, Pascal (2009) *The Murmuring of the Artistic Multitude: Global Art, Memory and Post-Fordism.* Amsterdam: Valiz.

12 For more on this see Miya Tokumitsu (2015) *Do What You Love: And Other Lies About Success and Happiness.* New York: Regan Arts.

13 Boltanski, Luc and Eve Chiapello (2005) *The New Spirit of Capitalism.* London: Verso. For an analysis of their arguments in relationship with cultural labor see Stevphen Shukaitis

(2016) *The Composition of Movements to Come: Aesthetics & Cultural Labor After the Avant-Garde.* London: Rowman & Littlefield International.

14 Moore, Alan W. (2011) *Art Gangs: Protest and Counterculture in New York City.* Brooklyn: Autonomedia.

15 Steyerl, Hito (2009) "The Institution of Critique," *Art and Contemporary Critical Practice: Reinventing Institutional Critique*. Gerald Raunig and Gene Ray, Eds. London: MayFly Books, 14.

16 Fraser, Andrea (2005) "From the Critique of Institutions to an Institution of Critique," *Artforum* Vol. 44 Issue 1: 278-285.

17 Steyerl (2009), 19.

18 For more information on Justseeds see http://justseeds.org. For more information on the Laboratory of Insurrectionary Imagination, see http://labofii.net.

19 For more on this see http://www.substation.org/coop/

20 Scholz, Trebor (2016) *Platform Cooperativism. Challenging the Corporate Sharing Economy.* New York: Rosa Luxemburg Stiftung.

21 Srnicek, Nick and Alex Williams (2015) *Inventing the Future: Postcapitalism and a World Without Work.* London: Verso.

22 McKee, *Strike Art* (2016), 237.

You Have to Fall in Love with the Territory

Discussion with John Jordan

John Jordan is someone who, more than anyone else I've ever met, stands at the heart of countless activist art projects. From Reclaim the Street to the Clown Army, or more climate camps than you can shake a sustainable future at, John is there, always looking for new ways to catalyze the collective radical imagination. He is a master at crisscrossing through but never staying within institutions, taking advantages of the resources that can be offered without compromising on the project at hand or the politics involved. Once I asked him about what inspired him. He answered that he takes most inspiration from Joseph Beuys and Subcomandante Marcos, but for different reasons: one learns from Beuys that art does not need to stay in the art world. And Marcos shows us that the best art doesn't even need to be art.

Framed this way, it's clear how these influences have shaped everything John has been involved in for years. Most recently he has been living at the ZAD in Nantes. The ZAD is truly a combination act on an epic scale. It is both a protest camp formed to stop the building of an airport, and a space for the opening of new possibilities for living together. Unfortunately, it was little discussed in the English-speaking world. In May 2017, I visited the ZAD and

had this conversation with John. More than any other part of this book it reads as a snapshot, as events have quickly unfolded and changed since then.

STEVPHEN SHUKAITIS (SS): What of the experience and lessons of the ZAD would you want to communicate to an audience who isn't familiar with what has been happening here? To put it another way, when you first start talking about what happened here, where do you start? How do you introduce it? And I'm asking that thinking about how to communicate this struggle to someone from Tottenham or California who isn't as familiar with the histories and context here.

JOHN JORDAN (JJ): I'd say it's a liberated territory of 4,000 acres against an airport and its world. It's a territory near Nantes, which is a huge cultural, eco, and arty kind of capital, a bit like Bristol or San Francisco. They wanted to build a new airport. They already have an airport. In the 1960s they decided to nominate this piece of land of 4,000 acres, about half an hour's drive away from Nantes, to build an airport. It's been resisted since the 1960s, initially by farmers, and then, after 2009, by a whole dynasty of activists who have occupied the territory and creating a laboratory of communing, a kind of new commune on these 4,000 acres.

SS: When you say sort of opposing the airport and its world, can explain a bit more what you mean by that?

JJ: What's interesting, compared to what this kind of struggle against an airport would be in the US or the UK, is that the main discourse there might well be climate change. That the airport causes climate crime, that the machines are burning carbon, and therefore was unnecessary. What's interesting here is that it's against the airport and its world. The discourse around climate's quite small. The idea of the world is that it's against domination: a world that comes with the airport. The world domination of control, of hierarchy, of industrialism. All the things that an airport kind of represents. The urbanization of rural territories. A lot of the critiques are around capitalism, urbanisation, loss of peasant land, the destruction of the food system, the concretising the natural world and urbanising rural spaces. That's turning rural spaces into more spaces of control, and destroying biodiversity.

The climate issue is quite small in a sense. But it's there, but it's less obvious as it would be in the UK or the US. It's this kind of beautiful merger of the yes and the no. The DNA of revolutionary struggle for me is this ability to have an active resistance, but embedded within that active resistance is the kind of prefigurativeness of actually living now. Of what the world that you want to live now looks like. You've got this fact that, since 2009, we've blocked the

building of this airport. You're blocking an industrial infrastructure project. Many people in the zone think we are governed by infrastructure now more than we're governed by parliaments. That it's the construction of infrastructure projects that actually form the forms of life that go with it.

For example, high-speed trains, create an infrastructure that links cities, and therefore destroys the kind of interstices in between the cities, and therefore pushes cities, pushes a kind of metropolitan culture of cities rather than developing more decentralized urban/rural networks and forms of life. That is infrastructure. You're blocking infrastructure projects, and at the same time you're creating a laboratory for different ways of being together. The reason it's super important for doing that is we've seen so often movements that are simply in the acts of resistance get easily burnt out. You're constantly in the no, in the negative. And if you're just in a move, your daily life isn't coherent with the activism that you're doing.

Whereas if you're simply in the alternatives there's a tendency to be recuperated because you forget who the enemy is… because you're just focusing on the alternatives. And therefore you can be recuperated by new forms of capital, such as green capitalism. The 1970s in the US are a good example of how a movement that was fundamentally anti-systemic at first split. You had the utopian alternatives developing separate from a systemic critique and a more resistance-type movement ending up in Silicon Valley, social networks, working with the military-industrial complex which those same people were against thirty years before. And because they were no longer integrated into a resistance movement then they were recuperated. That's one of the most beautiful and powerful things of the ZAD, this capacity to integrate these two: this direct action and this construction of alternative ways of being and being in common and living in common together.

SS: It sounds like a combination of prefiguration and refusal.

JJ: Yes. Prefiguration, refusal, resistance, creation.

SS: That's interesting how the climate element is not the dominant framing, especially because in the limited media coverage of the ZAD in the UK it has been. The framing around infrastructure and role of the city is quite interesting. There's different points of articulation, articulating a politics that could bring in different kinds of people… bringing in people from different angles. How do you work between people coming from much different perspectives, different places and experiences? How do they overlap and cooperate with each other coming from different places?


RÉSISTANT
BATON DE LA RÉVOLTE

JJ: It's a very complex and long, difficult, changing process, with its ups and downs, its seasons, its failures, its wins. The diversity is extraordinary. I have never worked in such diversity. I was involved in the climate camp movements in the UK. You had local struggles where you would be against roadbuilding. You'd have the local citizens against the road. You'd have the crusty punks and hippies and activists as well, and they'd be working together. Here the diversity goes beyond the local people and the activists. The most important thing to know is that the activists were invited to come here. They didn't just turn up. That sets the framework in a way. In 2008 there was a letter by the inhabitants who resist, which was a group that set up to take more direct action forms than the NGO. They wrote a letter and invited people to come and occupy the territory saying this is how we're going to win this airport struggle. We're going to occupy the territory.

That was from the beginning. Already there was farmers. And we call it composition, in a sense. Composé in French. It's a difficult word to translate. It's not about composition. An assemblage is the best way of describing this composition. You've got NGOs, you've got political parties, anarchists, primitivists, and libertarian communists. You've got local farmers. You've got farmers nearby who aren't even locally affected by the airport. You've got citizens' groups. You've got naturalists and biologists. You've got this extraordinary combination. You've even got people who are simply living here because it's an outlaw zone. The police haven't been here since 2013. There's a load of possibilities if you're trying to escape from the police.

The way it works is impossible to say. It works because there's an openness, that we all have something to learn from each other. That's a key thing. There was a beautiful moment a few months ago in a meeting where one of the key farmers said 'we have all gone beyond ourselves in this struggle.' In a sense everyone is pushed out of that comfort zone. And because we're all equally pushed out of our comfort zone there's a kind of base understanding. In 2012, when the police tried to evict the zone, the peasants opened their doors, opened their barns, for people to set up HQs and medical centres.

In that moment of resistance there was understanding of the diversity of resistance. You couldn't just win this struggle via nonviolent resistance. Because if there had been nonviolent resistance police would have just completely evacuated the zone very quickly. And if it simply had been conflictual forms of resistance then there wouldn't have been more popular support. What happened is this incredible diversity of tactics, with tractors blocking roads. Retired people singing songs in front of riot cops. People up the trees in more classic Earth Firsty-type stuff. You had clowns. You had naked people. You had people throwing Molotov cocktails. You had barricades. You had blockades of people sitting on the ground with their hands in the air. You had all these different

forms of struggle. That was a kind of first beginning of understanding this kind of fragmentation and diversity that was our strength.

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SS: Can you tell me more about how ZAD has narrated its struggle, both to itself and to the outside world? And not necessarily just media work, but also in terms of art and cultural production, and the use of symbols and mythmaking. There seems to be a strong element of thinking and working in-depth with how certain symbols resonate with people.

JJ: There is. Again, with the ZAD, one has to always be really careful. This is my perspective. The ZAD is 1,000 different kind of mirrors, different ways of thinking about the world.

SS: Could you call it a diversity of narrative tactics?

JJ: Diversity of narrative tactics. That's nice. I've never been in a struggle which has been so self-reflective in terms of its storytelling and its capacity to tell its own story so quickly. That's done through a whole series of things. The Mauvaise Troupe writing collective has collected dozens of in-depth interviews that were then published as zines that became the basis for another book that they produced about the ZAD and the high-speed train. Whenever you arrive in the ZAD, in most of the info spaces, it's one of the things you can pick up very easily.

There's also a lot of song writing. Writing songs around the history of the zone that are written to folk songs, traditional folk songs. There's a lot of call-and-response which are sung during parties. They are sung a lot. There's a lot of parties to celebrate building work, and rituals to celebrate the end of a building work. We built this huge barn with sixty traditional carpenters. And after putting on of the roof we celebrated with a huge traditional folk dancing event. When we finished the lighthouse, there was a big party to celebrate the launch of the lighthouse. So really celebrating these moments. There's a lot of rituals. On 8th October, they started bringing a stick, to plant a stick into the ground to promise you'll come back to defend the zone if the police come. It was during the threat of evictions in 2016. And 40,000 people came. 20,000 people put their sticks into the ground. That became this kind of collective ritual.

A lot of effort is put into rethinking forms of resistance, and rethinking the aesthetics of resistance, but always being aware of some kind of tradition. The sticks, for example, come from a tradition on the Larzac shepherd who… the Larzac was a fight against a military base in the 60s and 70s, which was won. And the shepherds had sticks. There was a key figure in this struggle who is

now dead who was a peasant who would always walk around with his shepherd stick. It was also a reference to him and for the Larzac struggle. There's this creation of new forms and yet with a real desire to link with common popular cultural forms. Hence the songs from folk cultures, folk tradition, folk tunes, and the sticks. To defend the territory you need to fall in love with it. And to fall in love with the territory you need to know it. You need to become the territory. And the territory has all these layers of history and culture and so on. The question is how do you reclaim these? How do you use these in your struggle?

The other work to do in terms of symbols is the fact the territory's been a liberated territory since 2013. When a judge tried to come on the land, there were barricades everywhere. He couldn't even get into the territory. Because it's a liberated territory, there's a huge media work to criminalise it and demonise it. One of the politicians said it's more dangerous than Mosul in Iraq. A lot of the storytelling is to try to counteract that. One of the things we talk is building the ZAD. Building is also defending, so that we can continue with our everyday lives and setting up farms, setting up gardens, building barns. That act of building in a sense is also saying we're here for the long term. You may think you're just going to come and evict us at any point, but actually, we're building as if we're going to be here for the long term.

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SS: What could you imagine being here in 50 years?

JJ: Wow. That's an impossible question. It's interesting. It's a wetland. And one of the reasons that this airport shouldn't be built is that it's incredibly important wetland for several watersheds around the area. It means it's an area that's quite climate-resistant, because it's got a lot of water in it. Whilst all around there may be a lot of droughts, this area will be more green than other areas. It's this strange mound of water and greenness that could be surrounded by a desert. Which, in a sense, is already the image that it is for us here. Capitalism is a desert, a growing desert of singularities and monoculture. It could well be this kind of oasis. That brings in the questions what happens to all the population of Nantes if food isn't getting to Nantes.

Do we arm ourselves to protect our oasis? The positive side of the fifty-year-thing would be that, there's a kind of federation of places like this, of liberated territories across Europe. I think there will be different federations. There'd be a whole fragmentation of liberated territories, possibly. Maybe you'll have some ecofascist liberated territories. And you'll have weird pagan metal liberated territories. And you'll have primitivist liberated territories. In a sense you might well have the kind of macro version of what the micro of the ZAD

already is, which is this fragmented, diverse ecosystem of different anti-capitalist positions… and different anti-hierarchical positions. Everyone in the zone is an anti-capitalist and against domination to some extent, with different views of it.

SS: It seems even if the airport is cancelled, in the eyes of the state, having territory that it can't control is an existential threat to its very existence.

JJ: Yes. The big threat that we're facing now is the fact that there's a possibility that the airport might be cancelled by the present government. Then what do we do? How do we protect the ZAD when there's no longer an airport with it to oppose? All the support we'll have from kind of ecological groups and citizens' groups and so on are not going to be there for defending a liberated anarcho-communist-primitivist territory. It's just not going to have the popular support. You're not going to have 40,000 people coming out to support that. That's the work to really be done in the next six months, which is about strengthening the compositions. We've got a thing which has the six points for the future of the zone without an airport. It basically says the diversity of the zone has to be respected, that those who come and use different forms of agriculture have to be respected, and that we would manage the land ourselves. But that's going to be incredibly difficult. It's a hope.… I think that our weapon is that there is a kind of hope here. I think people come wonder how it works… it's messy. It's complicated. It's difficult. To some extent people are managing to live despite capitalism in these 4,000 acres.

And but through also using capitalism. It's despite. It's not outside of. Being able to run the 200, 400 acres of land as commons. To share tools. There's sixty communes already working together. It is a yes. That could be one of our strongest weapons… is that it is hope in a time when people are losing their hope. And it's material. It's practical. It's not just words. It's not just theory. It's hope embodied in everyday forms of life. That's super-interesting because it talks to way more people.

SS: You're talking about how control is exerted not through government directly but through infrastructure development. And maybe the way you're talking about composition is in fact the sort of opposite to that control through infrastructure. It's how the composition of different ways of living and forces of being together is the flipside of infrastructure as control. What are the forms of being together on the zone that are not controlled by infrastructural demands? It seems at first they'd be articulated in opposition to to being controlled by infrastructure. But then you also have to articulate the importance of that being together not in relationship to opposing the airport, but in it being viable in itself.

JJ: Are you asking me to define the structures that keep that the composition together, and how they're not an infrastructure?

SS: I'm thinking about the shift that happens how you narrate what you're doing. Let's say the external threat of the airport ends, then there's a longer story about, we're here together to stop the airport, but we're here together because we're here. In other words, it's the importance of talking about why we're here and what's being created here, which isn't necessarily about the airport at all. It's about what's being done in the zone.

JJ: Climate Camp was a key part. The letter written in 2008 was amplified by the climate camp, which was France's first climate camp in 2009, influenced by the British climate camps, by people who'd got into the Kingsnorth climate camp and said we need to do this in France. Where is there a climate crime? We're going to come to Notre Dame des Landes, to the airport struggle, which was little-known at the time. Now it's front-page news all the time. For the presidential elections, it came up whenever there were articles about 'what are his big issues for the next presidency.' It was always number two.

The theory of the climate camp was that we create a ten-day space which has porous borders, which is different from a kind of squat or going to a meeting. Going to a political meeting and a squat or an NGO, or whatever, you've got to cross a certain threshold into a certain space. It's quite difficult to get involved. The idea of the climate camp was always to have these kind of porous, stretched, porous edges that people would come into, and therefore we would expand a movement or get more people involved in direct action, because it seemed less scary than crossing a threshold into a space. What's interesting here is you've got 4,000 hectares, with everyday life cross-crossing this zone all the time. It's not a closed space. It's not a ghetto. It's this liberated zone, which the British and the French state constantly try and give an image of it as closed. A lot of their storytelling narrative is you have to go through checkpoints to get there, you can't go in easily. I'm talking about the main road that people go to work every morning and every night. And the fact that it's criss-crossed by people involved in everyday life is really fascinating. That's also one of the ways you build the composition, because people stop out of interest.

They bring their material… it's a really beautiful example of a cultural resistance, because not everyone can be on the front line of a barricade. Not everyone wants to be. Most people don't want to be on a barricade. Most people don't want to confront the police. But a lot of people want to get involved somehow as a kind of act of solidarity around resistance. Because it's this criss-cross thing, people will come past, and they'll see something happening, and they'll offer material help. It can be anything from, when we were building the lighthouse, a guy turns up and gives us a lightning conductor. We needed a

lightning conductor. He stopped, he saw the lighthouse, saw it didn't have a lightning conductor and said 'you haven't got a lightning conductor. I've got one in my van. That's the kind of work I do. Here you go.' It was a grand's worth of lightning conductor just given to us. You have this ability for people to get involved in radical forms of resistance via their everyday… the material basis of their everyday lives.

So bringing electric cables, lending their tractors, bringing seeds. Doctors, thirty doctors, coming to help during the evictions, but then afterwards, teaching people medical skills. A coffee-maker bringing free coffee. Things like that, all the time. Incredible cultural resistance. All these people bringing gifts and these things as their act of solidarity, in the full knowledge that this is a zone that's outside of the law. And it works mutually. The doctors now have asked the people who work in medicinal herb gardens to teach them herbalism. There's this incredible mutual exchange, in a sense. It's kind of creating another kind of form of infrastructure, in a sense, but a material base for some kind of revolutionary activity. A lot of the thinking around here, or a certain frame, a certain current of thinking on the ZAD is, how do we turn the ZAD into a revolutionary base? A place that produces stuff that people can come and train in, or can come learn. They will have some kind of material capacity to support other struggles and other movements. And the ZAD will go and feed people, or help in those kind of material ways.

SS: Maybe the question then is what prevents the emergence of compositions like this elsewhere.

JJ: One of the reasons we can't, we're not winning these battles, these struggles, is because we're not located… we're in this kind of hypermobile world. Many of us in the West are in utter hypermobility, and have no connection to, or have a very abstracted connection, to the thing they're fighting for. When you're living on a territory like this, and you're fighting every day… I won't go through a day where I don't look outside and go, it's really fucking beautiful. Oh my God. They really want to build an airport here? It's becomes so tangible. The more you discover… and you're living on the zone. It doesn't feel like it's activism anymore. I've always had a problem with the term activist and activism, in that you have this kind of monopoly of people who change the world, assuming other people don't change the world through their everyday activities or whatever.

What's interesting here is, in a sense this interview is a form of activism, because we're in a house, squatting in a territory where we shouldn't be, and everything becomes a kind of active activism and resistance. Just sleeping here at night, or having your coffee in the morning. It also gives you a sense, the activism becomes your everyday activity, which can be organising traditional

activist things like a demonstration or an action. But it also can be making cheese, or organising the collecting of the hay, or planting a new garden, so that it's really embedded into everyday life. When that happens, you have a certain connection with the thing that you're struggling around, which is just so much more tangible. There's a beautiful John Berger quote where he talks about the problem with the left and liberalism is also these kinds of global solutions. And his thing is you change something by knowing the life story of that thing, the texture of the things. The life story and the texture of the thing. That's when you begin to feel the struggle as a territory, which is a place with all its histories and its population. It's not just the land. Then you do, the tangibility of it is really hopeful.

It gives you a force, in that you're not somehow shaken by… I see increasing amount of people totally depressed online, on Facebook or social media, around Trump, around Brexit, around the refugee crisis. And these things seem that they're kind of abstractions, in a sense that you can't… I'm really not describing this well.

Yes. Simply by living, and simplify by living the struggle twenty-four hours a day in your everyday life on a territory that you're falling in love with every day as we're watching it and seeing it just gives you a strength and a sense of hope and a tangibility that I never saw in organising summits or the kind of streets parties that would happen for one day and then you need to spend another six months on another event. It goes away from this kind of eventness, in a sense. So much activism is events-based. Here it has a completely different rhythm.

SS: Arguably there's was a similar process in previous movements – I'm thinking in particular about movements during the late 1990s – where the composition formed around questions about how do you give a face to these global trade deals? How do you make it something that can be confronted, rather than this abstraction, or the abstract world of finance capital? How do you create a space where you can embody how you encounter that? And the ZAD strikes me as something quite different, but perhaps similar in creating a space where something which is quite abstract, like infrastructural power, is given a concrete form.

JJ: Yes it is. There was a de-abstraction… what's the face of this thing? But I don't think it's sustained, actually. That kind of eventness, it has its limits.

ANDREW BOYD: Reading some of your writing lately, you talk about art as a practice as practice of life. That feels very much how it is informing how you approach your work at the ZAD, and what kind of sensibility, not just in acting yourself, but trying to model for others here. Can you talk about collapsing

some of those separatenesses that you talk about in the ethics and aesthetics and how you live them out? It seems like your understanding of art and how to follow that muse seems to inform your work here and your philosophy of why you're here and how you're here.

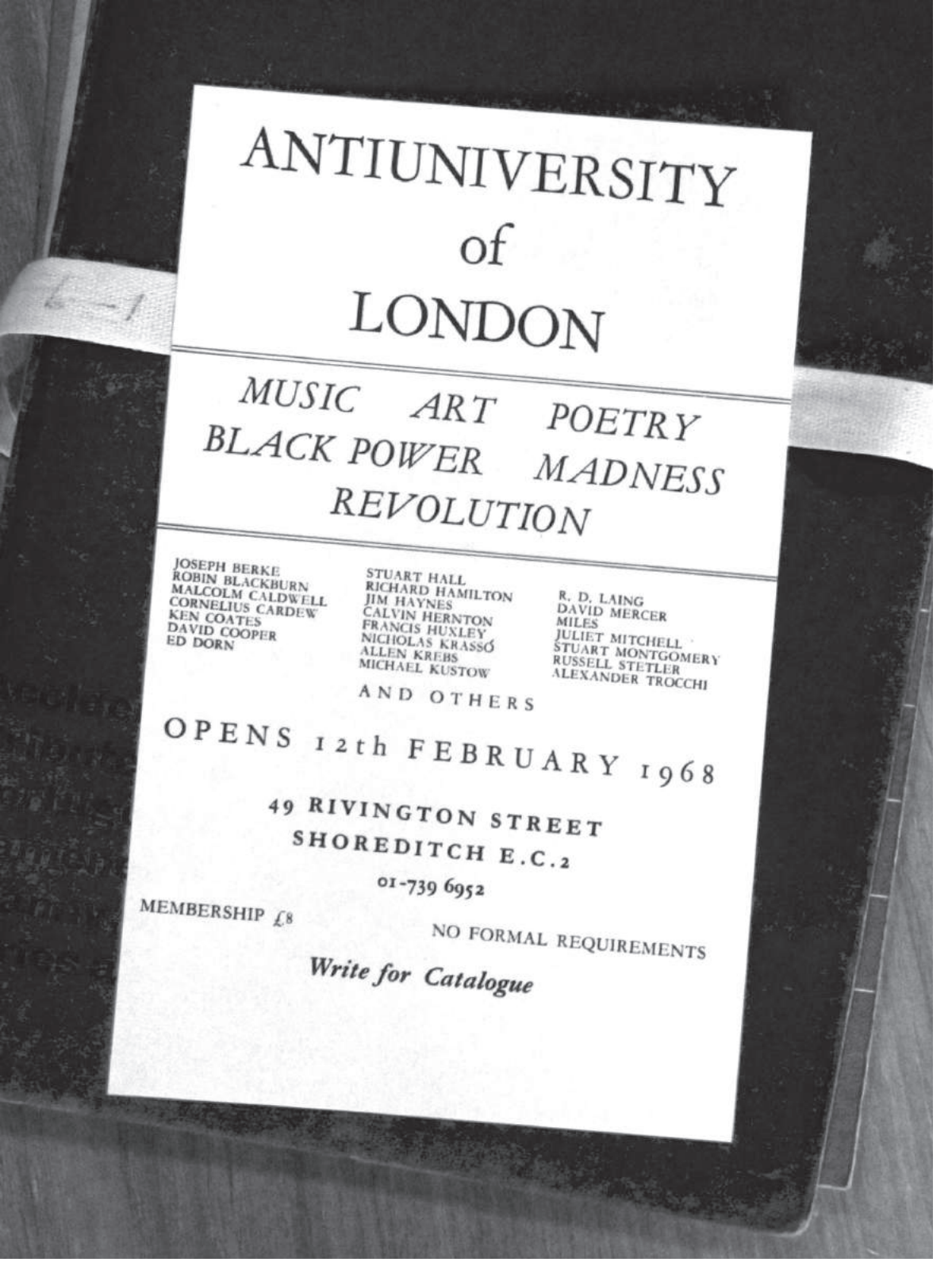
JJ: That definition of art that we'd already loved at the Lab is Alan Kaprow's definition, which is, simply paying attention. Art is simply paying attention. That leads to the recognition that art as an activity separate from everyday life is a very Western concept, for half a dozen centuries, and not even half a dozen centuries. In Bali they say we just do everything in the best possible way we can. We don't have a word for art. Doing everything in the best possible way one can, that paying attention, is also… they say communism is a certain discipline of attention. In a place like the ZAD that attention is super-important because not only have you got to pay attention. We're living in common so you've got to pay incredible attention to the way you relate to people, the things you do. You've got to pay attention. You pay attention to the fact that every act – it might be a practical act – but it can have a symbolic resonance for the struggle as well. Simply harvesting the hay, it can have a symbolic aspect as well as a simple practical aspect.

A lot of people here try and slow down from capitalism so as to have more attention to the way they live and to the choices they make in their lives. And they're kind of freed from the kind of manic-ness of city life and constant bombardment from the kind of virtual network of advertising and so on. It takes you out of that automatic pilot that you can be in so much in a city. You actually make choices about what you're going to do. When you're living in such diversity, you need to give attention to the differences. You can't just storm into a meeting and speak as maybe you would speak to someone who had the same political references and point of view as you. You'll have to pay attention to how you describe something. Here there's a real attention to the way things are built. There's a kind of beauty in the trashiness of some of the stuff in the ZAD. There's an attention to the way your hut is built. There's a kind of performativity.

Even though a lot of people in the ZAD would refuse that. Today we walked past a barricade with a dead heron hanging there. There's a consciousness in that behaviour of putting a dead heron on the barricade. Because this zone is this kind of symbol of resistance, and people come and see it and watch it. Everything you do is this performance in a way. Even though a lot of people would completely refuse that, unconsciously, it's there in a lot of way people do things. For me the lighthouse is a work of art that is also a work of resistance. It is also a symbol to the struggle. It's also a working lighthouse. There's a certain freedom here that you can do completely crazy projects. And you've got so

much support, because you've got thousands and thousands of people around you supporting it in different ways.

And you've got no building regulations, so you can do what whatever the fuck you want. That liberates the zone's creativity as well. People come here to rebuild a life. A lot of people come here and there's a sense of how anything is possible on the zone. Which has it's, pros and cons. A lot of people in the zone are artists… but then there's a load of people here who went to art college, or dance, or theatre school, but you wouldn't know by what they do outwardly. But you would see that they've got a certain attention to the way they live their lives and the things they do, but they're not making theatre shows and art exhibitions.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Infrapolitics & the Nomadic Educational Machine

Stay just as far from me as me from you.
Make sure that you are sure of everything I do.
'Cause I'm not, not, not, not, not, not, not, not
Your academy
– Mission of Burma, "Academy Fight Song"

Anarchism has an ambivalent relationship to the academy.[1] This is, when one takes a second to reflect, not so surprising. How can one maintain any sense of ethical commitment to non-hierarchal, non-exploitative relationships in a space that operates against many of these political ideals? And how to do so without creating a space or knowledge that can be turned against these political goals themselves? As Marc Bousquet and Tiziana Terranova remind us,[2] the institutional setting of the university is not a location outside the workings of the economy (i.e., it is not a bubble nor an ivory tower), but is very much a part of it, existing within the social factory and producing multifarious forms of value creation and the socialization of labor (the development of 'human capital' and the ability to brandish forth credentials to obtain employment, practices of knowledge, information, and organization that are

used throughout the entire social field).[3] This is the case, broadly speaking, both for the classical university, which played an important role in the process of state building and the creation of national culture, and for the neoliberal university, which is more geared to innovation and creativity. That is to say, of course, innovation and creativity understood primarily as those forms that can be translated into new intellectual property rights, patents, and commodifiable forms of knowledge and skills. Thus, there is no 'golden age' of the university that one can refer to or attempt to go back to; it is not a 'university in ruins' that can be rebuilt to return to its former glory precisely because it is a space that has always played a role in creating and maintaining questionable forms of power.[4]

Anarchism, except for perhaps a few strains of individualist orientations, cannot find a home in such a space without betraying itself. But the realization that anarchism can never really be of the university does not preclude finding ways to be in the university and to utilize its space, resources, skills, and knowledges as part of articulating and elaborating a larger political project. As Noam Chomsky argues, "It would be criminal to overlook the serious flaws and inadequacies in our institutions, or to fail to utilize the substantial degree of freedom that most of us enjoy, within the framework of these flawed institutions, to modify or even replace them by a better social order."[5] While the extent of this 'substantial degree of freedom' might be debatable within the current political climate of the university and more generally, the point nevertheless remains: one can find ways to use the institutional space without being of the institution, without taking on the institution's goals as one's own. It is this dynamic of being within but not of an institutional space, to not institute itself as the hegemonic or representative form, that characterizes the workings of the nomadic educational machine.[6] It is an exodus that does not need to leave in order to find a line of flight.

The reigning common sense might advocate for a distinct area of anarchist studies within the academy. Instead, I'd like to argue for an approach to education based on undercommons and enclaves within multiple disciplines and spaces. In other words, to disavow anarchism as object of anarchist studies in favor of a politics of knowledge constantly elaborated within a terrain of struggle. The impossibility of anarchism qua 'Anarchist Studies' proper, far from closing the question of the politics of knowledge from an anarchist perspective, opens the matter precisely from the perspective that more often than not this occurs in the infrapolitical space of what James Scott and Robin D.G. Kelley call the "hidden transcript of resistance," the space of minor knowledges and experiences that do not seek to become a major or representative form, instead forming tools from discarded refuse and remains.

If there is one thing that can be gleaned from the history of autonomist political thought, it is that the social energies of insurgency and resistance

to capitalism, when turned against themselves and re-incorporated into the workings of state and capital, determine the course of capitalist development. That is to say that capitalism develops not according to its own internal structural logic, but according to how it manages to deal with and utilize the social energies of its attempted negation. Similarly, if one heeds the recent analysis that many people, drawing from this tradition, have made of the university (the edu-factory project being perhaps the best example of this[7]), one can see how the university has come to play an increasingly important role in the social field as a space for economic production and struggle.

This is why it would be absurd to assert a space in the university for the continued development of anarchist thought in an institutionalized way, for instance as a department of anarchist studies or similar form. What at first might seem as if it could be quite a victory for subversion could just as easily be turned into another profit-making mechanism for the university, creating the image of subversion while raking in tuition fees. There are numerous programs as well as institutions (to remain nameless for the moment) who constantly turn their 'radical image' into an improved bottom line while all the while operating on a solidly neoliberal basis, strangely enough without any tarnish to their illustrious radical credentials. Meanwhile, institutions that have attempted to run their operations in line with their stated politics have endured a whole host of other pressures and dynamics leading to many difficulties including programs closing down.[8]

This creates an inevitably eccentric position for the subversive intellectual in the academy, precisely because the finding of space might be the very act of delivering capital its future. But in another sense, given capital's dehumanizing tendencies, no one is ever in a comfortable relationship to it. As argued by Stefano Harney and Fred Moten, the role of the subversive intellectual in (but not of) the university, is like a thief who steals what she can from it, using the space to form a "collective orientation to the knowledge object as future project."[9] This would be to utilize the space provided by the university, not as a goal in itself, nor to assert one's right to such a space, but to accomplish something within this space. In other words the fact that one has managed to create a space to discuss anarchist politics does not mean that one has accomplished anything just by that in terms of creating a more "radical" university. It is what one does with this space that is the core politics within the university more so necessarily than the specific content. In this way at times an engaged but tepid liberal politics can very well yield material effects and outcomes that are more radical in their effect than a radical politics without means of its own realization. It is a politics based more on process and ethics of transformation rather than the claiming of territory. However, radical knowledge production is not fixed as an object or a space; it continuously moves and morphs across disciplines, frontiers, ideas, and spaces. It is a form of knowledge production

that comes not from a perspective of separation but rather constant self-institution and questioning of the foundations that support it.

Rather than necessarily assert and affirm an identity or space, these forms of knowledge production develop in exodus, in the maroons and hidden alcoves of the university, in the constantly moving spaces that James Scott and Robin D.G. Kelley call the hidden transcript.[10] This hidden social transcript encompasses not just speech but also an array of practices bound to the particular location – which is both mediated and created by those practices – and so is marked between such and the public transcript often through ongoing struggle and contestation. Between the hidden and public transcripts exists a third realm of politics, "a politics of disguise and anonymity that takes place in public view but is designed to have a double meaning or to shield the identity of the actor."[11] Arguably, the overlooking of this space might in many ways suit the needs of the social actors who articulate their freedom dreams by constantly reinventing and reinterpreting their cultural practices as a part of this third realm of politics, of the infrapolitics of resistance that creates a space for dreams of transcendence and autonomy to exist in a seen (yet unseen) manner. Radical academics, when they find a space in the academy, can use their position to create room and possibilities for organizers to use it for their ends, to orient their work towards the needs and desires of organizing, rather than fixing them as objects of study.

This it to think about the autonomous institution of the nomadic educational machine as a process of subjectivation, on constant becoming, which avoids fixed institutionalization: as the constant movement of constituent power through the undercommons, as one more instance of creating a transformation machine for the development of radical subjectivity exterior to capital's appropriation without needing necessary to find a physical exteriority to capital. The undercommons exist as the forms of self-organization developed by the despised and discounted who no longer seek to develop a form through which their marginalization be can countered by a recognized form of being in public. In other words the undercommons are the spaces in which forms of self-organization exist that no longer seek the approval or recognition of their existence but more often than not get along much better without it.[12] This is not an institution in any sort of Habermasian sense with clearly defined speech acts and reasonable debate. The nomadic educational machine rather is a transformation machine;[13] it is a process for structuring an exteriority of knowledge production to the dynamics of capitalist valorization through educational labor and production, an exteriority that is not necessarily physical but often temporal, intensive, and affective in its nature.

This is the problem (or one of them) that confronts 'anarchist studies.' What might seem at first a relatively straightforward phrase quickly becomes more complicated. What does anarchist studies mean and who will benefit from

establishing this field of study? All too easily, anarchist studies become nothing more than the study of anarchism and anarchists by anarchists, weaving a strange web of self-referentiality and endless rehashing of the deeds and ideas of bearded 19th century European males. This is perhaps a bit too harsh, but is in general an accurate observation. That of course is not to deny or denigrate the importance and value of movement histories and studies, as they often provide a wealth of insight and information. The problem is when seemingly all other forms of knowledge production that could be encompassed within the framework of anarchist studies become forgotten within the endless repetition of the same histories and ideas. By too easily slipping 'anarchist studies' into the 'study of anarchism,' the of has constructed anarchism as a pre-given object that one stands outside as object of knowledge that can be examined, probed, and prodded, rather than as a common space of political elaboration and the development of new ideas and knowledge as a part of this politics. In other words what is lost is the sense of anarchist studies as the elaboration of ideas and knowledges useful to further developing anarchist politics, such as studying the workings of healthcare to financial markets, from the movement of emboli to the movement of the social, approached from a way that is deeply connected to questions posed by social movement and struggles.

In either case it is an approach to knowledge production geared toward the twin imperatives of creating blockages in circuits of oppressive forms of power as well as prefiguring liberatory forms of sociality. There is also a tendency in this dynamic to reduce anarchism to its linguistic instantiation that then further reduces it to only a specific kind of politics.[14] In other words, we cannot reduce anarchism to the mere use of the word 'anarchism,' but rather might highlight and propose social relations based on cooperation, self-determination, and negating hierarchal roles. From this perspective, one can find a much richer and more global tradition of social and political thought and organization that while not raising a black flag in the air is very useful for expanding the scope of human possibilities in a liberatory direction. The conjunction of anarchism and anthropology has been quite useful in this regard.[15] There is also much to learn from postcolonial thought, queer studies, black and Chicano studies, cultural studies, and feminism. Some of the most interesting anarchist thought to emerge within recent years has explored these conjunctions and connections with great success.[16]

The workings of the nomadic educational machine are closer to the operations of a diffuse cultural politics than what would be commonly recognized as an educational project. David Weir makes the intriguing argument that anarchism's great success as a form of cultural politics (particularly within the spheres of art, music, and in creative fields generally) is because of the inability to realize anarchism's political goals in other ways.[17] But there is more to it than an inability to realize political goals, particularly when the realization of these

goals is almost always understood to be the creation of a hegemonic space or situation, such as replacing a particular territorial nation-state with a newly created anarchist non-state. The success of anarchist cultural politics reflects its inherent consistency and fidelity – a failure to create hegemonic forms is a refusal of institutional forms that contradict its politics. It is seeing the educational dynamics that exist within the hidden configurations of knowledge production circulating in the undercommons, a process that is just as much about the articulation of ideas through the arts and culture. The nomadic educational machine is a fish that swims in the secret drift of history that connects medieval heresy to punk rock, from Surrealism to Tom Waits; and it is this submerged history from which insurgent movements draw theoretical and imaginal substance and inspiration from, to forge tools and weapons for resistance.[18]

The nomadic educational machine exists as a diasporic process of knowledge creation within the undercommons. But more than existing within a diasporic configuration, the workings of the nomadic educational machine are necessary for the articulation of this space itself. That is to say that there are forms of knowledge and interaction that constitute a particular space and an approach to education such that it is not clear or perhaps even possible within such to clearly delineate where education and life are different. Paul Gilroy, in his description of the black Atlantic as a transnational, transversal space created by the movement of blacks across the Atlantic, suggests the idea of a partially hidden public sphere.[19] The black Atlantic, constituted by the movement of black people both as objects of slavery, colonialism, and oppressive forces as well as in motion seeking autonomy and freedom through real and imaginary border crossing, can be considered part of this space. While the space described is certainly visible in the physical sense, it is nonetheless a space of history, politics, and social interaction that has often been overlooked as a site of cultural production and analysis.

There are a variety of reasons for this overlooking of the black Atlantic and other spaces. In addition to longstanding racism and conceptions of displaced people as having no history or culture (or at least not one that deserves the same level of analysis of others forms of culture or history) that preclude a serious consideration of such a space, are factors created by the relative inability of the social sciences (sociology in particular) to analyze social forms outside the nation-state. The social sciences, having evolved concomitantly with the rise of the modern rationalized nation-state, tacitly assume that social and cultural phenomena correspond to national and state boundaries, and are often read as if it were the case even when it is not so. The continued existence of ethnic absolutism and cultural nationalism also creates difficulties in analyzing forms of cultural production that violate these clearly defined political, racial, and

cultural boundaries which are assumed to constitute natural pre-existing fixed and immutable categories.

The creativity of the nomadic educational machine is the articulation, preservation, and reinterpretation of cultural and social forms as part of this partially hidden public sphere, as a part of the hidden transcript. The public transcript, or the self-representation of power, more often than not totally excludes and often denies the existence of the social forms developed in this partially hidden public sphere. But this exclusion from the gaze of power, in the blackness of the undercommons, is not necessarily something to be decried or banished, but could very well provide the basis upon which to build a radical cultural politics not instantly subsumed within the optic of the spectacle and the mechanisms of governance. Indeed, there is often a great effort put forth in what Roger Farr (building on Alice Becker-Ho's work on Romani slang) describes as a strategy of concealment, one which builds affective and intense bonds and politics around the refuge of the opaque space, the indecipherable gesture.[20] Jack Bratich's work on the panics that secrecy, or even just the appearance of secrecy, has within the left and more broadly in the public, is also relevant here. While some concern is valid around closed circles (perhaps to avoid the emergence of informal hierarchies, as Jo Freeman has famously argued), one cannot forget how much of the history of revolts and insurrections are founded upon conspiracies both open and not, with the ability to cloak such plans oftentimes quite important to their success or even mere survival.[21]

It would be arguable that in a sense the overlooking of this space in many ways suits the needs of the social actors who articulate their freedom dreams. Constantly reinventing and reinterpreting their cultural practices as a part of this third realm of politics, the infrapolitics of resistance creates a space for dreams of transcendence and autonomy to exist in a seen yet unseen manner. This corresponds well with the two notions of politics that Gilroy poses: the politics of fulfillment ("the notion that a future society will be able to realize the social and political promise that present society has left unaccomplished. It creates a medium in which demands for goals like non-racialized justice and rational organization of the productive processes can be expressed") and the politics of transfiguration (which "emphasizes the emergence of new desires, social relations, and modes of association…. and resistance between that group and its erstwhile oppressors").[22] While he describes the politics of fulfillment as much more willing to play along with western rationality and the dynamics of the state political process (and thus to exist in full view), the politics of transfiguration has a profoundly different character that makes such unlikely. The politics of transfiguration focuses on the sublime and the creation of new forms of social relations and realities. Thus while the politics of fulfillment can show its designs in full view (for the most part), the politics of transfiguration have a more subversive character, that which expresses itself in the

partial concealment of double-coded articulations and the infrapolitics of the partially hidden public sphere.

It is in this space that the arts figure so prominently. The formation of the space itself, as a site for interaction, can itself be considered a form of social sculpture or aesthetic activity. And in so far as it also creates channels for the development and articulation of knowledge through social interaction, also a form of education. From folk songs to tap dancing, theater, tales, and more recently movies, are all involved in creating what Gilroy describes as "a new topography of loyalty and identity in which the structures and presuppositions of the nation-state have been left behind because they are seen to be outmoded."[23] This is the space, as much as it isn't a space at all, where the freedom dreams that Kelley explores come to be and are retold, reinterpreted, and redreamt in a million new combinations. Although Kelley laments that in a world where getting paid and living ostentatiously seem to be held as the ends of the black freedom movement, this is the space to build radically democratic public cultures, to acknowledge and foster the social force of creativity and imagination.[24] Its transmutable, transversal form created and maintained by these articulations, enables discussion of a radically democratic public culture even if the existing political context or situation prevents such conversations from happening openly.

The diasporic aesthetic, which characterizes the form of appearance of the nomadic educational machine (as well as its partial non-appearance), is the social function and creativity displayed by the articulations of those who through displacement and marginalization must partially hide or conceal sections of their expression, often times in plain view, so that they may continue to exist under marginalizing or oppressive conditions. It is the voice, to borrow from the ideas of the Zapatistas, which must hide itself in order to be seen. It is the expression of those who bow before the master during the day in order to pilfer the grain warehouse at night. It is the space created by, containing, and sustained by the articulations and dreams of those who dream out loud in semi-opaque manners. It is not the will to be misunderstood, but rather a question of who wants to be understood by, and who wants to remain an incomprehensible glyph towards. As Nietzsche once observed, the only thing worse than being misunderstood is being totally understood, for that is indeed truly the end.

There is an odd parallel between social scientists that have difficulty understanding and theorizing liminal and recombinant spaces as those in diasporas and the ongoing failure of well intentioned, largely white progressive political forces to appreciated forms of resistance and subversion that occur within displaced communities in order to stay functional. As traditionally sociologists have seem stymied by non-state forms of social analysis, the left in general often fails to appreciate politics aside from marches, rallies, and other visible

manifestations. But the result is similar: the failure to understand a large segment of social reality because it does not jive with existing conceptual and analytical frames of reference. And if there is anywhere that an actual anarchist educational project can find a home, it is here within these spaces and enclaves, rather than in the brightly lit halls of academia or in the company of polite conversation.

It is this task of the constant renewal of the grounds of politics, of finding a way to create a space for subversion, sabotage, and learning within social movement, that is the task of the nomadic educational machine. It is also the same process engaged in by people drawing from the history of militant inquiry and research within autonomist politics.[25] This is a constantly renewing process, not a onetime thing but rather an orientation towards tracing out the development of the grounds on which struggles occur and constantly rethinking on those shifting grounds. It becomes the task of continuing in the tradition of nomadic thought, of embodying and working with philosophy as described by Deleuze and Guattari, which is to say in the creation of concepts through processes of deterritorialization and reterritorialization. Calling forth "not the one who claims to be pure but rather an oppressed, bastard, lower, anarchical, nomadic, and irremediably minor race… it is this double becoming that constitutes the people to come and the new earth."[26]

Endnotes

1 The discussion here is limiting explores the relation between the nomadic educational machine and the university, or higher education more generally. Arguably there are different dynamics to consider within other educational spaces.

2 Bousquet, Marc and Tiziana Terranova (2004) "Recomposing the University," *Mute,* Number 28: 72-81.

3 For some thoughtful consideration of value production and struggles within the classroom, see David Harvie (2006) "Value-production and struggle in the classroom," *Capital and Class* 88: 1-32; and Marc Bousquet (2008) *How the University Works: Higher Education and the Low-Wage Nation*. New York: New York University Press.

4 Readings, Bill (1997) *The University in Ruins*. Cambridge: Harvard University Press.

5 Chomsky, Noam (2003) *Objectivity and Liberal Scholarship*. New York: New Press, 19.

6 There is a good deal of resonance between the concept of being in but not of a space and the framing within Open Marxism of the position of being both within and against capital or the state. The moment of suspension created between existing within but not of is precisely an exteriority which is not exterior, a fold of the interior that creates the outside within.

7 See www.edu-factory.org

8 The Institute for Social Ecology's campus in Vermont, which operated as a haven for radical thought and played a very important role in the radical left in the US, is perhaps the most striking of recent examples. The New College in San Francisco seems to be suffering a similar fate, albeit for a larger set of reasons and dynamics.

9 Moten, Fred and Stefano Harney (2013) *The Undercommons: Fugitive Planning & Black Study*. Brooklyn: Autonomedia, 34.

10 Scott, James C. (1990) *Domination and the Arts of Resistance: Hidden Transcripts.* New Haven: Yale University Press; Kelley, R.D.G. (2002) *Freedom Dreams: The Black Radical Imagination.* Boston: Beacon Press.

11 Scott, James C. (1990) *Domination and the Arts of Resistance: Hidden Transcripts*, 19.

12 Harney, Stefano (2008) "Governance and the Undercommons." Available at http://info.interactivist.net/node/10926. April 7th, 2008.

13 Patton, Paul (2000) *Deleuze & the Political*. New York: Routledge.

14 This need not always be the case. For examples of people who have not fallen into this trap see work of Peter Marshall, Jason Adams, Harold Barclay, and others who have not fallen prey to such a tendency. Even Kropotkin did not base his history of anarchist thought around the use of the word, but rather on what he identified as the 'libertarian tendency' which he traced all the way back to Lao Tzu.

15 Graeber, David (2004) *Fragments of an Anarchist Anthropology*. Chicago: Prickly Paradigm Press.

16 In particular see the work of people such as Jamie Heckert, Lorenzo Kom'boa Ervin, Ashanti Alston, Mohamed Jean Veneuse, Richard Day, Sandra Jeppesen, the Leeds May Day Group, El Kilombo Intergalactico, Peter Lamborn Wilson, Alan Antliff, Daniel Colson, Saul Newman, Marta Kolarova, and Arif Dirlik as well as publications such as *Siyahi* and *Affinities.*

17 Weir, David (1997) *Anarchy & Culture: The Aesthetic Politics of Modernism*. Amherst: University of Massachusetts Press.

18 Marcus, Greil (1989) *Lipstick Traces: A Secret History of the Twentieth Century*. Cambridge: Harvard University Press.

19 Gilroy, Paul (2003) "The Black Atlantic as a Counterculture of Modernity," *Theorizing Diaspora*. Ed. Jana Evans Braziel and Anita Mannur. Malden: Blackwell Publishing, 73.

20 Farr, Roger (2007) "Strategy of Concealment," *Fifth Estate* Number 375; Becker-Ho, A. (2000) *The Princes of Jargon*. Trans. J. McHale. New York: Edwin Mellen.

21 Bratich, Jack Z. (2008) *Conspiracy Panics: Political Rationality and Popular Culture*. Binghamton: SUNY Press.

22 Gilroy, Paul (2003) "The Black Atlantic as a Counterculture of Modernity," *Theorizing Diaspora*, 233-246.

23 Ibid., 63.

24 Kelley, Robin D.G. (2002) *Freedom Dreams: The Black Radical Imagination.* Boston: Beacon Press.

25 See for instance Stevphen Shukaitis David Graeber, Eds. (2007) *Constituent Imagination: Militant Investigations // Collective Theorization*. San Francisco: AK Press. See also the *transversal* issue on militant research (http://transform.eipcp.net/transversal) and Generation On-Line (www.generation-online.org).

26 Guattari, Félix and Gilles Deleuze (1994 [1991]) *What is Philosophy?* London: Verso, 109.

Class Composition & Its Discontents

JENS KASTNER (JK): You are author of a book on autonomy and self-organization, and you recently organized an exhibition and a book on Gee Vaucher, who's best known as the main visual artist for the anarchist punk band Crass. Then we can assume you are also familiar with history and theory of anarchism. In your latest book *The Composition of Movements to Come*, you are re-reading some artistic avant-gardes from an autonomist standpoint. A central notion of this re-reading is "strategy." If I should characterize an anarchist perspective on any subject, I would choose "strategy" as one of the last. It seems contradictory to the anarchist radical moralism of acting here & now. What does strategy mean for you?

STEVPHEN SHUKAITIS (SS): When there is an area of political discussion or a concept that seemingly cannot be discussed it is often useful to start from there, or at the very least to investigate why this is the case. That would seem to be an important way step out of any 'radical moralism' – even if holding on to a sense of ethics at the same time. This particular book started coming out of experiences of the anti-globalization or global justice movement of the 1990s and early 2000s. In particular it starts from ideas around employing a diversity of tactics, which was quite useful in terms of bringing together quite different often disparate approaches for common protests and projects. But for me that

also raised the question of how one would even go about thinking or working through strategic directions for movement organizing.

I'm not so sure that there are not always already discussions of strategy occurring in anarchist and autonomous politics. It's just that they often times don't present themselves that way – in large part because of the negative connotations often associated with strategic thought as being a top down, hierarchical orientation to politics. And that is often the case. But my approach was to look at different ways that avant-garde and experimental arts, including the Situationists, the Art Strike, and Neue Slowenische Kunst function to create collective spaces that functioned as forms of collective strategizing. You might call it exploring strategy by other means, aesthetic in this case.

JK: For example, you're arguing that the practices and ideas of Guy Debord and the Situationist Internationale should not be understood "only as artistic-political interventions, but also as methods of articulating strategies of collective subjectification through these practices" (26).[1] Would that be valid for every avant-garde movement or even for all of these you have investigated?

SS: I would hesitate at arguing that this would be the case for every avant-garde movement or practice. But it would certainly seem the case that avant-garde artistic practice, as it embraces the idea that it is attempting to radically change the nature of art, politics, and social life in general, would contain some notion of reorienting collective subjectification. The Situationists, for example, claimed that they did not want lead or act in a vanguardist manner but rather to 'organize the detonation,' which for them became finding practices and creating situations in which new social subjects could emerge from and act collectively. Indeed, this might not always be clearly expressed, and remain implicit. And in those cases there is more work needed to tease out what notions and practices of subjectification are contained within. It's like Gee Vaucher says that all art is political, all aesthetics is political – the question is how you draw the line.[2] I would suggest that artistic avant-gardes need to have some approach to where and how that line is drawn. And this will be less readily apparent for movements that are more or perhaps even exclusively contained within the institutional 'art world' – such as was argued by Peter Burger (amongst others) about the so-called 'neo-avant-gardes' of the 1960s.[3] But even there you could find approaches to subjectification, just less explicit and not as developed.

JK: One of your theses is that the avant-garde "has not died" (72). Does that does mean that all of their strategies could be practiced today in the same way as during the 1960s? There still seems to be an emancipatory potential in art practices. On the other hand you are also stating that the utopian potential of

being an artist has collapsed because in contemporary societies it "has been realized perversely in existing forms of diffuse cultural production. 'Everyone is an artist' as a utopian possibility is realized just as 'everyone is a worker'." (72) How would you mediate these positions?

SS: It would be absurd to just fall back on repeating ideas or practices from the avant-garde today hoping that they would have the same politics or resonance that they did originally. Of course they wouldn't. To the degree that any political or artistic practice can claim to be radical it's only in relationship with the composition of the situation it finds itself in. And that's part of why I'm trying to further expand the autonomist notion of class composition, using the concepts of political and technical composition in a broader sense to analyse social, cultural, and artistic practices. This follows from how Bifo describes this expanded sense of an autonomist Marxist framework as 'compositionism.'[4]

I don't think it's my role to mediate the possibilities of artistic or cultural production. Rather what I tend to do is to observe (and participate in sometimes) practices that are already happen – and then to look at what they produce for those who are involved in them. This is along the lines of what John Clammer has described as developing not just a new sociology of art, but sociology from art.[5] And in that sense the belief in the utopian potential, the liberatory aspect, of being an artist has not collapsed today. You can see that when you talk to people who embark on a career or life as an artist, or as a cultural producer more generally, because of the freedom they believe that will bring them. That's a very powerful, and still seductive idea. And perhaps that was never really the case – it was always a form of autonomy that was proclaimed and compromised at the same time. But what does the belief in those potentials of artistic and cultural practice do for those who believe in it? And yes, there are still dynamics of elitism existing within the combined and unevenly developed art worlds out there. But sometimes even when that elitism has been eliminated or reduced the idea of it persists as something to be railed against through railing against it, or making of populist gestures. I'm more interested in teasing out what that psychological and social investment in artistic and cultural practices does for the people involved in them, more so than developing an abstract analysis of them.

JK: Coming back to the "strategic-compositional reading of the avant-garde" (141). Your point is, in short, only if we are looking in a certain way, will we see certain realities: For example, the rupture of the everyday-life in the history of the avant-gardes instead of their contribution to the art history. But does this sort of investigation not tend to fade out realities that are not suitable? For example, the aspect of reproduction of an elitist circle in which every art as art

is perceived, or the aspect of artists as role-models for cultural entrepreneurship. What about failure?

SS: There certainly are aspects of failure to consider, and not always in a negative manner. Here I'm thinking of how that was explored in the book *Failure! Experiments in Aesthetic and Social Practices* that the *Journal of Aesthetics & Politics* released a few years ago.[6] Failure is often productive in the sense that it does something for those who are involved in whatever practice is in question, even if they did not attain the stated goals and is not considered successful. If anything I think there is too much of a focus on the failures of the avant-garde. And this fixation on failure is not helpful precisely because of the way it seems to block off looking at what is actually produced for those involved. And that's part of why I would say it can be helpful, and has been helpful, for the framing to have shifted away from the idea of avant-garde practices to experimental practice. Because when you talk about experimental practice it's less a case of being so worried about success and more about what is produced.

A few years ago I was talking with Alan W. Moore about an exhibition about art and squatting that has taken place in London. It was a wonderful exhibition and experiment showing all the great things that squatting had made possible by making more space for cultural production. And I asked Alan why refer to it as an exhibition at all – what was the importance of that? His response was that calling it an exhibition allowed for stepping outside of the realm of political calculation or sole focus on success. You might say that's almost putting the Kantian notion of purposeless purpose to a decidedly politically purpose. And I find that quite useful.

JK: The possibility for failure or the possibility of remaining without any effect on social and political life of a society seems absent to me in the writings of many post-Operaist theoreticians. Antonio Negri characterizes art as multitude,[7] Paolo Virno says avant-garde art is "a lot like communism."[8] What about criteria for success concerning the politics of art?

SS: I probably just backed myself into a rather unpleasant Königsberg alley by mentioning Kant, but I don't think you're going to get anything like universal criteria for success. Although perhaps not if you follow Mike Wayne's interesting Marxist-Kantian aesthetics in his book Red Kant.[9] I'm more interested in taking a more sociological approach and drawing from the criteria that people involved in various forms of artistic and cultural production give themselves, whether explicitly or implicitly. And those will vary widely, from attempting to move and influence people, to propagate ideas, or to further develop practices of expression or deepen meaning. The broad development of success metrics and KPIs can be left to the art bureaucrats – and surely they have for too

many. If anything I'd argue for an approach that avoids being taken hostage to notions and criteria of success, whatever they may be. Or at least I'd suggest developing a more flexible relationship with notions of success and failure as well as remembering that both change the conditions of the possible. And the main question always remains engaging with those conditions.

JK: But not to speak about art all the time: The title of your book refers to the autonomist tradition. The term "composition" there was an analytic tool to investigate the changes which capitalist developments caused in the social and political mixture/ composition of the working class. The notion then also worked as normative bracket to identify certain processes, compositional processes of a struggling, self-organizing working class. In my view, the problem in this tradition of using the term – from Mario Tronti to John Holloway – is that the really important questions could not be asked. The answer is always already there: The working class is struggling for liberation. But what, if the people are not struggling, or struggling for the wrong reasons and dubious goals? With Pierre Bourdieu, I would agree that social analysis has to be focussed on struggles. But the results of these struggles should always considered open. Otherwise, you could not explain why so many working class members are voting for ultra-right wing parties. Do you think there is a usable – maybe strategical – anarchist/ autonomist approach to explain right-wing populism?

SS: Honestly I'm not the best person to ask about populism, right wing or otherwise. But my basic inclination in how to approach that question would be to look at ways that the desires and aspirations congealed into those kinds of politics are the frustrations and thwarted demands that were either abandoned by the Left, or that were stolen from it. So you can look at the way that someone like Trump addresses himself to those who feel abandoned and screwed over by the neoliberal trade deals, or the way that the Brexit campaign resonated with those who very much felt that they were left out of the benefits of neoliberal globalization. And you combine that truncated sense of class consciousness with a convenient scapegoat, whether in terms of racialized politics, or through heightened fears around migration and refugees. That's my first thought there.

I know I just said a minute ago that there was too much emphasis on failure in the art historical framing of the avant-garde, but I would suggest the autonomist tradition has had perhaps the opposite problem, where there has not been nearly enough consideration of failure, or more conceptually not enough attention paid to the dynamics of class decomposition. There's an interesting question about conflating strategic and analytical dimensions in autonomist thought. I would broadly agree that is often the case, sometimes productively, but not always.[10] You can also find figures whose work is more

useful in thinking that through – such as Bifo and Silvia Federici. That was a key aspect of my first book was putting the concepts of recuperation and class decomposition, at the centre of an autonomist analysis. And that's important not because of wanting to develop a fixation or fetish of failure, but because the grounds of political recomposition will be found in finding ways to counter and undermine existing dynamics of class decomposition. In that sense your question about right-wing populism is very pressing indeed – and that's something that very much would be good to consider. A very fruitful way to start thinking about that can be found through the writing of Alberto Asor Rosa, who was both a key influence in early Italian Operaismo, and a key commentator on literature and culture. And in that spirit I will leave you with a quote from his recently translated book The Writer and the People:

How to create a profound and organic relation between intellectual enquiry and vast popular needs has been the dominant question of all those thinkers and movements that have sought a serious strategy for the various uprisings for independence or national renewal. How to create such a relation today, after past bourgeois failures, is the dominant question of a workers' movement that aspires to escape from the narrow horizons into which reformist leaders have forced it for decades. The problem of the relation: hence, intellectuals/people is only one aspect of a much vaster vision of class struggle.[11]

Endnotes

1 All of the quotes with no further citation information that appear here are from *The Composition of Movements to Come* (2016).

2 Burrows, Alex (2014) "Something From Nothing: The Crass Art Of Gee Vaucher." *The Quietus*. 2 December 2012. Available at http://thequietus.com/articles/10865-gee-vaucher-crass-art-interview.

3 *Burger, Peter (1984) Theory of the Avant-Garde. Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press.*

4 Berardi, Franco (2009) *Precarious Rhapsody: Semiocapitalism and the pathologies of the post-alpha generation*. Brooklyn: Autonomedia.

5 Clammer, John (2014) *Vision and Society: Towards a Sociology and Anthropology from Art*. London: Routledge.

6 Antebi, Nicole, Colin Dickey, and Robby Herbst, Eds. (2007) *Failure: Experiments in Aesthetic and Social Practice*. Los Angeles: Journal of Aesthetics & Protest Press.

7 *Negri, Antonio (2011) Art & Multitude. Cambridge: Polity Press.*

8 Virno, Paolo (2009) "The Dismesure of Art. An Interview with Paolo Virno," *Being Artists in Post-Fordist Times*. Pascal Gielen and Paul De Bruyne, Eds. Rotterdam: NAi Publishers, 18.

9 Wayne, Michael (2014) *Red Kant: Aesthetics, Marxism and the Third Critique*. London: Bloomsbury.

10 *Shukaitis, Stevphen (2013) "Recomposing precarity: Notes on the laboured politics of class composition" ephemera: theory & politics in organization Volume 13 Number 3: 2013: 641-658.*

11 Rosa, Alberto Asor (2016) *The Writer and the People*. Calcutta: Seagull Books

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