

FIELD

*A JOURNAL OF SOCIALLY-
ENGAGED ART CRITICISM*

2

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FIELD

A JOURNAL OF SOCIALLY-
ENGAGED ART CRITICISM

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Editorial

Grant Kester

There is no surer way of evading the world than art, and no surer way of attaching oneself to it.

– Goethe, *Elective Affinities* (1809)¹

Welcome to the second issue of *FIELD*. Lenin was said, perhaps apocryphally, to have danced a jig when the Bolsheviks managed to retain power in Russia longer than the 72-day life span of the Paris Commune. While the stakes for *FIELD*'s survival are considerably less momentous, I can say that we are delighted to be releasing our second issue this fall. While this isn't, properly speaking, a thematic issue it has nonetheless occurred that most of our contributors touch on the same general issue; how do we determine the critical efficacy of a given art practice? Here it should be noted that "criticality" has, for some time, functioned as the implicit criterion for the evaluation of artistic or aesthetic merit in contemporary art more generally. This is, of course, consistent with the earliest concept of the aesthetic as a form of critical self-reflection (on the harmony of the faculties or the free play of our formal and sensuous drives in the virtual realm of aesthetic semblance). It should also be noted that the essentially monological concept of the self that is assumed to engage in this reflective project continues to inform contemporary accounts of art's critical potential.

That all modernist art (not just the socially engaged variety) makes some claim to a critical efficacy is self evident, as is the fact that this capacity rests on a set of explicitly ethical claims about art's

relationship to dominant systems of power. It is equally axiomatic that the preponderance of what we know as modernist art is driven by variations of the same underlying impulse: to challenge the growing influence of (implicitly capitalistic) forms of materialism and possessive individualism. It takes no great hermeneutic effort to detect this orientation in the special privilege assigned by Kant to disinterest, in Schiller's assault on the "reign of material needs" or in Adorno's attack on "constitutive subjectivity" in *Aesthetic Theory*. At the same time, the source of art's power to challenge this regime was to be found in its monological autonomy from the same corrupt social and political system that it hoped to transform. For Schiller the aesthetic re-invents the growing schism between works of art and the world of daily life—which would become a defining feature of modernity—as the precondition for art's capacity to effect a harmonious reconciliation of contending classes. One symptom of modernist fragmentation (the hierarchical segregation of fine art) thus became the antidote for another (class division).

In this model concrete social or political change is merely the mechanical or pragmatic extension of the real, creative work of social transformation, which only occurs through the cognitive reprogramming of individual subjects. Any direct social or collective action is premature, and even hazardous, until we have first learned how to respect, rather than instrumentalize, the other through a singular experience of aesthetic education (whether this occurs through exposure to elevating models of high art or the spectacle of economic abjection engineered to "force" the bourgeois viewer to admit his own complicity in class oppression). This deferral of praxis is re-articulated by Adorno as a prohibition on the premature reconciliation of subject and object, or self and other, in artistic experience, which would allow the bourgeois viewer an unearned experience of aesthetic transcendence. The necessary presumption in both cases, of course, is a hierarchical separation between artists, who possess an innate capacity for critical reflection, and individual viewers (always implicitly "bourgeois") whose consciousness remains mired in what Viktor Shklovsky famously termed "habitualization". It

is only after the (inevitably deferred) revolution, when the aesthetic reconciliation of self and other is finally universalized and made real, that we can be allowed to indulge in all those emotions (friendship, love, sympathy) that “we revolutionists,” as Trotsky once wrote, “feel apprehensive of naming”.² Until that time any artistic practice that traffics in the kinds of affirmative or solidarity-enhancing modes of affect necessary to actually work collectively does nothing more than provide an alibi for a fundamentally corrupt system.

As I’ve suggested, the ethical orientation of the avant-garde has historically been staged through this binary opposition between complicity and criticality, between those practices that can be seen to engage in an authentic form of (autonomous) critique, and those that can be shown to reinforce rather than challenge oppressive social or political systems. It would seem clear that these two operational modes can’t be entirely disentangled, and that this tension, between salve and salvation, between agent of radical change and alibi for the status quo, is built into the very operation of the avant-garde as a discursive apparatus. As Paul Mann describes it, the avant-garde is “not a victim of recuperation but its agent, its proper technology.”³ Like Icarus, just how closely do artists hew to the corrosive warmth of the social before their wings are melted and they plummet to earth? These issues are even more pronounced when we turn to the arena of socially engaged art, whose very self-definition assumes the problematic counterpoint of a socially *disengaged* art practice. Thus, one of the central discursive tropes evident in recent criticism of socially engaged art circulates around the efficacy of “merely” local or situational actions. While there are certainly valid reasons for being skeptical of practices grounded in local sites of resistance, this critique assumes that artists today actually have the option of developing their work in conjunction with a revolutionary movement operating at a global scale. More crucially, it ignores the fact that the future evolution of new, potentially global, forms of resistance must begin precisely with the creative and practical experience of local or situational action.

This fall I wrote a short piece for the A Blade of Grass website that explores this question in more detail, using Thomas Hirschhorn's widely celebrated *Gramsci Monument* (located in the Forest Houses complex in the South Bronx) as an example. I want to return to this discussion briefly here, as it bears directly on many of the questions raised in this issue of *FIELD*. In particular, the *Gramsci Monument* offers a useful illustration of the complex ideological machinations necessary for an artist whose livelihood is dependent on the collecting habits of the 1% to retain the aura of autonomous criticality necessary to be simultaneously embraced by the validating mechanisms of academic art criticism. In addition, given the increasing appropriation of "social art" by museums, art fairs, and foundations, it also provides a revealing example of the specific modes of practice that are most congenial to the institutional and ideological demands of the mainstream art world. Typically these involve temporary and ephemeral gestures that entail no long-term commitment, responsibility or investment but, rather, provide highly mediagenic moments of immersion in "other" social and cultural contexts. Certainly they don't encourage anything as déclassé as a form of resistance or criticality that might raise troubling questions about the hegemonic function of the sponsoring institutions themselves.

For Hirschhorn, of course, the criticality of the *Gramsci Monument* is linked to its carefully regulated autonomy, evident in his insistence that this project is "no social work experiment, but pure art". The most obvious subtext for this insistence is what we might term the exculpatory critique, which I've alluded to above. It is familiar to us from several decades of critical theory, but I'll rehearse its general outlines here. Given the repeated failures of the working class to rise up in revolutionary protest and overthrow the entire capitalist system, the artist or theorist has come to function as a kind of protective vessel (Adorno used the term "deputy") for a pure revolutionary spirit that must be held in trust until the proper historical moment allows for its return to the masses for final actualization. Until that time any concrete action (to improve the conditions of the oppressed,

for example) only serves to compromise the exemplary freedom of artistic or intellectual production and exonerate the “system” itself from critique, by showing that some positive change is possible without a total revolution. Here the premature reconciliation of art and life replaces the premature reconciliation of self and other as the condition against which advanced art differentiates itself. The artist, in order to preserve his or her own (internalized) revolutionary purity, must abstain from concrete action and instead traffic only in various form of symbolic enactment (performances, the production of physical objects, etc.) designed to interpellate individual viewers.

One might be surprised to find a project that is so clearly indebted to the often-reviled traditions of community art presented as an exemplar of aesthetic purity. However, Hirschhorn’s evocation of purity in this context deserves closer scrutiny, as it can reveal a great deal about the increasing institutional popularity of various forms of collaborative or participatory art. The result of this mainstreaming has been a tactical shift in the constitution of autonomy itself. We have moved from a model of spatial autonomy, in which art preserves its independent criticality by remaining sequestered in museums and galleries, to a model of temporal autonomy, in which the artist preserves his or her critical independence by retaining mastery over the unfolding of a given project through time. Here the artist alone determines the moment of both origination and cessation, and the complex choreographic markers that structure the processual rhythms (of creativity, of incipient resistance, of reinvention or reorientation) set in motion by their work.

In the absence of the institutional and spatial boundaries of the museum or gallery, time, and the structuring of time, becomes the primary form through which the artist exercises his or her autonomy. It is the realm of expectation and disappointment, realization and deferral, and completion and incompleteness. The orientation to time in the structuring and planning of *Gramsci Monument* is symptomatic. It was exhaustively event-driven, rather than process driven, combining elements of both a museum education program and a biennial (complete with its own “pavilions”). This is museum

time, institutional time, teleological time, predicated on planned events and scheduled, highly programmatic, activities, and largely resistant to the improvisational emergence of new critical insight or the unforeseen social energies and antagonisms that can be generated by a messy, complex, creatively staged collaborative interaction (a process that is, more often than not, temporally disobedient). Not surprisingly, the *Gramsci Monument* appeared to have no real orientation to local nodes of practical resistance that might have allowed the residents of Forest Houses to integrate the ideas espoused by Antonio Gramsci, the intellectual figurehead of the project, with their own lived experience.

This sovereign relationship to temporality is clearly evident in Hirschhorn's insistence on the "time-limited" nature of the *Gramsci Monument*, which came in response to a critic's inquiry about its possible long-term effect on the Forest Houses community. Hirschhorn's response is symptomatic:

First of all, I am happy to learn that residents want the *Monument* back, because this means that the project was not a failure. But I had been, since the very beginning, clear to everybody that the *Gramsci Monument* is a new kind of *Monument*, and it's a new form of art—concerning its dedication, its location, its output and its duration . . . It's not a *Monument* which understands eternity as a question of time; it's a *Monument* which understands eternity as 'here' and as 'now'.⁴

For Hirschhorn the purity of *Gramsci Monument*, and his own critical autonomy as an artist, rests on his singular ability to prescribe its temporal limits, and to refuse any responsibility for the actual effect the work might have on the Forest Houses community "after" the project is completed. Here the fundamentally monological orientation of his practice is evident. In order to instantiate and preserve his own autonomy Hirschhorn must refuse any reciprocal answerability to the site and to the unfolding social processes that might be catalyzed by his presence there. The effect of this temporal sovereignty on the community itself is apparent in the following observations; one made during the project's eleven-week run (by

the then-director of the Dia Art Foundation, which commissioned the work) and the other about one year after its conclusion by Susie Farmer (the mother of one of Hirschhorn's chief contacts at Forest Hills).

The seminars on Saturdays are packed. There are people coming every day: that's a sign that the residents are interested in the project. I remember I was there one morning just before it opened to the public and a group of kids was running toward the monument, screaming, "The monument is about to open. Let's go to the computer room!" There is ownership. The *Gramsci Monument* is part of Forest Houses; it's part of their lives.

– "The Momentary Monument: Philippe Vergne on Thomas Hirschhorn's Ode to Gramsci," Walker Art Museum Magazine (September 12, 2013)⁵

Whitney Kimball: I remember the last time I talked to you, you were telling me about kids who were getting really inspired by the art there. Have you seen that [enthusiasm] grow at all over the year? [Note: Last year, Susie had told me a story about a little boy who'd been particularly inspired by the *Monument*, and had been thinking about going into an art program because of it.]

Susie Farmer: No. And one little boy who we particularly thought would be very good [with art], I don't even know if he's going to school now like we'd encouraged him to do. The children are asking every day if it's going to come back. No, they're not going to come back. It was a one-time thing. Every day they had something to look forward to. They would get up early and come to the *Monument*. It was something they never had in their area before, and they may never have it again.

– Whitney Kimball, "How Do People Feel about the Gramsci Monument One Year Later?," Artcity (August 20, 2014)⁶

By refusing to use his considerable prestige (and the Dia's equally considerable financial resources) to create a more sustainable transformation in Forest Houses, Hirschhorn imagines that he is offering an indirect critique of the failure of existing public agencies to fulfill their own obligation to support the Forest Houses residents themselves, invoking what he somewhat cryptically terms the "non-necessity of the world as it is". This is a straightforward, and

fairly predictable, reiteration of the exculpatory critique outlined above. For Hirschhorn, art's function is to provide a brief, symbolic anticipation of a different world, evoking the possibility of concrete change or political empowerment (in the case of the *Gramsci Monument*, via the staged consumption of Marxist philosophy or critical theory) but never seeking to realize it. The residents of Forest Houses can be employed, trained, photographed and lectured to, but never engaged in a process that entails their own agency in the development of new forms of resistance or criticality.⁷ If the after-effect of this approach is some level of disillusionment that the unprecedented outpouring of resources and media attention devoted to the Forest Houses community had been abruptly withdrawn, it's preferable to a scenario in which the state could point to some more lasting improvement in the community to excuse its own inaction.

By leaving the community with no sustainable model of creative resistance Hirschhorn can preserve his own image as an uncompromising critic of capitalism while siphoning off the social capital generated by working-class residents, whose cultural and economic difference is a narcotic to arts institutions and funders anxious to demonstrate their social commitment (so long as it remains short term), without calling into question their institutional privilege or their hegemonic function within the global art market (now valued at \$54 billion dollars per-year). Of course one can't expect Hirschhorn, or any artist, to resolve the economic crisis of the working class in the South Bronx. But one can ask what it means for an artist to offer the hope of something different from "the world as it is," while using the frustration and disappointment produced by its failed realization to demonstrate his unwillingness to indulge in the "premature" reconciliation of art and practical action. Here the people of Forest Hills, their kindled enthusiasm, their aroused hopes, their participatory involvement, become the medium for a "critical" gesture intended primarily for art world consumption.

In This Issue...

This analysis leads us to our current issue. It features an illuminating exchange between Noah Fischer and Sebastian Loewe, produced in response to Loewe's critique of the appropriation of the Occupy Movement by Documenta and the Berlin Biennale in *FIELD* issue #1. Taken together, Fischer and Loewe's essays provide a useful précis of two key positions on the question of art's critical efficacy; one of which sees the art world as simply another site from which to stage resistance against an increasingly integrated global economy, and the other which warns us of the (bourgeois) art world's perennial ability to assimilate an "astonishing amount of revolutionary themes without ever seriously putting into question its own continued existence or that of the class which owns it," as Walter Benjamin famously observed in "The Author as Producer". Is the art world a site of cooption or contestation? Of course it is both. The critical challenge we face is in deciphering the hieroglyphic mechanisms of each of these processes as they are set in motion at specific sites, and accounting for their strategic and tactical relationship to the larger forces of neo-liberal capitalism.

Gloria Durán and Alan Moore offer another perspective on the complex play of complicity and critique in their analysis of La Tabacalera, a vacant state-owned tobacco factory that was turned over to a group of activist artists in Madrid by the Spanish Ministry of Culture in 2010. Durán and Moore trace the complex interrelationship between the Spanish state, under the guise of a "new institutionality" policy, and a network of Madrid-based art and social justice groups, as they sought to create an autonomous, self-organized social center rooted in leftist traditions of activist squatting. The Tabacalera, as they describe it, was "a social center with permission". Many of the questions raised by the Tabacalera involved the tension between alternative social spaces as sites at which a new, prefigurative form of political life can be nourished and the pragmatic demands entailed by operating a large facility under some level of state supervision. What kind of decision-making

processes would be effective and representative, while retaining the critical political agency of the squat? And how did the groups involved in the Tabacalera manage internal schisms, associated with the role of the Asociación Panteras Negras (Black Panthers), which sought to function as a “social center within a social center”? Durán and Moore provide an invaluable glimpse into the tensions and insights produced by the negotiations necessary to make the Tabacalera both operational and inclusive.

C. Greig Crysler, in the first of a two-part study of the emergence of new forms of participation in contemporary architecture and design, addresses a similar question. More specifically, Crysler is concerned to challenge the assumption that participation per se is a necessarily progressive political form, and to unpack the complex historical process by which participation was mobilized in architecture and planning discourse during the 1960s, only to succumb to the forces of bureaucratic rationality. In this critique he turns to the work of urban theorist Horst Rittel for his key concept of “wicked” problems. Rittel is referring to our tendency to “solve” systematic problems with stopgap or temporary solutions that simply defer the unresolved tensions not fully addressed in the original formulation of the problem itself. Here we find a corollary instantiation of the critique of local or situational action I’ve sketched above. Working in the context of Great Society-era social programs, Rittel developed an innovative analysis of the ways in which the formulation of design problems often obscures the contingency of the social structure that precedes and determines them. His analysis here bears a potentially revealing relationship to the process by which museums, biennials and foundations sponsor, commission, and regulate, participatory or “social art” commissions. The second part of Crysler’s essay will appear in *FIELD* this spring.

We’re also pleased to publish Mariana Botey’s interventionist address to the 2015 SITAC conference (SITAC XII), which was organized by Carin Kuoni of the Vera List Center for Art and Politics under the theme of “Arte, Justamente/Just Art”. SITAC, the Simposio Internacional de Teoría Sobre Arte Contemporáneo, is a famed

conference that regularly brings leading artists, theorists and critics to Mexico City for wide ranging discussions on events of importance to contemporary art. In her remarks here Botey unpacks the conference theme, which became especially acute with the current crisis of governmentality in Mexico and the nation-wide protests associated with the kidnapping and murder of 43 students in the state of Guerrero. Can we assume that any artistic practice possesses a necessary relationship to justice in a period of such profound and systematic crisis? And if not, then what capacities, what operations, can art deploy in order to claim this relationship? Here Botey identifies art with a “state of exception” to a regime predicated on political violence. “Art does not need to be defined as just or unjust,” as Botey writes, its “space is juridically a space of transgression—and in its strongest cases a form of radical relationship with the truth.” We want to give special thanks to Sara Solaimani for translating Botey’s talk and also providing an introduction.

This issue also features two reviews by *FIELD* Editorial Collective members. These include Noni Brynjolson’s review of John Robert’s new book *Revolutionary Time and the Avant-Garde* in which he attempts to revive an authentically critical form of avant-garde artistic practice based on a re-articulation of the Hegelian concept of negation. Adorno’s work plays a central role in Robert’s effort to re-function the historical avant-garde for the contemporary moment. Here art retains its critical power by refusing any premature “escape” into political praxis, serving only to critique existing structures of power and meaning from an autonomous distance. It thus reclaims its role (outlined above) as the single cultural site at which an ethos of pure negation holds out against the onslaught of repressive desublimation that characterizes modern capitalism. Our second review comes from Paloma Checa-Gismero, who attended the twelfth Bienal de La Habana this summer. In her review Checa-Gismero discusses the particular focus of this year’s Bienal on community-based practices, examining commissioned projects by Graciela Duarte, Manuel Santana and César Cornejo, among others. Duarte and Santana’s contribution was a reiteration of their long

term Echando Lápiz project, which employed a process of literal “botanizing on the asphalt” to engage community members in a more reflective relationship to the urban environment through the close analysis and documentation of local plant species. Cornejo’s Puno MoCA project set in motion a series of new institutional and collaborative relationships with city residents by using their homes as satellite exhibition spaces for the Bienal itself. Here the boundaries between public and private and art and life are creatively transgressed.

As I noted in our first editorial, we are especially concerned to expand the scope of discussion around socially engaged art beyond the already discourse-laden U.S. and European circuit, and beyond the Anglophone world more generally. One of the signal features of the expansion of socially engaged art is its remarkable global scope. It represents a far too complex and situationally nuanced field for any single critic or writer. For this reason we have plans to appoint a series of Corresponding Editors; critics and writers with expertise in specific regions. With this issue of *FIELD* we are delighted to introduce our first Corresponding Editor for China, Bo Zheng. Zheng is a critic, artist and historian specializing in socially engaged art. He received his Ph.D. from the Visual and Cultural Studies Program at the University of Rochester in 2012 and is currently revising his dissertation, *The Pursuit of Publicness: A Study of Four Chinese Contemporary Art Projects*, for publication as a book. His essays on Chinese socially engaged art have been published in multiple journals and books (most recently in *Global Activism: Art and Conflict in the 21st Century*, MIT Press, 2015) and he is an editorial board member of the *Journal of Chinese Contemporary Art*. Zheng received an Early Career Award from Hong Kong’s Research Grants Council in 2014 and a Professional Development Award from City University of Hong Kong in 2015. Currently he is building an online database and a MOOC, both on Chinese socially engaged art. Zheng currently teaches at the School of Creative Media, City University of Hong Kong, and is an affiliated member of the Institute of Contemporary Art and Social

Thought at China Academy of Art in Hangzhou, China. As an artist Zheng has worked with a wide range of communities, including the Queer Cultural Center in Beijing and Filipino domestic workers in Hong Kong. His project *Family History Textbook* received a Prize of Excellence from the Hong Kong Museum of Art in 2005 and *Karibu Islands* received a Juror's Prize from the Singapore Art Museum in 2008. His recent art projects include *Sing for Her*, a participatory installation created with minority singing groups in Hong Kong, and *Plants Living in Shanghai*, a found botanical garden and an open online course created with ecologists and humanities scholars in Shanghai. We look forward to presenting Zheng's research in upcoming issues (he's currently planning an interview with the Taiwanese artist Wu Mali). For more information on his work see: cityu-hk.academia.edu/BoZheng and www.tigerchicken.com.

Grant Kester is the founding editor of *FIELD* and Professor of Art History in the Visual Arts department at the University of California, San Diego. His publications include *Art, Activism and Oppositionality: Essays from Afterimage* (Duke University Press, 1998), *Conversation Pieces: Community and Communication in Modern Art* (University of California Press, 2004) and *The One and the Many: Agency and Identity in Contemporary Collaborative Art* (Duke University Press, 2011). He has recently completed work on *Collective Situations: Dialogues in Contemporary Latin American Art 1995-2010*, an anthology of writings by art collectives working in Latin America produced in collaboration with Bill Kelley, which is under contract with Duke University Press.

Notes

1. Goethe, *Elective Affinities* (1809), translated by David Constantine, (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1994), p.152.
2. Leon Trotsky, "Communist Policy Toward Art," (1923), <https://www.marxists.org/archive/trotsky/1923/art/tia23.htm>
3. Paul Mann, *The Theory-Death of the Avant Garde* (Bloomington, IN: Indiana University Press, 1991), p.92.

4. Whitney Kimball, "How Do People Feel about the Gramsci Monument One Year Later?," Artfcity (August 20, 2014).
5. Philippe Vergne, Former Director, Dia Art Foundation and current Director, MOCA Los Angeles. "The Momentary Monument: Philippe Vergne on Thomas Hirschhorn's Ode to Gramsci," Walker Art Museum Magazine (September 12, 2013) <http://www.walkerart.org/magazine/2013/philippe-vergne-interview-hirschhorn-gramsci>.
6. Kimball, op cit. <http://artfcity.com/2014/08/20/how-do-peoplefeel-about-the-gramsci-monument-one-year-later/>. Erik Farmer, the Forest Hills Tenant Association President, and Susie Farmer's son, registered a similar concern: "Well I thought [the reactions] would be a little more mixed, but mostly, everyone misses it. They wish it was back. Everyone keeps asking me *Is it going to come back this year, is it going to come back* . . . I had to tell them, nope, that was it, not again this year. So there's nothing for the kids to do now, they're really bored. You can see how nobody's out here, when the monument was here last year, it was full of people outside."
7. The governing matrix for all of these processes remains the *a priori* plan devised by Hirschhorn before the event begins. Hirschhorn discusses the centrality of the plan in an interview with Benjamin Buchloh: ". . . my idea was that I wanted to make sculpture out of a *plan*, out of the second dimension. I said to myself, 'I want to make sculpture, but I don't want to create any volumes.' I only want to work in the third dimension—to conceive sculpture out of the plan, the idea, the sketch. That is what I want to make a sculpture with: the thinking and conceiving, the various plans the planning." Benjamin H.D. Buchloh, "An Interview with Thomas Hirschhorn," *October* 113 (Summer 2005), p.81.

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Agency in a Zoo: The Occupy Movement's Strategic Expansion to Art Institutions

Noah Fischer



Image 1. Taksim Solidarity Action, New York City, June 2013. Credits: Noah Fischer

Part 1: Introduction

It appears that the 2011 movements are now dead; we know for a fact that they were violently repressed in nearly every case. Today, protesters from Tahrir, Moscow, and squares in other cities continue

to face harsh political retribution including imprisonment and torture.¹ However, the picture of a movement that ended after a few months in 2011 changes when we consider subsequent occupations such as Occupy Gezi Park in Istanbul (2013), Occupy Central with Love and Peace in Hong Kong (2014), World Cup Revolt in Brazil (2014), or the rolling #BlackLivesMatter protests in the United States (2014–15), we realize that the picture of worldwide revolt is not a painting from the past; that it is not even a picture, but a reality we are still living today. This confusion between image and reality of movements touches on the political challenge that is currently most central: the mesmerizingly visual quality of a market-dominated society, a space where one's thinking is inundated with fabricated mini-narratives constantly trying to frame reality. Spin has never been as powerful as it is today: in the United States, democratic elections are flooded with capital and replaced with enormous public relations campaigns—parallel to other forms of entertainment. This is why current financial inequality and anti-democratic trends appear as cultural rather than political challenges. In this essay I argue that the tactic of occupation so central to the 2011 movements was a unique and effective response, dealing in a much more subtle way with the mechanisms of cooption than previous uprisings. I will argue that this phenomenon has everything to do with art: when the squares were evicted, the movements brought the strategy of occupation into cultural spaces and, perhaps most prominently, into art institutions.

Upscale art milieus—from upscale art fairs to major museums—in their surging economic significance and the popular fascination they arise, are being hacked to reveal a massive new wave of social, racial, and economic inequality at the epicenter of high-art luxury. In some cases this is meant to apply pressure on the 1%, with a leverage that would be nearly impossible to access in other spheres. For example, Gulf Labor's campaign, now in a direct negotiating stage, is aimed at the new Guggenheim museum in Abu Dhabi, highlighting how museums are involved in the rebranding of migrant labor-abusing monarchies and oligarchies, whose actual

repressive turns are remade to look like art-loving destinations for a particular global progressive class.² We have seen spirited rejections of curatorial programming connecting Creative Time with Israel's military industrial complex,³ and a successful artist-led call for Sydney Biennial to cut all ties from its founder and lead sponsor, Transfield Holdings, an investor in immigration detention centers.⁴ We have seen #BlackLivesMatter actions staged at the New York Armory art fair, importing the issue of police violence and, beneath it, structural racism, to 1% watering holes without invitation.⁵

Yet the movement's use of these art stages touches on a widespread anxiety. Generations have witnessed the absorption of political dissent by soft and cooptive, rather than antagonistic, responses from capitalist institutions—including advertising corporations, private academies, and art institutions. Therefore, it makes sense to take a hard look at whether art institutions only serve as traps set by the elite to absorb dissent or if they can contribute to the shift away from late capitalism that these political movements demand.

This question is posed in an essay published in the first issue of *FIELD*⁶ where its author, Sebastian Loewe, argues against the Occupy movement's use of artistic platforms and concludes by advising activists to address the systemic foundations of inequality instead of "migrating to the art world." Playing the protagonist in Loewe's sweeping portrayal of the Occupy Movement, and what Loewe characterizes as its "fatal flaw" of moralistic politics, is the figure of the movement-affiliated artist, whose artworks "express a longing for political morality through the means of art and artistic direct action." The artist in Loewe's portrayal is not only romantically naïve but lethally dangerous to the movement. Loewe theorizes that the Occupy Movement's very last gasp of air and subsequent rigor mortis can be attributed to two art exhibitions that occurred in 2012: the 7th Berlin Biennale and dOCUMENTA13.⁷ Protesters, apparently searching for opportunities to advertise the movement, instead led it into a fatal trap.

At the crux of Loewe's critique⁸ is the idea that representation and politics don't mix. This is argued more or less in the following way: once inside the gates of the Biennale, the protesters gazed into the eyes of the art world and were turned to stone. The result was a transformation of political intention into immobilized aesthetics with the ultimate effect of reinforcing the status quo itself. According to Loewe, this occurs automatically when the image of protests is foregrounded as art, because the institutional acceptance of progressive values is fully demonstrated as a kind of righteous beauty, cancelling out the need to protest further. Loewe explains it this way:

"Once the camp is perceived as a work of art and not just a political occupation, it is connected to a longing for sensuous perception and the "satisfaction to higher spiritual interests", as Hegel puts it. All initially political aspects of the Occupy camp are then bound to aesthetic pleasure, which means they are bound to the personal taste and mental stimulation of the viewer. Potential political activists thus become an audience."⁹

My response begins with an attempt to bring this critique into proper scale and into the political realities of our present moment. By asserting that two German art exhibitions represent the entire transnational 2011 movements' Waterloo, Loewe's theory minimizes the primacy of asymmetric state violence impacted on the 2011 movements. Nearly across the board, we saw a coordinated demonstration of militarized police power, breaking its own laws and clearing the peaceful protest squares through beatings, unlawful imprisonment,¹⁰ conspiracy, and subterfuge.¹¹ Meanwhile, the speedy passage of draconian legislation tailored to the occupations serves as a chilling reminder of the unification of lawmakers and industry against grassroots democratic movements, clearly registering a threat to future occupiers. This is not to brush aside the importance of the cultural stage, which is what I will mostly discuss here. However in this case,¹² to overly endow the art world¹³ with movement-killing significance bypasses an opportunity to examine how hard-edged anti-democratic tendencies, including physical violence, emerged from behind a soft neoliberal veneer

to snuff out grassroots democracy. This narrative runs directly counter to the illusion spun by capitalist democracies (an illusion only conjured for those with white privilege in the first place), which creates the image of a world in which police enforce laws protecting public free speech and public assembly rather than unleashing illegal violence on its practitioners. The fact that leadership was fearful enough of these peaceful uprisings to temporarily remove the veil and resort to autocratic methods is the key lesson about the end of the square stage of the 2011 movements.

Zooming back down into the art world and Loewe's theory that it automatically aestheticizes protest, we might begin by thinking more about the illusions that the art world conjures about itself. Respected art institutions such as the Venice Biennale or the Museum of Modern Art in New York are still widely viewed as neutral spaces for critical thinking and aesthetic contemplation, somewhat removed from the aggression of market forces. Breaking this myth by showing that many art institutions function as core organs of neoliberal ideology production is a necessary step in understanding how the expansion of the Occupy Wall Street movement (OWS) into these spaces was of a strategic rather than naïve character. Within the first weeks of OWS, one of my groups, Occupy Museums (OM), planned actions at MoMA with the understanding that we were enlarging the domain of the contested spaces of Wall Street (via museum trustees, along with many other connections I will describe later) rather than "migrating" to neutral spaces in search of resources, as Loewe claims.¹⁴ The Occupy Wall Street movement understood museums as viable targets to challenge normalized economic inequality—as extensions of Wall Street.

Yet Loewe's discussion of the 7th Berlin Biennale and DOCUMENTA 13 concerns an interaction between activists and art institutions that was not apparently about "targets"—in other words, not antagonistic, but sympathetic, and it must be acknowledged that there is a difference between occupying museums with and without invitation, even if the final political intention is the same. This interplay between outside and inside seems to be the danger zone

for cooption, but a deeper appreciation of the thinking of those involved in the movement reveals it as somewhat of a false duality—a claim that I will discuss in relation to the 7th Berlin Biennale, where the approaches concerning exterior and interior worked in tandem. The key is understanding the overall political challenge—not just that of the art world—as a problem of images.

Perhaps a metaphor will help paint a clearer picture of how representation and aesthetics might work in relation to occupation, and there is a very concrete one in the situation described at the 7th Berlin Biennale: the human zoo. In his essay, Loewe remembers: “In Berlin the public considered the intervention to be kitschy, and it was referred to as a human zoo.”¹⁵ I propose to consider this zoo in greater detail—how was it constructed spatially and ideologically? How might the human zoo relate to the history of museums? And, also, could the occupied squares also be seen as zoos? If we ask ourselves in relation to the 7th Berlin Biennale about the border of this human zoo, we might realize that it was in fact borderless, and we might encounter a useful tool for understanding the nuanced tactic of occupation as it relates to the specific challenges of neoliberal culture-scapes, which are constructed around a borderless market.

Speaking of nuance, questions about the exact meaning of the Occupy Movement lead into a terrain of political, geographical, and temporal complexity that brings the actual life of the 2011 movements into view. In Loewe’s text, use of such phrases as “Occupy’s general world view”¹⁶ confuses things because OWS, occupations in Hong Kong, Germany, and Madrid (which is the Indignados of M15 Movement preceding Occupy Wall Street) are all discussed interchangeably as one same movement called “Occupy.” However, the movements under the particular meme of “Occupy”—the more than 300 other US Occupations,¹⁷ Gezi Park Istanbul, Central Square With Love and Peace, Hong Kong, and many others—often have no more in common with one another than what OWS shares with the politics of Tahrir Square (Arab Spring), the Icelandic Revolution, or the Israeli Tent Movement. It is not wise to conflate a movement challenging Wall Street’s dominance (OWS)

with one concerned about China's control over local elections (Occupy Central), yet the collapse of this complexity is convenient because it's only possible to characterize an entire transnational political process as "moralistic" through artificial constructions. This can be avoided by referring specifically to movements (or groups) by name, such as M15/Puerta del Sol or Occupy Wall Street in New York. Or, when there is a reason to speak generally, referring to the 2011 Movements. When discussing the 7th Berlin Biennale, political parsing will add a lot to an analysis, since political differentiation was present in microcosm in the Kunstwerke.

Part 2: The Human Zoo in Berlin

I was a participant in the seventh Berlin Biennale, among those invited from the Occupy, Blockupy, and M15 movements by curators Joanna Warsza and Artur Zmijewski to make use of the main space of the Kunstwerke as, in Zmijewski's words, "a situation that we don't curate, supervise, or assess."¹⁸ As it turned out, this space, which had been laid out with temporary structures for assemblies, projections, and art-making by the host group, Occupy Berlin, sat below a public viewing platform. In one smaller adjacent room also within that same exhibition hall, invited activists cooked reclaimed food and in another one, we slept on mattresses laid out on the floor en masse. Biennale visitors did not tend to enter these rooms, so their main experience was peering down on activists in the main space working on computers, having assemblies, or spray painting signs that gradually crammed the walls with a mishmash of slogans and graphics .

As is now well known, the arrangement was quickly referred to by the press as representing a human zoo, and this name was also soon used by those of us participating. In fact, I am among those quoted by Loewe in his FIELD essay, stating that our occupation was a "human-zoo." In the context of his essay, my statement sounds like an admission that the situation didn't provide any meaningful agency

for the 2011 movements. But Loewe misunderstood the meaning of my statement: this zoo-like quality was not inherently a problem. Rather, I saw the specular quality of our position in the biennial as a useful tool. To understand how this could be requires me once again pull back for a wider view of movement political thinking.

As Chris Hedges writes, "If we are not brutal about diagnosing what we are up against, then all of our resistance is futile."¹⁹ One possible understanding of neoliberal capitalism is to see it as a series of enclosures separating apparently free social space into racial and class-based containers, which, although minutely controlled, often have no apparent boundaries. Consider that Americans, citizens of a nation that relegates by far the world's largest population of human beings to years behind bars and concrete walls, while separating itself from its neighbor Mexico via a militarized multi billion dollar fence still stand at the remnants of the Berlin Wall and wonder how such an ideological monstrosity could have ever existed. On one hand, this simply speaks to the persuasiveness of capitalist ideology to render physical control invisible. But there is also a grain of truth here: social control under late capitalism cannot be boiled down into a monolithic policy, it's often carried out through a double system just now coming into popular consciousness through a closer look at police violence sparked by #BlackLivesMatter protests: physical force keeps legally disempowered immigrants and traditionally repressed black people in check. But instruments of distraction and social normalization, enforced through a logic of visibility are the favored weapons used to neutralize revolt potential among the rest of the 99%.

In this situation, citizens are now brought into total visual exposure to the market. With the continual tracking of metrics of personal information ushered in by the ever-accumulating technologies of credit cards, video surveillance, and the myriad forms of social media, we have lost control of our lives as non-abstract existences whose value lies beyond image. This loss of control allows the world's largest corporations to easily hunt down citizens and non citizens with scientifically precise advertising weapons. This citizen

is hunted not in order to be shot, stabbed, and eaten or displayed as trophy, but rather to continue their “normal” lives in a completely depoliticized dimension: atomized into a sub-sub demographic and matched up algorithimically with the corporate bottom line which is extraction of common resources transformed into private profit. We can see how this system parallels the hunting of wild animals for display in a zoo, which is also a zone of total exposure to a market, where the normal existence of the animal is supposed to continue in a completely controlled and capitalized visible format.²⁰

A second function of zoos is to display prone animals to visitors in order to demonstrate the superiority of one species over another. By this logic, the current near complete penetration of the market into private life signals the superiority of the 1%, who, taking the cue, began indulging in evermore reckless hubris such as the 2008 crash and subsequent public bailouts. But this of course has sparked a backlash in the form of the 2011 political movements and their continuation. This brings us to a theory of occupation: occupiers of Zucotti/Liberty park or Puerta del Sol rather than fleeing this zoo, voluntarily stepped into highly exposed public spaces for indefinite periods of time, often in 24/7 view of corporate television vans as well as media outlets and social media. The squares were watched from the inside and outside in extreme detail: sleeping, eating, yelling, organizing, and doing nothing? everything had an audience, as if the protesters were zoo animals. In most cases space was held not by any viable challenge to military or police forces, but rather through the temporal continuity of compelling public spectacle of the occupations themselves. Why did this ongoing living in public seemed to contribute the greater politicization of the occupying community and successful dispersal of its messages, rather than to atomization and extraction?

Perhaps the ongoing exhibition of grassroots democracy short circuited a capitalist imperative in which time not spent in the pursuit of profit becomes simply inconceivable and taboo—indeed the attempt to share power has been repulsive to free market ideologues for centuries²¹. But the success of occupation also

makes me think about the primacy of artists and artistic tactics in the squares. Like grassroots power-sharing, non-market oriented art practice generates what capitalism can only understand as redundant production- a production which Greg Sholette calls "dark matter." Sholette states: "I attempt to reveal dark matter as a potentially vibrant agency already engaged in proto political processes of non market gift giving, informal self organizing, and in some cases, overt political resistance."²² Perhaps this understanding of political agency contained deep within art practice explains why so many artists took part in occupations and why it is so easy to imagine the squares as giant conceptual art projects.²³

Whatever the reason for the success of the occupation tactic, it certainly ended a cycle of protests as benign representations of "bodies in the street", such as the massive marches of the Iraq war in 2003.²⁴ As a general result of occupation, we witnessed a temporary flipping of the neoliberal zoo logic: rather than citizens' lives brought into total visual domination by the market, the power and corruption of the 1% was brought into a plane of higher visibility to the eyes of the public. Legible images and languages describing this power began to circulate.

As we wonder how the tactic of occupation might function within an art institution rather than in a square, we must begin by noticing that art no longer has the monopoly on transformation from politics into aesthetics—daily life and meaningful political process abstracted by markets are present as normal functions of every kind of institution, within public or private space. This is in fact the core condition sparking resistance in the first place. It does not mean that art institutions cannot be undifferentiated from universities or banks or sports arenas: indeed, understanding their specific qualities is the key to tactical success. But it does mean that Loewe's advice to activists to depart from the art world in search of firmer ground²⁵ does not help, as no such ground exists. Instead, we are left to face the chilling scale of our challenge. From a practical perspective, the effective mentality in facing this nearly overwhelming landscape of market based control is to

shed strict dogmatic formulations in exchange for an experimental approach. We search for effective hacks, cracks, and hidden political potentialities, which might be hiding in plain sight. This gets us close to a framework for understanding the Occupy Wall Street/M15 movement's intervention in the 7th Berlin Biennale. But before we get into the specifics, it will help to look more closely at art institutions from a movement perspective.

Part 3: A Movement Analysis of Art Institutions as Targets

If we peer into the history of museums, doubts about their ability to aid the 2011 movements' struggle seem well founded. Already in their early days as cabinets of curiosity, the 17th Century's 1% amassed in them bragging collections out of colonial exploits, in what was seen as concrete proof of racial and cultural superiority (sometimes even exhibiting live humans exoticized like zoo animals).²⁶ In this way, museums have long been official incubators of those cultural norms necessary for elites to illegally extract resources and abuse communities. Similarly, we see today a museum trend perfectly in line with rising economic inequality and its effects. Flet's for example witness the rapid proliferation of US museums doubling as tax write offs and abusing loop holes regarding public service, where buildings attached to billionaire mansions on remote properties are considered public spaces.²⁷

Art institutions are in fact core components of the Capitalist mother-board. Major museums and biennials, from MoMA to the Venice and Berlin Biennales, hover above a surging art market. The critical value they produce equals more expensive prices and ultimately, a transformation into stable assets of the art circulating through them, playing a similar role to that of a ratings agency. But in my view, their significance is not so much financial as ideological. The tight and opaque global network connecting museums, auctions, art fairs, and biennales functions as an informal networking channel for a global capitalist class while the image of

this luxurious lifestyle and high production aesthetics are dangled before the noses of the 99% as the ultimate sign of aspiration: the juicy carrot on the stick. Meanwhile, the everyday functioning of these institutions -first through their construction, then their hiring processes, and their tendencies to employ unpaid interns-, incubate and normalize extreme versions of neoliberal precarity. In short, many art institutions have become weaponized as precise manifestations of a 1% worldview that the Occupy Wall Street Movement targets concerning the invasion of the public sphere by the private. Going back to the zoo metaphor, the entire art world would act as a tiger cage attracting crowds by the allure of beauty, exoticism, and power. However, it turns out that the crowds themselves are the ones being totally exposed.

Grey Zones

In the light of this exposition, the debate comes down to a struggle between a defense of art's existence within the private sphere versus a notion of art taking place within the commons—as a natural inheritance of being part of a society. The Occupy Museums movement sees museums as contested sites: this grey zone is the fulcrum on which our activism balances.

Boris Groys has written in relation to the founding of the Louvre that "instead of destroying the sacred and profane objects belonging to the Old Regime, they defunctionalized, or, in other words, aestheticized them. The French Revolution turned the design of the Old Regime into what we today call art, i.e., objects not of use but of pure contemplation."²⁸

On one hand, this seems to support Loewe's contention that museums automatically aestheticize and depoliticize their contents, acting as counter-revolutionary traps. However, if it is the icons of the 1% holding political power which are defunctionalized, then the politics are reversed, and activating a revolutionary potential within the logic of display. The Louvre in Paris opened exactly a year after the death of the French king, allowing free entrance for the public.

In its time it was understood as a symbol of popular sovereignty (this historical contextualization renders the Louvre Abu Dhabi, a museum returned to conditions of repressive monarchy, especially depressing).²⁹ This history points to a promise implicit in public museums, especially their claim of non-censorship that famously echoed by president John K Kennedy in a Cold War context, when he stated that “the artist...becomes the last champion... against an intrusive society and officious state.” In their housing of this unfettered individual expression, museums are expected to create spaces for contemplation and exploration of political power, rather than for the superstitious belief in the latter’s legitimacy. This democratic function, though seldom is ever reached, and almost completely rhetorical and ceremonial, has nevertheless seemed to provide quite a bit of leverage to activists who know how to work with symbols. As Greg Sholette shows in his *Dark Matter Archives*,³⁰ a robust tradition of artist protest particularly from the early 20th century to the end of the Cold War provides credibility for the legitimate amplification of pressing citizen’s political issues in museums. This might also explain why protesters at museums act in relative safety from violent arrest despite the valuable assets held inside museums (compare police reactions with occupying banks or sports stadiums for example), and why subsequent interruptions of their temple- like domain have often provoked significant press repercussion.

Most of the historic actions such as Art Workers Coalition display of Vietnam War atrocities in front of Picasso’s *Guernica* at MoMA (1970) “Q: And babies? A: And babies,” (following a letter writing campaign to Picasso to remove the painting in solidarity)³¹ are examples where the museum has been used to separate a persistently romantic notion of free speech and democratic values associated with art, from a hard edged reality of military campaigns and financial domination. This would not be possible with targets such as banks, the energy industry, and governments, all already reviled. Museums, as institutions well regarded in social life, are

hence useful in exposing the contradictions between democracy and capitalism.

Interior Tactics

So far I have discussed how and why art institutions make good movement-targets, but what does it mean to occupy an institutional interior? Remembering that in every possible kind of space from the street to the office, people are under more or less equal exposure to the political force of the market, this boundary-crossing from exterior to interior might be less significant than it initially appears. However, it should not be taken lightly either, since it certainly means stepping inside the formal frame of power. Once invited in, activists are likely to be perceived as coopted, a perception with repercussions. From the experimental approach— a movement perspective, this means that sharper tactics are required for the operation, and that dangers need to be pondered in order to find counter strategies.

Activists accepting an invitation temporarily hold the institutional brand, becoming diplomats for the art institution, which compromises the credibility of their critical position towards said institution. This problem can be avoided by forfeiting the higher visibility usually generated by symbolic media-based action, and instead opting for the tactic of excavating deeper into the logic of the institution itself. This brings us to the 7th Berlin Biennale.

Part 4: The Occupied Berlin Biennale

We are now back in our activist zoo in Berlin, under the gaze of an art audience. From the vantage point outlined above, we can see that the “human zoo” is simply an outcropping of a much more pervasive condition where the neoliberal individual is brought into complete visibility to the market. This particular zoo was unique mostly because the paying visitors, media, and art world professionals viewing the Biennale, actually perceived it as a zoo,

which was hard to avoid, due to the awkward concentration of the political dynamics of the gaze that visitors experiences in the Kunstwerke. The press immediately found this zooness distasteful, accusing the Biennale's curators of having deceived activists for their own benefit. But by portraying the members of the squares as victims, many of these critiques revealed a deep seated political cynicism coded into the art world who mostly failed to pay closer attention to the actual political process or cede the possibility of agency to activists.³² Was the curatorial thinking benign or ironic? Curators Artur Zmijewski's and Joanna Warsza's manifesto-like move to present only a concrete political function as art, rather than the usual pluralistic position favored by the market,³³ ran parallel to and was influenced by the 2011 movements, which had been unfolding in real time during their two years of research before the Biennale. As such, I would tend to see their concept as an effect of a particularly heightened historical moment, which swept their project up into its sphere of radicalization. However, their decision to designate a large portion of the Kunstwerke's space to activists' supposed free reign should not primarily be judged on the merits of authored concept. Seen as a rare movement/hybrid act, it might instead be a call to analyze the actual political dynamics that had entered the Kunswerke, to search for a new way to look at an exhibition.³² I would suggest a few points of context.

The first key to understanding BB7 is that Zmijewski was a visiting artist-curator, rather than a permanent member of the institution. As primarily an artist (rather than a curator) already long acclaimed in Poland, he was not focused on maintaining the institution's brand in the way that Richard Armstrong and other museum directors and curators continually defend theirs.³³ This meant that a potential wedge might have been driven between the curators and the Biennale institution itself. In my view, the barrage of bad press might have acted as this wedge, pushing Zmijewski into closer alignment with the goals of the movement rather than the goals of the Berlin Biennale Institution which is its positive branding and preservation.

The second key to understanding the occupied portion of BB7 is to see that it had been initiated, but not contained, by its curatorial premise. Though it is customary to see exhibitions as static pictures which is how most reviews of BB7 saw it, that was not the case in an exhibition that had invited actual movement activists from different regions for a long term stay. A political complexity unfolding over time emerged from this initial framework. For example, many participants were German—a nation then as now leveling austerity measures on southern Europe, while other invited activists had been key figures in the Puerta del Sol and other squares opposing these austerity measures. Berlin should not be considered a neutral political space. Although in Zmijewski's previous video works such as "Others" he had gathered politically oppositional groups into the same space with a camera rolling, occupied BB7 concerned a much more subtle politics- a movement politics which has alignments and tensions which in fact have still not been well formulated. Dynamics and tensions inside this community opened a second track of the Biennale's political content, worlds apart from available catalogs and wall texts, although paradoxically in an exhibition format, the invited public was not able to pick up on this content track.

The Biennale itself opened on April 26th with an assembly hosted by Occupy Berlin. Eventually, there were a few acts of vandalism lashing out against the institution itself: invited Spanish activists were expelled from the Kunstwerke for spray painting on the KW's courtyard façade, while shortly after, Brazilian activists poured paint on top of Zmijewski's head in the St. Elizabeth Church, an outpost of the Biennale which housed Pawel Althamer's Draftsman's congress. These antagonistic acts had served to further reify Zmijewski into a Kurtz-like figure, while dividing activists by allegiance vs. no allegiances to the Berlin Biennale, which generally echoed north-south European lines. However, this was only one stage in an unfolding picture. Occupy Museums was the one group in the "Occupy Camp" of Berlin whose practice had already been focused on the specific intersection between art institutions and the horizons Occupy Wall Street Movement. Although our goal for

BB7 was primarily to build up a transnational action network on the artistic front, we knew that we would have to first deal directly with the power dynamics implicit in our relationship to the Berlin Biennale, as well as with the strange spatial fact of living inside of an exhibition. Our plan was three pronged: we would first publicly name the curators and the institution's position of power in the situation- beyond the misleading "situation that we don't curate, supervise, or assess." (-need a reference-) We would then basically ignore the exhibition, using it only as a base to stage actions at targets around Berlin (banks and museums). Simultaneous to this we would quietly organize among the community toward more effective assemblies and working groups as a kind of Trojan Horse to infect that particular art world platform with the direct democracy spirit of the movements. We would thereby repurpose the Biennial, which we understood as a propagator of neoliberal political normality in its "default" state, into a useful site for our movement. We arrived in Berlin one month after the biennial opened, after the vandalism and schisms described above had already taken place. We also arrived after press reviews had mostly been written, which meant that we encountered a situation which was perhaps still alive politically but considered case-closed on a critical level.

Horizontalization Process

In the middle of June, after some preliminary actions which doubled as workshops to merge Occupy Museums together with activists from Spain, Germany, and Russia ³⁴ we publicly challenged the curators with a statement called "You Cannot Curate a Movement."³⁵ It read "All decisions will be made by the assemblea, which includes and embraces former curators, directors, workers, and the entire KW community." We also proposed that "All... decisions pertaining to finance from the German Government [would] be made by the assemblea and mapped in complete transparency [retroactively] from the beginning of the biennial to the end." Thus, we proposed to bring BB7 completely into the logic of the movement itself rather than a Biennale simply containing a

specific zone for activism, whose perimeters were conceptualized by the curators.³⁶

While such a proposal would usually be met with silence, or put through a bureaucratic process to defang and aestheticize it,³⁸ the fact that the curators were aligned in their interest to continue the experiment rather “protecting” the institution, and also the fact that the exhibition occurred in 2012 while the initial energy of the squares was still hot, led them to accept it, which opened the way for a historical experiment. Once accepted, the proposal was brought to a general assembly consisting of all KW workers: from directors to janitors and all staff members and guards, where consensus was reached. We then formed a number of working groups and further general assemblies to carry out the horizontalization process: each working group represented a merging of the Biennale/Kunstwerke team with activists.³⁹

Subtle shift in power within the Berlin Biennale occurred simply through this act of congregating, proposing, and breaking the lines between curators, artists, activists, publics, and museum workers. When the guards brought up their unlivable wage in assembly (in front of the KW director as well as staff, activists, and some visitors from the public), it resulted in a 30% raise at the following Biennale.⁴⁰ This small concrete win pointed to the fact that the biennale had become effectively politicized. From the activist’s standpoint, which at first had felt viscerally humiliating (visitors photographed us each morning as we walked through the courtyard to the only shower). It had meant regaining dignity, meshing more organically with the institutional staff and stretching out from the curated “zoo” beneath the viewing platform into the offices, exhibition areas, and courtyard. But it wasn’t only activists experiencing the transformation of the place. A number of Kunstwerke staff quit after the horizontalization experiment. As Zmijewski writes: “Political reality is brutal-after this experience the Kunstwerke went back to its former shape quite fast. But a few of the permanent Kunstwerke employees decided to quit their job. After the experience [that] they had during BB7 they were not able to continue work under the same conditions.”⁴¹

In claiming a kind of political success for this experiment, I note that most of the mechanisms of power such as access to German Federal Cultural Foundation's actual budget, or financial decision making and especially the ability to break the temporal frame of Biennale programming were much too deeply rooted to touch in the few weeks of the experiment. It also did not generate the kind of withering media/shaming attention that Occupy Museum or Liberate Tate actions or Gulf Labor Coalition/G.U.L.F.'s uninvited actions tend to. However, the end goal of these high profile actions and campaigns from a movement standpoint are not only to enact reform on specific issues (with the exception of Liberate Tate) but rather to bring a movement horizon which is a post-capitalist horizon, into the art world. The horizontalization process was a successful experiment in transforming neoliberal hierarchies and temporal logic from the inside, even if temporarily, and along the way we won allies while strengthening movement networks.⁴² It's something of an irony then that the perception of a human zoo—as an object of ridicule, finally turned out to be an illusion that concealed a democratic experiment which was a genuine moment of institution-breaching by the 2011 movements. Since this process did not adhere to the codes of an art world where exhibitions consist of authored aesthetic or conceptual frameworks, and where political processes within art institutions are theoretically impossible, to most viewers, including Loewe, the experiment was automatically invisible. However, direct democracy and interior occupation do not depend on high visibility to function, they may even depend on invisibility within the art world context.

Conclusion

The years since 2012 show that the 7th Berlin Biennale contributed significantly to an international movement-affiliated network that continues to leverage the art world in the service to movement-horizons. BB7 participants followed up with similar institutional experiments including an attempt to horizontalize the Zamek Ujazdovsky in Warsaw, whose leadership was replacing

permanent staff with a system of precarious labor. The campaign, called “Winter Holiday Camp” contributed to the ousting of the institution’s director.⁴³ Occupy Museums staged an exhibition called “Occupy Your BFF” at Momenta Art in Brooklyn, New York, which led to the reorganizing of its Bloomberg affiliated board.⁴⁴ In Germany, an occupation and physical intervention of the exhibition “Global Activism” at Zentrum für Kunst und Medientechnologie Karlsruhe challenged a logic of display which aestheticized global movements and editorialized their politics. In the ZKM’s exhibition’s version of global activism, Germany and its austerity program as well as its immigration issues did not factor into the global political picture. In turn, an international group including African refugees living in Germany physically altered the curatorial wall text scrawling missing voices onto white walls. Additional self made institutional experiments such as the recent Avtonomi Akadimia in Athens also share the DNA of BB7.⁴⁵ Where neoliberal gatekeepers try to self-servingly frame and coopt the politics of the 2011 movements, we have intervened, breaking through the professional anxieties which normalize and usually inhibit effective politics in a highly networked art world and conducting experiments with a political framework and artistic process that is inspired by the square movements themselves, showing that “you cannot curate a movement.”

The International cells resulting from BB7 have also proven to be an essential tool for waging international campaigns. In 2014 I joined the Gulf Labor Coalition campaign along with a small group of people who had been central players in the Occupy Movement, and transferred tactics developed with Occupy Museums and campaigns such as Strike Debt into an action campaign that turned up the pressure on the Guggenheim. Forming the Global Ultra Luxury Faction (G.U.L.F.) we occupied the Peggy Guggenheim Collection in Venice, finally forcing negotiations between GLC and the Guggenheim Foundation’s board of trustees—an important escalation after a five year campaign. The network forged in the shadows of the human zoo of the Berlin Biennale was the secret weapon that helped a mostly US-based group assemble a small

army⁴⁶ to shut down a non-US branch of the Guggenheim museum. The action's tactical complexity which included a number of boats to seize the Guggenheim Museum from the grand canal points to a new potential: a potential to act internationally at a high level has become an essential device for countering the global leverage exerted by the 1%.⁴⁷

The current breathtaking recent global consolidation of power by the 1% has shifted the ground so that politics have totally ceased to function in the formal political sphere and the a logic of financialization has colonized a previously unthinkable portion of public and personal territory. market has seeped out from Wall Street into the financialization of everyday life. The battle for human equality and justice will find itself surrounded if confined to traditional political battlefields and dogmas. But with the understanding that "all our grievances are connected," people are developing activists are finding threads to exert leverage in their own across many spheres; , and re-discovering the dignity of common struggle and solidarity. Artists are no exception to this process, in the occupation of art institutions we are seeing this struggle and this solidarity with the larger developing movements articulated with full intensity.

Noah Fischer is a New York based artist and activist. He is a member of Occupy Museums and Gulf Labor. Initially Fischer's practice encompassed kinetic installations (Rhetoric Machine, New York, Oliver Kamm Gallery, 2006, Pop Ark, Kunstenfestivaldesart and Steirischer Herbst 2007) experimental theater (collaborations with andcompany&co), and object making (Monitor, Clare Oliver Gallery, 2008). Following the financial crash, Fischer exited from the private art market, initiating an inquiry into mechanisms of inequality through performance in public space (Summer of Change, 2011). This practice collided with the Occupy Wall Street Movement where he performed in the park as a giant talking coin, and then became involved in direct action organizing, initiating Occupy Museums with

a manifesto on October 19th, 2011. Fischer has played a central role in planning actions and experiments at MoMA, Frieze, Guggenheim, 7th Berlin Biennale, KM, and CCA Warsaw, uncovering a network of allies internationally. He is currently working on a platform concerned with debt in the arts along with artist Coco Fusco, and maintains a studio practice in Brooklyn.

Notes

1. <http://www.theguardian.com/world/2013/apr/10/egypt-army-torture-killings-revolution>
2. <http://www.tdic.ae/tdiccategories/cultural/pages/guggenheim.aspx>
3. <http://hyperallergic.com/131497/over-100-artists-and-intellectuals-call-for-withdrawal-from-creative-time-exhibition/>
4. Gulf Labor: <http://www.gulflabor.org>, Sydney Biennale Boycott: <http://www.theguardian.com/commentisfree/2014/mar/11/sydney-biennale-boycott-victory-shows-that-divestment-works> BDS: <http://mondoweiss.net/2014/06/activists-taking-technion>
5. <http://hyperallergic.com/189038/black-lives-matter-demonstrators-stage-die-in-at-the-armory-show/>
6. <http://fieldjournal.com/issue-1/loewe>
7. In this response to Loewe's text, I will be discussing Berlin Biennale (BB7) and leaving out Documenta which I only visited for a day. In my opinion, Documenta was less radical of an occupation by virtue of not taking on its 1% institution more directly. It also contained a different activist context: either most of all German occupiers, while BB7 was made up of activists from Madrid, NYC, Berlin, Frankfurt, Turkey, etc. And in fact, it was mostly not the German Occupiers who were active in the institutional transformation described in this text.
8. Two examples: "The attempt to frame political movements within an art exhibition, as in the oxymoronic 'invitation' extended to members of Occupy and the Indignados to inhabit the ground floor of KW, neutralizes their activism by filtering it through the lens of representation, rendering their action less urgent and their presence more harmless." <http://www.frieze.com/issue/review/7th-berlin-biennale/>

"As some aspects of the recent Occupy Wall Street demonstrations have shown, political discourse has become increasingly dominated by the impulses of neo anarchism, identity politics, post colonialism, and other intellectual fads. This new radicalism has made itself so irrelevant with respect to real politics that it ends up serving as a kind of cathartic space for the justifiable anxieties wrought by late capitalism, further stabilizing its systemic and integrative power rather than disrupting it. These trends are the products as well as unwitting allies of that which they oppose." Gregory Smulewicz Zucker and Michael Thompson, http://logosjournal.com/2015/thompson_zucker/

9. <http://fieldjournal.com/issue1/loewe>
10. http://gothamist.com/2015/04/02/ows_nypd_settlement.php
11. http://www.motherjones.com/mojo/2011/11/occupy_protest_coordinate_crackdown_wall_street
12. http://www.huffingtonpost.com/lee_camp/anti_occupy_law_passes_nea_b_1343728.html
13. Which NYC mayor Bloomberg significantly called "my personal army" in 2011
14. Here is Occupy Museums initial call to action: http://tumblr.artfcity.com/post/11652516894/occupy_museums_speaking_out_in_front_of_the
15. <http://fieldjournal.com/issue1/loewe>
16. "One of Occupy's major political goals was to encourage the 99% to "assert [their] power." [7] The claim at the very end of the New York declaration reads: "Join us and make our voices heard!" [8] Every single voiced critique of political, economic and social conditions was considered a valid contribution to Occupy's general world view, a world view which claimed to become increasingly effective as more people joined." <http://fieldjournal.com/issue1/loewe>
17. https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/List_of_Occupy_movement_protest_locations_in_the_United_States
18. http://www.berlinbiennale.de/blog/en/allgemein_en/7th_berlin_biennale_for_contemporary_politics_by_artur_zmijewski_27718
19. http://www.salon.com/2015/06/04/we_are_in_a_revolutionary_moment_chris_hedges_explains_why_an_uprising_is_coming_%E2%80%94_and_soon/

20. Or held for eventual entertaining slaughter as the first zoos in Rome were, sited next to the Coliseum where animals fought humans.
21. Alexander Hamilton, first American Secretary of the Treasury: "It has been observed that a pure democracy if it were practicable would be the most perfect government. Experience has proved that no position is more false than this. The ancient democracies in which the people themselves deliberated never possessed one good feature of government. Their very character was tyranny? their figure deformity." Speech in New York, urging ratification of the U.S. Constitution (21 June 1788).
22. [http://www.manifestajournal.org/issues/i forgot remember forget/artists embrace your redundancy introduction gregory shoettes dark#](http://www.manifestajournal.org/issues/i%20forgot%20remember%20forget/artists%20embrace%20your%20redundancy%20introduction%20gregory%20shoettes%20dark#)

It it was a conceptual art project, it was one totally outside of the frame of the art world. When, in the first weeks of the occupation, Nato Thompson at Creative Time (and many others) attempted to organize a sanctioned exhibition in the park called the "Occupennial", the idea quickly lost traction as the spirit of non-affiliation became apparent.
23. [https://www.greenleft.org au/node/53400](https://www.greenleft.org.au/node/53400)

"Instead of migrating to the art world and partaking in international biennials, activists should put effort into the analysis of the systemic, antagonistic foundations of inequalities, damages and grievances, in order to prevent moralistic criticism."
24. https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Saartjie_Baartman
25. [http://www.nytimes.com/2015/01/11/business/art collectors gain tax benefits from private museums.html](http://www.nytimes.com/2015/01/11/business/art%20collectors%20gain%20tax%20benefits%20from%20private%20museums.html)
26. Though many museum boards such as the Whitney are loaded with Goldman trustees. <http://whitney.org/About/Trustees>
27. [http://www.e flux.com/journal/on art activism/](http://www.e%20flux.com/journal/on%20art%20activism/)
28. [http://museologien.blogspot.com/2013/02/a question raised by french revolution.html](http://museologien.blogspot.com/2013/02/a%20question%20raised%20by%20french%20revolution.html)
29. <http://www.moma.org/collection/works/7272?locale=en>
30. <http://www.darkmatterarchives.net/>
31. (excepting the work of the Rolling Jubilee and related groups whose tactics have tried to hack into the market)

32. "The attempt to frame political movements within an art exhibition, as in the oxymoronic 'invitation' extended to members of Occupy and the Indignados to inhabit the ground floor of KW, neutralizes their activism by filtering it through the lens of representation, rendering their action less urgent and their presence more harmless." [http://www.frieze.com/issue/review/7th berlin biennale/](http://www.frieze.com/issue/review/7th%20berlin%20biennale/)
33. "In such a situation it's not enough—in my opinion—to have art that only fights to keep its position, which just makes claims on public funds and participates in sharing the economic profits which it creates. That's fine? but it would also be useful to have art that is smart and creative enough to take part in transformative social processes." [http://www.berlinbiennale.de/blog/en/allgemein en/7th berlin biennale for contemporary politics by artur zmijewski 27718](http://www.berlinbiennale.de/blog/en/allgemein%20en/7th%20berlin%20biennale%20for%20contemporary%20politics%20by%20artur%20zmijewski%2027718)
34. Which flattens out all approaches, relegating "political art" into one possible sub-market among many potential options.
35. Richard Armstrong's letter to the editor of the New York Times: "Defending Plans for a Guggenheim Museum in Abu Dhabi" [http://www.nytimes.com/2015/06/04/opinion/defending plans for a guggenheim museum in abu dhabi.html?_r=0](http://www.nytimes.com/2015/06/04/opinion/defending-plans-for-a-guggenheim-museum-in-abu-dhabi.html?_r=0)
36. (most of the Occupy Berlin activists stayed aloof from these actions and meetings.
37. <https://mbasic.facebook.com/148157235282782/photos/a.151476798284159.30787.148157235282782/282232808541890/?type=1&refid=17>
38. In fact, this is basically what happened with the proposal of Critical Practice to render the Biennale totally transparent. It was presented to the curators through official channels and foundered in the bureaucratic process and was never realized. It lacked leverage or pressure on the institution. See this article by Critical Practice: <https://ia601702.us.archive.org/20/items/ArtLeaksGazette/AL-Gazette-Critical-Practice.pdf>
39. [http://www.berlinbiennale.de/blog/en/comments/7th berlin biennale is moving towards horizontality 30631](http://www.berlinbiennale.de/blog/en/comments/7th%20berlin%20biennale%20is%20moving%20towards%20horizontal%20ity%2030631)
40. Which was actually two institutions, according to Zmijewski.
41. During this time, the media working group was able to freely use the Biennale's entire press list—not an especially comfortable situation for an art institution to be in.

42. This is from an interview with one of the KW employees (preferring to remain anonymous) who participated in the process:

NF: "Did you attend any assemblies, and if so, how did you view the decision-making process?"

KW Employee: "Again, I liked the overall strive for consensus, but very often it resulted in too long processes to be able to participate on a regular basis. But due to the open atmosphere, I felt to be able to address topics with the curators that otherwise would go unmentioned....I know that some fellow employees had the hope that the experiment would have longer lasting effects."

43. http://www.revoltmagazine.org/Issue_03/Articles/BERLIN_BIENNIAL_article.htm
44. Most centrally those affiliated with S.A.L.E Docks in Venice. <http://www.saledocks.org/>
45. https://artsleaks.files.wordpress.com/2012/09/noah_fischer_artleaks_gazette_2.pdf
46. <http://artleaks.org/2013/10/04/open-letter-to-the-workers-and-publics-of-ccajazdowski-castle-from-the-winter-holiday-camp-working-group-warsaw-poland/>
47. <http://artcity.com/2012/10/03/the-big-trouble-with-bloomberg-at-momenta-art/>
48. <https://www.facebook.com/avtonomiakadimia?fref=nf>
49. <http://gulflabor.org/2015/guggenheim-in-venice-is-occupied/>

Basically Ignore the Exhibition

Response to Noah Fischer's "Agency in a Zoo:
The Occupy Movement's Strategic Expansion to Art Institutions"

Sebastian Loewe

The demise of the Occupy protest movement might be a historical preface of something bigger to come or maybe already the end of a movement of direct democracy. But one thing is for sure: the Occupy movement didn't deteriorate in 2012 because they chose to contribute to art biennials. States forced protesters and occupiers to roll over and show their bellies, to retreat and leave the battlefield arms raised. One cannot underscore enough the role that several democratic states played in ending the movement by relentlessly evicting the Occupy camps. Zuccotti Park and all the other protest venues were brought down hard. Noah Fischer's essay "Agency in a Zoo: The Occupy Movement's Strategic Expansion to Art Institutions"¹ makes that very clear. A bit less clear seems to me his concept of "zoo-ness" that his essay revolves around. Fischer introduces this concept in response to my criticism of the OWS movement's appearance in the Berlin Biennale, as I elaborate it in the essay "When Protest Becomes Art"², and describes "zoo-ness" as a "useful tool"³ for symbolically occupying art institutions. However, when it comes to explaining the implementation of this tool in the context of the 2012 Berlin Biennale, where the Occupy camp has been called a 'human zoo', Fischer suddenly loses interest in its own theoretical concept; but let me explain seriatim.

First, I want to briefly reply to some of Fischer's paraphrases of my assertions and re-address the issue of art and activism. What I didn't want to say was anything like "representation and politics don't mix". Obviously they do. Lots of artists, including Fischer, use artistic means to promote political criticism and ideas. I have tried to answer the question about the extent in which this concrete political artistic practice, namely the two biennial contributions by OWS, actually works for the Occupy movement. And I have tried to explain it in the light of the goals of the Occupy activists themselves. Also, I never wanted to say that the protest movement entering the Biennale was "canceling out the need to protest further". Instead, I said that it is not that the need in general is cancelled out, but that the art installations failed to integrate or build on it. That's a fine but important difference. I said that the political concepts handled by the Occupy protest in Kassel and Berlin, because they were transposed into the symbolic realm of installation art, were mostly perceived as something that provided aesthetic pleasure. The overall symbolic nature of the protest camp installations in Kassel and Berlin was based on the idea of an audience that overcomes its traditional passivity, engages in discussions with the activists and gets politicized. This didn't work, for reasons I tried to explain in my essay. In a nutshell: it's not that an audience can't partake in discussions after all, but it is my conviction that this one did so for the sake of its own edification and not so much as a way to form a serious and consensual political will - the actual goal of the activists involved. In this way, the symbolic nature of the installations revealed its deficits regarding the transformation and activation of an audience into politicized members of the movement - or at least into sympathizers. On the contrary, it seemed that the heterogenous audience at least in Berlin saw the interventions in a surprisingly unisonous way as distasteful art installations and as such as essential expressions of the movement; as a consequence, Occupy was perceived as an immature political movement. In my essay I tried to reflect on this outcome and its causes, both impairing the success of OWS's contributions. In reaction to the negative

aesthetic perception of the art installation on the ground floor in Berlin, Fischer says that some of the activists performed a so-called horizontalization of the *Kunstwerke*. As he explained, activists saw the need to leave the constraints of the ground floor of *Kunstwerke* and directly address the institution. The criticism expressed in my essay targets the installation in Berlin and the camp in Kassel. As for the horizontalization which remained invisible for most of the viewers, it certainly circumvents the audience's depoliticization by directly facing the staff as politicized members of the art institution.

Second, I want to take a closer look at Fischer's concept of "zoo-ness", a supposedly "useful tool" for occupation in art institutions, as well as a tactic to intervene "neoliberal cultural landscapes". What comprises this concept of "zoo-ness"? Fischer understands "zoo-ness" as a metaphor (I'd say it's an allegory) for a capitalist system that hunts down people for corporate profit and puts them on display. "Zoo-ness" is also an allegory of the Occupy camp at Zuccotti park, as Fischer reminds us that protesters were often regarded as zoo animals. Furthermore the "zoo logic" of total exposure also applies to Occupy's BB7 exhibition and not only to the participants, but confusingly also to the audience. At the same time, "zoo-ness" stands for the very opposite, for a "flipping of the neoliberal zoo logic". In his vision of "zoo-ness" Fischer identifies the same mechanisms of "visual domination by the market", inequality and corruption with a quality of resistance. What has been the reason for struggle, control and powerlessness mysteriously turns into an instrument of emancipation. By simply reversing signs, Fischer turns the former negative effect of the zoo allegory into a positive one. "Zoo-ness" in this conjecture is an ambiguous figure that stands for a ruthless capitalist world of surveillance and exposure and at the same time for a liberation from all that. In this vision the same content and methods serve both complete ideological manipulation and fundamental emancipation from it. Fischer's understanding of "zoo-ness" sounds much like the rather effortless historical idea of an over-affirmative criticism, of a revolutionary critique that derives from the very structures that produce ideology. In this mechanical

image and understanding, misappropriation and subversion trigger a pole reversal of an otherwise omnipotent economic and political order, suddenly revealing the true nature of capitalism and art. In a sort of abstract defictionalization and reversion the “revolutionary potential” of “zoo-ness” is then activated, Fischer concludes.

Interestingly, it all comes down to the participation in Berlin Biennale 7 where “zoo-ness” vanished in Fischer’s essay. Key to understanding BB7 and its occupation is not the abstract “zoo-ness”, but foremost the curator, his career and intentions, as well as the hidden dynamics and tensions within the group of occupants. Fischer explains that the public could not pick up on these important dynamics which were “worlds apart from available catalogues and wall texts”. So Fischer and other activists decided to “basically ignore the exhibition” and approach the art institution directly. The “zoo-ness” in this report did never serve as a useful tactic or tool. In fact, it seems like the ground floor exhibition was all the more an arena of ignorance, misunderstanding and “illusion” as described earlier by Fischer. On the contrary, activists decided to engage in a tactic that resembled a “Trojan Horse”: the “horizontalization” of the art institution that hosted the Biennale. But if all that “zoo-ness” was not necessary for the art practice and is not necessary for the theoretical explanation of Occupy’s contribution to BB7 why come up with a theoretical concept in order to defend an idea that is not even pivotal in understanding the situation in Berlin? As a member of the protest movement, why hang on to the idea of a symbolic representation within the institutional art space, when one has already ignored – hence abolished – it? Since the movement’s political qualities are judged based on aesthetic criteria, why not refrain from Biennale art and hence edification, for an already very saturated globalized art audience? Why not find a critical practice that exceeds the narrow boundaries of an aesthetic practice fitted into the visual constraints of an art biennial? In a way Fischer and other activists already answered these questions practically. They moved on to the direct action of horizontalization in response to theirs and the public’s perception of what was taking place at BB7’s

ground floor. To assess this intervention impartially based on the description given by Fischer in his essay is almost impossible. Since it was a process mostly hidden from the public I cannot comment on the actual experiences and the insights it provided. But judging from remote distance it seems to me that this experiment, that was not only undertaken to question, but to “transform neoliberal hierarchies”, comprises some conceptual difficulties. Aside from the aspect of actual change, it seems to me simplistic to assume that a substantial *contentual* critique of an institution like a museum and its political and economic purpose, could be accomplished by simply disturbing the order and applying an organizational *method* practiced on the squatted squares. The formalist idea of questioning hierarchies without criticizing the overall purpose of these hierarchies seems unrewarding. This being said, I have to underscore that the experiment certainly questioned hierarchies. Which thought-provoking insights the people involved gained, we don't know. At the end some quit their jobs.

Third, I want to make a very brief annotation regarding the relationship between private and public, hoping to question well-beloved convictions and to contribute to a discussion that might also fuel future counter-hegemonic concepts and artistic actions. It seems to me that not just Fischer's essay iterates a certain understanding of fundamental “contradictions between democracy and capitalism”, hence between the public and the private. In this understanding of social, economic and political reality the public stands for all the good because it serves the people, whereas the private stands for all the bad because it excludes people. In my opinion this assumption of an “invasion of the public sphere by the private” that the Occupy Wall Street Movement targeted - in this purity of a schism - this dichotomy is not justifiable. Is it not true that democracy fundamentally builds on the power of private property? In the free world everything turns into a commodity to pay for in case of need. Is it not true that democratic states nurture and protect this order of private production and consumption? Everyone is forced then to privately compete against one another,

using only privately owned means and therewith earn money that can buy privately owned goods. And is it not true that the public is hence the sum of all competing free and equal private interests? The public lawfully and thus forcefully manages to restrict private interests, so that they can coexist in the first place, despite them being antagonistic. In this panorama democracy is fundamentally tied to private property and thus private interests. To question the power of private interests without even shedding the dimmest light on the nature of the public seems untenable. From my point of view it seems highly debatable whether such a simplifying dichotomy of public vs. private is something that should determine so many political discussions and protests.

As for the contributions to Berlin Biennale 7 and the Documenta 13, the protest art installations might have been a failed experiment. But from the direct intervention into the Kunstwerke institution in Berlin may evolve a new artistic practice in conjunction with Occupy. I for myself am persuaded that there is still a lot of political thought to be conducted that could contribute to the relationship of protest and art practices.

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The Green Box Art Editions, Berlin. Loewe is a visiting lecturer at the University of Art and Design Burg Giebichenstein, Halle, Germany. He lives and works in Berlin, Germany.

Notes

1. <http://field-journal.com/issue-2/fischer>
2. <http://field-journal.com/issue-1/loewe>
3. All quotes, if not indicated otherwise, stem from Fischer's essay.
4. Why use tropes to categorize and describe reality? Fischer criticizes the "confusion between picture and reality" without realizing that this allegory of a "zoo-ness" does exactly that: offering a picture of a life in cages as a simplifying explanation for complex social, political and economic reality.
5. <http://field-journal.com/issue-2/fischer>

La Tabacalera of Lavapiés: A Social Experiment or a Work of Art?

Gloria G. Durán and Alan W. Moore



Image 1. Entrance to Tabacalera. Credits: Lucía Domínguez.

This text tells the story of the first years of a remarkable experiment in Europe—the turning over by the federal Ministry of Culture in Spain of an enormous state-owned building to a group of activist artists to run as an autonomous, self-organized social center. This is not so unique. A number of large squatted buildings

in European cities have become state-sanctioned centers of culture, usually after years of struggle. But the case of the Tabacalera in Madrid, while it certainly involved squatters, was rather different. It was a proactive “gift” of sorts by a ministry that was toying with an idea of “new institutionality”—a different kind of relation between cultural institutions of the state and the politicized social movements which have been behind squatting in Europe since the 1970s. This move was evidence of a slow, careful institutional current of motion beyond the politics of antagonism, which unfolded during two different regimes: first one of the liberal left (PSOE, Partido Socialista Obrero Español), and then a right-wing austerity government (Partido Popular, PP). This current has surfaced dramatically in the recent (May 2015) municipal elections throughout Spain which put new faces of the ‘radical left’ into power. Many of these people come from the social movements—activist formations like neighborhood associations, and issue-specific groups, and have been active squatters.¹ The story of Tabacalera gives a hint of what will likely become more common in the future—truly self-organized autonomous projects, produced with state cooperation, which make provision for both political activists and creative producers. Sounds great, right? Well... here’s our story.

“Meet Us in the Morning”

It was March of 2010 and the early spring sun was shining in Madrid. I had an appointment after lunch, at Embajadores Street, number 53, in the highly diverse neighborhood of Lavapiés, traditionally home to the working class and more recently many immigrants. When I arrived, the activist artist and professor Jordi Claramonte was waiting with a mop and bucket in his arms. Soon our number grew to around 40 people, and we went inside the huge building that was to be the social center Tabacalera.

That day we went in through a narrow entranceway, and a security guard, hired by the government to take care of the empty

building, kept our ID cards. Only those first 40 people were allowed to enter and start the cleaning.

The old tobacco factory is around 32,000 square meters—an entire city block. It is a labyrinth, with an extensive basement. We could not use the upper floors, but that day we visited the whole building. The underground of the old factory was for the “tobacco ladies” (cigarreras) making cigarettes, and the upper levels for clerks. It had a bar, a small salon with a beautiful floor, a central “nave” like a public plaza in the middle of the building, a back yard, and three different storage garages packed with machinery.

From those first moments we thought about suitable places for the different collectives. Like the wild west, La Tabacalera de Lavapiés was an unknown territory, with no laws, where different colonists could look for a home. In the coming days, after a callout on the internet, thousands arrived. The place was soon cleaned and organized for all the neighbors and their different needs.

Every day during that spring security guards hustled us out at 10:30 pm sharp. And we could not get in before 10 am. The deal with the government, even before any document was signed, was just for the daytime. We were never allowed to stay the night. After some five years of Tabacalera, at 11 pm the building must always be empty and clean.

During those early days we met after working to think together about how to organize the huge space. Someone cooked lunch in the cafe. We had some beers at the end of the day and continued talking. It was intensive. All that first year our lives were “La Tabacalera de Lavapiés”, all day long and into the night.

The Old Tobacco Factory

The Tabacalera dates from the late 1600s when it was used to make playing cards and snuff for the Spanish royal court. In 1809 they began to make cigarettes. It grew throughout the centuries as

the central processing plant for the state's monopoly of tobacco. The building, designated historic, is administered by the Ministry of Culture, Department of Fine Arts.

It retains a special place in the history and imagination of the Lavapiés district. In 1809, almost all the workers were women who had been making cigarettes illegally in Lavapiés. Las cigarreras were well organized and often rebellious, well-known for their feisty image. Bizet's operatic character Carmen was one of them. During an epoch when the place of women was in the domestic sphere, the cigarreras were an exception. These workers, hired for their skills, started the first women's union in Spain. Their solidarity and spirit of mutual support inspired us in our experiment.

The massive building of the Tabacalera is close to three world renowned art museums: the Prado, the Reina Sofia (MNCARS), and the Thyssen-Bornemisza. This privileged setting puts the big empty building at the center of the cultural politics agenda in Madrid. Closed in 2000, it was only the largest of the 19th century factories in Madrid's city center which were closing at the end of the 20th century. With the decommissioning of all this industrial space, the cultural scene in the city started to roar.² What couldn't be rented was squatted. But the side effect was predictable. Already by the 1990s neighbors in Lavapiés realized that the gentrification of their old and historically poor district was exploding, and began to organize.

The struggle against gentrification was organized with the neighborhood associations—the asociaciones de vecinos³—which have a long tradition in Madrid. They began in 1968, under the dictator Francisco Franco. While they gather in the currents of different social movements, their autonomy, their strong local organization, and their capacity to negotiate with civic powers have made them key elements in the urban transformations of every Spanish city, especially Madrid.

The future Tabacalera CSA—Centro Sociale Auto-Gestionado, or self-organized social centre⁴—really began in the early 2000s

when some activist artists and neighborhood organizers developed public actions to reclaim the recently closed tobacco factory. Activists had squatted another Lavapiés building to make a social center called Laboratorio,⁵ and after that was evicted, a second squat, the Laboratorio 2. Jordi Claramonte explained that as the next eviction drew near, “we began to look for other buildings in our neighborhood to move our activities. We looked at the Casa Encendida, but it was bought by a bank. Then afterwards we looked at the Pacisa cookie factory, and it was transformed into the Circo Price (a theater and concert hall). So we focused our energies on the tobacco factory, La Tabacalera. We started ‘La Tabacalera: A Debate’, and went out into the streets dressed as old cigarreras on a Sunday night, with big red flowers in our hair, and tight dresses... That’s why the Ministry called us when they decided to start a dialogue.”⁶

The principles of “La Tabacalera: A Debate” were directly stated—“From now on the future of this building should be open to public debate, the public uses of the factory and whatever we want to do here. We want this debate to be held inside the building. We want to know the place, to live the place, to produce the site. We want to create a social thread, a deep commitment, a community in such a way that direct action will be the basis for citizenship in the Tobacco Factory.”⁷ The social center-to-be then, already existed as a collective demand, organized with neighborhood associations and articulated through the colorful street protests faux cigarreras of the art collective *Fiamblera Obrera* (workers’ lunch box).

Another Big Museum

Even while neighbors, activists and artists were trying to be heard, the federal government agency in charge of the building was developing a total project that had nothing to do with their claims. In 2007 the council of ministers approved a plan to create a National Center for Visual Arts there, the CNAV. In July of 2008, a design competition was launched. The architects Nieto and Sobejano

were announced as the winners, with a 30 million Euro plan which included the biggest LED screen in the Eurozone. A banner was hung on the side of the building announcing the museum to come. But the crisis arrived first, and the project was halted.

The economic collapse in Spain put the spotlight on a long boom period which saw many ill-advised, even megalomaniac building projects (a giant useless airport in Castellon with an abstract statue of the local politician out front is perhaps the most notorious). A lot of these were cultural buildings. The City of Culture in Valencia, a project of star-architect Santiago Calatrava, ruined that city's budget. It is largely empty today, and already crumbling. Santiago de Compostela in the north emulated Valencia with the City of Culture of Galicia, designed by Peter Eisenman, which remains unfinished. Madrid, with three centuries of imperial infrastructure, instead saw grand scale renovations of historic buildings for cultural purposes, much if not most of which remained largely empty.⁸

In 2008 and '09, part of the Tabacalera was used for Photo España, an annual multi-site exhibition. Its abandoned state then seemed like a glamorous setting in which to exhibit Art. Pablo Berastegui, an active cultural agent in Madrid during these years and a one-time director of the Matadero center, employed a minimal installation of wire-hung panels to show some of the festival photos in the dusty factory. During that moment, when the building was re-opened for an artistic purpose, the real history of CSA La Tabacalera de Lavapiés began.

As Carlos Vidania explained,⁹ the purview of the Spanish Ministry of Culture is the whole of the country. They had no plans for the neighborhood. They simply developed an artistic use for some empty properties, some cheap exhibitions in buildings without restoring them.

One idea for Photo España was for an exhibition with the neighbors' associations around the building, one that would involve the network of agents working there—the Red de Lavapiés. Claramonte and Tina Paterson of the colorful art collective Fiambrera

Obrera were seen as perfect for the show. But these “creativists” were not thinking of an exhibition of photos. They were thinking about art as direct action and as a way of organizing life.

As Paterson told me: “One day Jordi received a phone call. Ángeles Albert was then the new General Director of Fine Arts. She didn’t know a lot about art, but she knew a lot about social movements. After the phone call we proposed not a common exhibition but a self management of the building during a year. And Ángeles understood the idea perfectly well. So we started.”¹⁰ CSA Tabacalera was on its way to becoming.

The Experiment Begins

When we first arrived at the building to see it and clean it, we didn’t know what was going to happen. But many in that crowd were in on the plan, people from squats like the three Laboratorio projects and the Minuesa.¹¹ We were told, “it’s an experiment in self-organization,” to build a participatory system to decide what to do with the building. We would learn by staying together, deciding, proposing and building together.

Claramonte and Paterson had met during the Laboratorio projects. They worked there supporting demonstrations of the Global Justice movement.¹² The variety of inventive programs in the Laboratorios inspired curators and managers in the institutional sector.¹³ As the new Casa Encendida center funded by the Caja Madrid bank opened nearby, some artists were exhibiting there at the same time they were working in the squats.

These kinds of overlaps may seem paradoxical when seen from the position of a politics of antagonism usually associated with squatting, or conversely, from a perspective of strictly legal institutional procedure. Yet the development of culture is a political process, and this kind of borrowing is normal in the city (not the province) of Madrid. Our cultural institutions have imitated the participatory tools designed by citizens in different settings, from

experimental alternative centers for the arts to squats and social movements.¹⁴ The Tabacalera was a hybrid, a social center with permission. There we tried different tools for participation gleaned from the agendas of the new cultural centers, the organization of different political parties, and later from the assemblies of 15M in the plaza of the Puerta del Sol. This is less a paradox than the new way to survive in the post-Fordist era: re-invent yourself, be autonomous, look for new projects, organize yourself.

Those at Tabacalera who knew what they were doing—or, as Carlos Vidania put it, those who knew what everything was about—came from the squats around the city, from Minuesa, the Laboratorios, and Patio Maravillas. Places like that had been occupied and self-managed since the early '90s. They all arose from the grassroots movements of the neighborhood,¹⁵ from the free culture movement,¹⁶ ¹⁷ and from the punk scene.¹⁸ In these places people had gathered to live and work communally. They were places of solidarity, of political struggle, and public alternative culture. In those places you could find political meetings, conferences, poetry, performance, concerts, dances, parties, graffiti, sculpture, art. During the years of transition to democracy and after, they were catalytic places to meet other people, and to discover together what kind of city we wanted to build and fight for. These were (and are) Madrid's public spheres where we exercise our responsibility as citizens in our "coming of age", as Kant put it.¹⁹

But there were many new to this collective experience, who were involved in something like that for the first time. I had worked in alternative art places,²⁰ like the "Ojo Atómico",²¹ but Tabacalera was "culture" in a broad sense, not only a site for contemporary art and its rhetoric. When it opened in 2010, before the 15M encampment and movement of spring 2011,²² we were thousands mostly without previous experience. For me it was a laboratory, a new salon, an experimentation with others, participating, learning, failing all at the same time and always in solidarity. It can be really hard to "participate" and to "listen" and stay together. Today governments and institutions love to use the word "participate," often as empty

rhetoric.²³ But it's a hard and complicated process. You can learn, but you need time and patience, and a space of freedom. La Tabacalera became a place like that.

At the starting point a kind of magic flow organized everything, and everything flew. Tina Paterson, who worked on the graphic design for Tabacalera, explained that it as a simple interchange. You asked for a place to do your stuff, you did it, you cleaned, you took your turn to care for the bar or the entranceway—you did whatever might be needed for all. And it worked. In the huge building that was our new “a-legal” playground, our patio de recreo, everyone found a place: the sculptors, painters, skaters, graffiteros, musicians, performers, soapmakers, theater people, yogis, flamenco dancers, claué dancers, clowns, green gardeners, hackers, videotistas, sewing circles, draughtsmen, photographers, chefs and cooks, bartenders, old ladies, young ladies, kids, book lovers, serious people, frivolous people, social workers, pensioners, Africans.

The common phrase at the time was “El que la propone se la come”, a Spanish idiom, a kind of slang—if you make a proposal, whatever it might be, you are responsible for realizing it. You cannot just come and have an idea if you are not going to make it real. So everyone should get involved in creating the new space according to their personal capacities. In our thoughts I guess we dreamed with many different texts: Montaigne, Spinoza, Baltazar Gracian, Kant, Diderot, d’Holbach, Negri, Hardt, Rancière, even Bourriaud. We were playing the game of a new possibility. We thought everyone would be responsible, and a good citizen if they got this chance to change things from the bottom. We dreamed of that new world. And for a year we lived it. We developed proposals, we made them real, we worked under free license, always creative commons, free culture. Everything was free, and of course no one was sexist, nor racist, nor were corporations involved.

It was surprising that everything worked fine. But only at the beginning. Afterwards we had to organize properly to keep on going. The problem was the enormous number of people

involved and the difficulties of spreading news and making decisions. Communication, internal and external, is key in a place and process like Tabacalera. After some months, things became really sophisticated. Our internet experts made our mailing lists, and our website, with its calendar and different blogs. There were many groups and one big central group with everyone, called “Coordination.”



Image 2. La Flor de Lavapiés. Credits: Lucía Domínguez.

How Can We Organize This Mess?

After some months of chaotic order we organized what we called “jornadas”—work days. We closed the doors and gathered to think together new ways of organization, protocols and internal documents to manage the place. The internal jornadas, in October 2010, ended up being symbolized by the Pulpiflor, a schema that was a cross between an octopus and a flower.

The Tentapétalo or Pulpiflor was a graphic representation of the Tabacalera and its dwellers. The real spaces were represented as petals, and the people in groups as tentacles. In the central part of the Pulpiflor was what we called “coordination.” It was not a proper assembly, rather a group of representatives from the groups and collectives that were finding their place at the Tabacalera. This was a union of necessities and places, a coincidence of sites and functions. The basement was for the musicians; the Molino Rojo for theater people; the Nave Trapecio for artists; silkscreen and photo were in the “tactical area”; the bar was for all of us; the kitchen for the gourmet group; the bike people in the yard; the hackers in the rooms behind the nave; the central square was for collective concerts and parties. All the offices in the corridors were for meetings, administration, the central bank, the library, the children’s place. We had almost everything.

The Octopus-Flower lasted only some months, then we organized our second internal meeting. We reorganized everything into “commissions” and “groups.” We had assemblies every Monday at 8 pm. The commissions were: economy, programming, respect, shifts, and communication. The aim of each was to organize all the work under their charge. They gathered every Monday from 5 pm until assembly time. In the economy commission, where I worked, we organized accounting for the center. The programmers prepared the agenda for the week. The shifts commission organized the internal work of care, cleaning and protection of the whole space. The respect group was in charge of fixing any conflict among Tabacalera dwellers, and the communication commission took care of internal and external communication.

The settled groups were: Molino Rojo (theater), Library (books experts), Mediatech, Ciras (social workers), Cyclica (hackers), Malugú (social workers), Cigarra (rock and roll fanatics), bikes (repair and built), soap (a little industry), publishing house (Papel de Fumar), Afro Temple (all-around African culture), Metropolis (technology), Keller (urban art), Muestrarte (art to hang), Eje Metabólico (whole food and groceries), Rocódromo (rock climbing), Catenaria (art historians and

researchers), Dibuja Madrid (drawing workshop) , Nave Trapecio (sculpture), Diógenes (furniture recycling) Costura (sewing section), Bah Pies (urban garden), Serigraphy (silk screen) , Tabacanal (our TV channel), Homeless video (video artists), Nuclear (musicians), Skate, Cocinitas (cooks). Still others formed and dissolved.

Towards a New Institutionalality

As mentioned above, a reciprocity of sorts exists between the structures which social movements create by direct action (i.e., squats) and cultural institutions. This also has a developed theoretical basis. In the second issue of *Carta*, the journal of the Reina Sofia museum (MNCARS) published in the spring of 2011, there are several articles on the idea of a “new institutionalality”. As museum director Manuel Borja-Villel writes in the lead text, “Towards a New Institutionalality,” the old cultural institutions have lost their capacity for social mediation. They need to change in order to be able to re-invent the social order, since they are the main structures for creating it. The idea of the public must be re-thought from the concept of the commons, so the museum works with different social movements and collectives from the city.

The project of new institutionalality, while frequently discussed, remains openly vague. Jesus Carillo, the program director at MNCARS during these years, defined it as a search for alternatives for cultural production and cultural consumption to those emerging under the neoliberal models of governance.²⁵ It is the principle of an institutional network, as one of the goals of *L’Internationale*, a long-term collaborating network among museums impelled by Charles Esche, director of the Van Abbemuseum, Eindhoven, Netherlands which recently launched a public-access “Museum of Arte Útil”—useful art—in one of their buildings.) Theoretical foundations stem from the work of Chantal Mouffe, a political theorist of radical democracy and “agonistic pluralism.” Artists and other art world actors should reject the kind of “exodus” suggested by Antonio

Negri and Michael Hardt, Mouffe writes, and instead transform art institutions into sites of research and socially engaged spaces of debate.²⁶ The weird and exciting exhibition “Principio Potosí” is a classic example of this impulse in the realm of history.²⁷ The impulse to re-examine the history of modernism in view of its political commitments has led MNCARS (Reina Sofia museum) and MACBA (contemporary art museum in Barcelona) to produce shows like “A Hard, Merciless Light: The Worker Photography Movement” (2011), and “Playgrounds: Reinventing the Square” (2014). The MACBA engaged closely with social movements around the turn of the century, during the period of the Global Justice movement, when they hosted a workshop with the creative activists (“creactivists”) of Las Agencias,²⁸ which Jordi Claramonte arranged. Borja-Villiel was director then, before he moved to Madrid.

In 2011, a clear practical instance of the new institutional impulse in the Ministry was the assistance given to the Casa Invisible in the coastal city of Málaga in the state of Andalucía. The Casa Invisible began as an okupa (a squat), the home of the “creadores invisibles,” the invisible creators, who felt excluded from the rapid touristically oriented development of that city on the “concrete coast” of southern Spain.²⁹ Through the not-so-subtle intervention of agents from the Reina Sofia museum,³⁰ the right-wing city government had been pushed to give the Casa Invisible a contract in 2011. But the “invisibles” had to renovate the historic building on a city-imposed deadline in order to conclude their agreement with the city. We of Tabacalera decided to give them money to make a key repair. The agreement which Casa Invisible made with the city government to allow citizens to run a city-owned building autonomously was a clear precedent in Spain.

While the historical project of uncovering and displaying the radical roots of modernism and postmodernism has continued in Spanish museums, the engagement with social movements slowed after the right wing took over Spain with an absolute electoral majority in 2012. In early 2015, however, the city government of

both Málaga changed from right to left. The Casa Invisible looks to be secure for the moment.



Image 3. Concert in the courtyard. Credits: Lucía Domínguez.

Inking the Contract

While Tabacalera was a sunset creation of the socialist government, it was not easy to achieve the first contract. Before the final signature when the future was unclear, we organized a conference with personalities from the local cultural scene in order to legitimize our work. The Ministry expected us to organize the place successfully: lots of visitors, plenty of activity and good reports in the media. The expression one civil servant used with our representatives was, “die of success,” a Spanish idiom that dramatizes the idea (and alludes to the ultimate fated dissolution of the project). Recognition by other agents working in mainstream museums, academia, and the art scene would be part of this.

The artists approached by the Photo España curators signed the first one year contract, from 2010-11 as their group SCCPP.³¹ This contract expired just after the right-wing PP won the federal elections. The text of the first contract spoke of “the social profitability of the building,” with the main objective of the Association SCCPP being “the organization and diffusion of cultural and artistic events dealing with social problems. To achieve these aims the Association SCCPP organizes exhibitions, conferences, workshops, performances and other activities that might achieve those objectives of social awareness.” The Ministry of Culture then agreed to undertake, in the wording of the contract, the “cultural project CSA La Tabacalera de Lavapiés, presented by the Association SCCPP, as a pilot experiment for the social interaction with different agents that might be committed to the social, creative and intellectual development of the people in their context.”

For the second year of the contract, we sought to bind the government to a longer-term agreement. We needed legitimation, so we asked for letters of support, and for people trying to change institutions from the inside to come to Tabacalera. Heads of departments at major museums came during a public event, Yaiza Hernandez from MACBA, Jesus Carillo from MNCARS and Amador F. Sabater, a philosopher tied to the 15M movement.

As we looked for a way to formalize our relationship for a longer term, we discovered a useful 2002 Spanish law.³² In late 2011, we signed for two years that might become eight, but we must re-sign and confirm our legitimacy every two years. Our new association is now responsible for whatever happens. Our authorization can be “extinguished” if the association does not adhere to the terms, or if the future CNAV, National Center for the Visual Arts, starts operation.

Aside from the arduous paperwork of the contracts, the government has also been concerned about the condition of the building. For this we have counted on architects who share the goals of the movement for free culture and the free use of public spaces. Even so, problems in our relationship with the Ministry remain. As

we write this article, an email comes from them concerned about “security inside the building.”

The first contract of Tabacalera expired in June of '11, just after the national elections in which the socialist government which had bowed to Euro-austerity was swept from power. Just before those elections were held, the 15M movement began with an occupation encampment of the Puerta del Sol, the main square of Madrid, by thousands of young people. The movement of the 15th of May changed the political landscape in Spain. At the time, it seemed as if every citizen with a bit of political sensibility made it down to the central square of our city. Of course, the Tabacalera was really supportive, and the 15M movements had tentacles inside the social center. Lots of furniture and stuff to build up the camp came from La Tabacalera. The hackers that worked with us were there. The urban artists from the Keller workshop brought enormous works of art that, imaged on the web, represented the awakening of Spanish civil society around the world. After the camp was evicted, material artifacts of the camp went to Tabacalera,³³ and the central courtyard was the site of a grand-scale musical, a performance celebrating the movement.³⁴

Finally, despite its origins and many connections with social movements and activist projects in Madrid, Tabacalera was not a political space. The squatted CSOA Casablanca, very near the Reina Sofia museum, hosted 15M campers from out of town when they came to Madrid, and held meetings for the Rodea el Congreso (Surround the Congress) demonstrations which were strongly repressed. Casablanca was evicted by police.³⁵ The low-level war waged by the city government against many neighborhood assemblies—they were forbidden to meet in public space, and so spawned several new okupas in Madrid—did not touch Tabacalera.

Never So Easy

The above-mentioned issue of the Reina Sofia museum's Carta journal contains another article, a critical self-reflection by Carlos Vidania and Ana Sánchez on Tabacalera. They write of the complexity of the project, and the difficulty of talking about it. They centered their text in the beginning and initial composition of the project. From the start they see the heterogeneous composition of individualities, and the lack of any common objective. For them the big "chaos" at the start of Tabacalera represented the real nature of the modern city: rampant individuality, lack of effective social ties (lazos sociales), lack of a common language—fragmentation.

The struggles inside Tabacalera came because it had to be invented—along with new habits, new ways of doing things, and new sociability. We invented new rules to govern our common ground, new norms against imperatives from the market. As a new institution La Tabacalera was an autonomous subject, and at the same time supported by the government, with relation to social movements. The new relationships we built were in tension. Vidania and Sánchez packed their text with open questions: "It is, in fact, a challenge for both parts: the wager (apuesta) by the public institutions that they can create a new frame for their relation with the social order, and the bet (apuesta) that the Tabacalera project can be an agent for a new institutionality."³⁶

The challenge was to create both a new model of cultural production and new ways for social and cultural production to be publicly legitimated. Through social cooperation, with an open, collaborative way of programming events, we sought to create culture with powerful meanings for the people around it, strongly connected to the city and the neighborhood, and all of it using only free license—"copyleft".³⁷ So the game is this: citizens can live in a place where they can create their own rules, their own forms and possibilities, their own desires, with no external impositions, with ever-open possibility, capacity, responsibility and determination. La Tabacalera started the new mechanism of self-organization in

a complex society with plenty of difficulties. The challenge of self-management is to be in charge of the common, and to take care of it. This difficult task, as we shall see, was in some sense too big, and it's still working itself out in a slow rhythm to this day.



Image 4. Tabacalera basement. Credits: Lucía Domínguez.

Flowers and Weeds

A lot of our time was devoted to putting out fires, and suffocating from those that refused to be put out. For sure, self-organization is not a utopia. It is a difficult project. While the experience of the Laboratorio okupas served as a model for many, Tabacalera was not a political project with a cohesive, struggle-tested collective of committed activists running things. Fault lines appeared continuously in the process of decision-making by assembly, and in the participatory democratic structures we designed for this kind of volunteer development of cultural resources.

Among these were executive decisions made without consultation with the assembly. Some of these came from the fiat nature of the center's creation, and the necessity of arranging things with the Ministry of Culture. We were also regularly damaged by the failure of so many to maintain our common resources due to laziness, non-participation in necessary building maintenance, and the casual theft of collective property. (In one case this was less than casual: a charismatic individual, an artist who dominated in the assembly was revealed to have been thieving from projects throughout the Tabacalera and storing the booty in his locked atelier.)

We faced problems with the immigrant communities of Lavapiés. Some were found to be accessing jihadist websites using the free internet, so that was shut down. Women complained of sexual harassment by men who would leave their wives at home and come to Tabacalera to cavort. The conflict between the assembly and the Templo Afro—organized as the Asociación Panteras Negras (Black Panthers) and understanding themselves as autonomous, as a “social center within a social center”—rose to intense levels. A leader of this group spoke insistently about the structural racism of the Spanish people, presented a bill of particulars alleging corruption and favoritism within the Tabacalera, and finally led a demonstration in the patio followed by an internal occupation of the cafe. The differences might have been resolved had this leader not been so inconsistent in his statements and approach, at one point agreeing to collective labor and at the next moment refusing, saying he was being forced to do it. The idea of a CSA within a CSA was impossible to deal with since with each assembly decision they reserved the right to agree or not. So at the end every single “consensus” was an error. Every time the strong personalities and their allies in assembly clashed, our utopia froze. At last we learned to live inside the conflict, and not try to get a consensus in assembly. Unfortunately, the conflict led to the permanent closure of the cafe, the major social center and an important source of money for Tabacalera. The salaries paid to some were the bones of contention. Now the cafe faces official sanitary inspections as

a barrier to re-opening. The many important projects that Templo Afro undertook, festivals, markets, days of cooking, rap concerts, which were important for the social integration of the Lavapiés community—all wound down during the period of conflict, and have not yet recovered their public dimensions.

Some celebrities did projects at Tabacalera. One of these, lured by the huge crowds at the center, was Italian comic actor and theater artist Leo Bassi. He produced his annual Belén (Bethlehem), an elaborate nativity scene typical of Spanish Christmas, updated and politicized as a scene of occupation with Israeli soldiers arresting angels, tanks, bulldozers, etc. But for the most part, the better known professional artists in Madrid did not go to Tabacalera. We were not legitimized, and it was not good for their careers. Maybe they would come if we were recognized by European institutions. One might think that the rise of social practice should bring more artists of that kind to work at Tabacalera. However, everyone who wants to do something there, especially any newcomer, has to negotiate an assembly which has become increasingly ingrown and bureaucratic—a labyrinth of meetings and bureaucratic procrastination—before being allowed to do anything. And of course there is no funding for artistic projects.

As I learned, the knowledge one gains from doing autonomous art projects is useless for a project like Tabacalera, the work of making a citizens' open cultural center. Art making, especially on the academic level, relies on all sorts of common knowledge and agreements that art people have that are more or less unknown to most. The consensus of understandings and procedures that have built up around art do not exist when artistic interventions are proposed as pure ideas in a public assembly. Does this mean that the social center must forget about innovation and creativity, and resign itself to being solely a workspace for artisanal production? One answer given now is the project by the Fundación de los Comunes to deliver education about radical pasts and radical culture in a series that seems to be about converting the understandings of political practice, social practice in art, into some kind of political education.

The yearning of many of the mainstream cultural institutions for a relation to the social movements brought about the grounds of possibility for Tabacalera. This process of relation began during the period of the Global Justice movement, in which many present-day institutional actors were involved, and continues now with the economic crisis and the planetary crisis of climate change. It is an expression of the idealism of the institutions and the people working for them. Again, the recent “Playgrounds: Reinventing the Square” exhibition here, that wholesale attempt to reimagine the history of radical modernism, and propose art as a continuous effort to create a radical place for children (and adults) to play freely, expresses that idealism fully. As per Friedrich Schiller in “On the Aesthetic Education of Man”: “Man only plays when in the full meaning of the word he is a man, and he is only completely a man when he plays.” (Of course there’s a fair share of bloody noses on the playground, too.) All these experiments of new institutionality and self-organization are searching for the autonomous human, the one capable of deciding her place and her life. That is a full human being.

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Alan W. Moore has written on artists’ groups, cultural geography and economy, and social movements. He worked with the artists’ groups Colab and helped start the cultural center ABC No Rio in New York City. He wrote *Art Gangs: Protest and Counterculture in New York City* (Autonomedia, 2011), and chapters for Julie Ault, *Alternative Art NY*; Blake Stimson & Gregory Sholette, *Collectivism after Modernism*; and Clayton Patterson, *Resistance: A Political History of the Lower East Side*.

He presently lives in Madrid, and runs the “House Magic” information project on self-organized occupied social centers. He co-edited *Making Room* (JoAaP, 2015), and wrote *Occupation Culture: Art & Squatting in the City from Below* (Minor Compositions/Autonomea, 2015). He lives in Madrid and Milwaukee.

Notes

1. A clear example is the election to the city council of a squatter involved with a social center in the city of Terrassa. In a text he wrote with his compañeros in the Ateneu Candela social center, Xavi Martínez succinctly outlines all the contributions the political squatting movement can make to enlightened governance. See X. Martínez, “Centros sociales y revolución democrática,” posted at diagonalperiodico.net, the website of the fortnightly Diagonal, May 21, 2015. Co-author Moore’s translation to English was posted June 9, 2015 at the blog “Occupations & Properties.”
2. Enrique Fidel, blog post, “Desindustrialización y transformación urbana en Madrid,” April 21, 2008, at: urbancidades.wordpress.com. Thomas Aguilera, in emailed comments on this paper, points out that the Matadero, the former city slaughterhouse now converted to cultural uses, represents “the southern pole of this gentrification program and the symbol of the cooptation of ideas from the grassroots” political and artistic scenes.
3. About the asociaciones de vecinos, see: http://es.wikipedia.org/wiki/Asociaci%C3%B3n_de_vecinos; and Vicente Quintana Pérez and León Pablo Sánchez (eds.), *Memoria ciudadana y movimiento vecinal. Madrid, 1968-2008* (La Catarata Ediciones, 2012).
4. The social center is a libertarian formation first named in Italy in the early 1970s during the Autonomist movement as “CSOA” for “Centro Sociale Occupato Autogestito” (self-organized occupied social center). (See *Affinities: A Journal of Radical Theory, Culture, and Action*, “Creating Autonomous Spaces,” vol. 1, no. 1, 2007; *Social Centres Network, What’s This Place? Stories from Radical Social Centres in the UK and Ireland, 2007?*; SqEK (Squatting Europe Kollektive) eds., *The Squatters’ Movement in Europe: Commons and Autonomy as Alternatives to Capitalism*, Pluto Press, 2014.) Tabacalera was named “CSA,” i.e., not an okupa or disobedient occupation. Practically, the designation means that it is a social and cultural center managed and organized by the people who want to be in the project. It is open to everyone who wants to join, discuss, work, and take care of the place.

5. The Laboratorio series of occupations (there were three) were among the most institutionally connected of the many okupas of Madrid. They provided a model of assembly-driven self-organization for autonomous cultural production. See Kinowo media, *Laboratorio 3, ocupando el vacío* (DVD; 2007; 64"; English subtitles).
6. Gloria G. Durán, conversation with Jordi Claramonte, Madrid, December 19th, 2013 (an interview for my book project, "No Man's Land: An Oral History of the Madrid Art Scene"); see also Jordi Claramonte, *Arte de contexto* (Donostia: Nerea, 2011). As a massive government building, the Tabacalera was an unsuitable candidate for squatting.
7. The project "La Tabacalera a debate" is described at: <http://latabacalera.net/web2004/>.
8. Journalistic discussions of the crisis of institutional overbuilding: Tom Burridge, "Why Spain's regions owe so much money," June 1, 2012, BBC News, Madrid, at: <http://www.bbc.com/news/business-18277681>; The Economist: "The Bilbao Effect," December 21, 2013, at: <http://www.economist.com/news/special-report/21591708-if-you-build-it-will-they-come-bilbao-effect>.
9. Interview with Carlos Vidania, at: https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=_aOPa9wPZiY. Active in the Laboratorio okupas, Vidania was a main figure in Tabacalera.
10. Tina Paterson, op. cit. Ángeles Albert had worked for the Spanish government's international agency in Mexico City D.F. before coming to the Ministry of Culture. She was familiar with the large cultural centers there organized by citizens (Faro de Oriente is the largest, at <http://farodeoriente.org/>), and so understood the SCCPP proposal.
11. A recent book of interviews by squatters in Madrid, the result of the Seminario de Historia Política y Social de las Okupaciones en Madrid-Metrópolis, is *Okupa Madrid (1985-2011). Memoria, reflexión, debate y autogestión colectiva* (Diagonal, Madrid, 2015; a free PDF is online). For more, see SqEK, eds., op. cit., 2014.
12. The Laboratorios were centers for the Madrid-based Yomango project of the SCCPP (aka Fiambrera Obrera). Yomango was a shoplifting performance documented in Nato Thompson, et al., *Interventionists: Users' Manual for the Creative Disruption of Everyday Life* (Massachusetts Museum of Contemporary Art/MIT. 2004). The Global Justice movement creative activists manifested theories of the tradition of carnival as popular resistance. See; Julia Ramírez Blanco,

Utopías artísticas de revuelta. Claremont Road, Reclaim the Streets, la Ciudad de Sol [Cátedra, 2014]; Gavin Grindon, "Carnival against capital: a comparison of Bakhtin, Vaneigem and Bey," *Anarchist Studies*, vol. 12, no. 2, 2004. These artists are a special breed, and there aren't that many of them. While the "creativists" had close ties to okupas, a continuous tension between the majority of artists and their activist peers exists. This is spelled out from the anarchist point of view in the short book *Contra el arte y el artista* by the Colectivo DesFace of Santiago, Chile (*La Neurosis o Las Barricadas*, 2012).

13. Jose Guirao, who set up the Casa Encendida as a non-profit project of the Caja Madrid, now Bankia bank, wrote that what he saw at the Laboratorio 3 inspired him in his design of the working structure of the new cultural center (see Jorge Fernández León, *Nuevos Centros Culturales para el siglo XXI en España. Consenso y conflicto*, Aecid, 2011). As Carlos told me, "One night Jose came to our bar at Labo 3, and said what a beautiful place." (Vidania, op. cit.) Later the director of the Casa Encendida praised the Tabacalera experiment to Marta Fernández Maeso as "an interesting gamble, and above all very participatory" ("Tabacalera: Two More Years of Experiment," *El País*, January 29, 2012, at: elpais.com/articulo/english/new/lease/of/life/for/the/Tabacalera/elpepueng/20120129elpeng_4/Ten).
14. In the new century the cultural landscape of Madrid has changed dramatically, both physically and in terms of management. The three administrations, the town hall (Ayuntamiento), the province (Comunidad de Madrid) and the federal Ministry of Culture, almost seem to be competing to have the biggest cultural center. Now there is MediaLab Prado in a renovated former sawmill (<http://medialab-prado.es/>), Matadero Madrid (<http://www.mataderomadrid.org/>) in a former slaughterhouse, and inside that Intermediae (<http://intermediae.es/>), all depending on the Ayuntamiento; Alcalá 31, Sala de Arte Joven, and CA2M (<http://www.ca2m.org/es/>) depend on the Comunidad; MNCARS (<http://www.museoreinasofia.es/>) depends on the Ministry of Culture. All these new spaces for the arts use the same rhetoric of context, public as an active agent, local instead of global, process and projects, not finished exhibitions, based in dialogue, solidarity, and collaboration. They use some of the same language as the squats and self-managed social centers, but with public money.
15. Manuel Castells, *The City and the Grassroots: A Cross-Cultural Theory of Urban Social Movements* (University of California Press, 1983)

16. The legendary programmer and proponent of free software Richard Stallman has been a frequent guest in Madrid, including at Tabacalera. He is fluent in Spanish.
17. Lawrence Lessig, *Free Culture: The Nature and Future of Creativity* (Penguin, 2004); free download at: www.free-culture.cc/freeculture.pdf.
18. Raul Lamarca Cruz, *Ratas de ciudad. Punks, Skin, Squatters y Antifas en Madrid* (Ediciones Descarriadas. Madrid, 2011).
19. In his famous essay of 1784, Kant defined enlightenment as “emancipation from self-incurred tutelage” and declared that its motto should be *sapere aude* – “dare to know.” Immanuel Kant (1784), “What Is Enlightenment?” at: <http://www.columbia.edu/acis/ets/CCREAD/etscc/kant.html>.
20. The movement of alternative art spaces was a universal post-1968 experience in the west. In the USA, it coincided with programs of direct government funding for artists for the first time since the 1930s. Julie Ault, ed., *Alternative Art, New York, 1965-1985* (University of Minnesota Press, 2002) contains a timeline which outlines the development of the alternative space movement in New York City. For Canada, see Luis Jacob, *Golden Streams: Artists’ Collaboration and Exchange in the 1970s* (University of Toronto, 2002). During the same time, many centers of new art were created in European countries, especially for media and book art. All of them were consorted internationally.
21. “El Ojo Atómico” was an alternative contemporary art space in the barrio of Prosperidad, Madrid. See: http://www.antimuseo.org/archivo/archivo_etapa1.html
22. The 15M movement is named for the date of a major encampment of the central square of Madrid, the Puerta del Sol, on 15 May 2011. Also referred to as “the Spanish revolution,” 15M was “a series of ongoing demonstrations in Spain whose origin can be traced to social networks and the Real Democracy Now (Spanish: Democracia real YA) civilian digital platform, along with 200 other small associations. Compared with the Arab Spring and May 1968 in France”, it started on 15 May with an initial call in 58 Spanish cities.” The movement maintains coherence, published a monthly newspaper, and as morphed into numerous political formations, many of which presently contest in the electoral arena. (Above quote: http://p2pfoundation.net/15M_Movement_-_Spain; 2012). There is more about 15M in the text below.

23. Markus Miessen, *The Nightmare of Participation* (Sternberg Press, 2010)
24. The history of Tabacalera is at: <http://latabacalera.net>, the link: : "Documentando" (documenting); fragments are in English.
25. A.W. Moore interview with Jesus Carillo in 2011. During this time, Carillo was traveling regularly to Málaga to assist the Casa Invisible. See also: Álvaro de Benito Fernández' interview with Carillo, "Latin American Conceptualism Bursts into the Institutional Arena Bringing New Management Models," *Arte Al Día* online, February 3, 2012, at artealdia.com.
26. "Chantal Mouffe: professor of political Theory, University of Westminster, London." *Artforum International* 48.10 (2010); accessed online
27. Alice Creischer, Max Jorge Hinderer, Andreas Siekmann, eds., *The Potosí principle: how can we sing the song of the lord in an alien land?* (Museo Nacional Centro de Arte Reina Sofía.; Haus der Kulturen der Welt.; Museo Nacional de Arte, Bolivia; Museo Nacional de Etnografía y Folklore, Bolivia; König, Cologne, NY; D.A.P./Distributed Art Publishers, 2010)
28. Jorge Ribalta, "Experiments in a New Institutionality," in *Relational Objects*, MACBA Collections 2002-2007, Barcelona: MACBA Publications, 2010; PDF online.
29. Giles Tremlett, *Ghosts of Spain: Travels Through a Country's Hidden Past* (Faber and Faber, 2007)
30. The Fundación de las Comunes was formed to mediate – to move funds, programs and influence between agents within the Ministry of Culture (mostly in the Reina Sofia museum), and other autonomous projects and organizations like the bookshop and publishing imprint Traficantes de Sueños, Universidad Nómada, and others. Tabacalera had a brief relation with the Fundación, but the foundation's main client was the Casa Invisible.
31. The SCCPP was a collective entity formed by the artists who received the first call from the Ministry to do something at Tabacalera. The artistic name SCCPP is "Sabotaje Contra el Capital Pasándosele Pipa," the parent of la Fiambrera Obrera and Yo Mango. But on all official papers the name is dramatically different – "Sociedad para la Cooperación y Convivencia de Pueblos y Personas." The website retains the original name – with images reminiscent of Mao-era China,

an allusion perhaps to Rudi Dutschke's idea of a "long march through the institutions" (see <http://www.sindominio.net/fiambreira/sccpp/>).

32. Ley de Patrimonio de las Administraciones Públicas de 2003, artículos 90 y siguientes. Sección 4, Autorizaciones y Concesiones Demaniales; Artículo 91 Condiciones de las autorizaciones y concesiones (at: http://noticias.juridicas.com/base_datos/Admin/l33-2003.t4.html#a90).
33. The archive of 15M, the Archivo Sol 15M, was moved from Tabacalera to CSOA Casablanca where it was locked up after an eviction; once recovered it was taken to ESLA Eko, a squatted social center in the Carabanchel barrio; now it is settled in a legal rented premises in calle Tres Peces called 3peces3, together with the library of the camp, BiblioSol.
34. Much of the music of 15M is at: <https://movimientoindignadosspanishrevolution.wordpress.com/la-musica-del-15m-videos-musicales/>.
35. Miguel Ángel Martínez, blog post, "The Necessary Squats" (2012), at: <http://www.miguelangelmartinez.net>
36. Carlos Vidania and Ana Sánchez, "La Fábrica Tabacalera: Experimentos del común," Carta, revista de pensamiento y debate del Museo Nacional y Centro de Arte Reina Sofía, Spring-Summer 2011
37. "Copyleft" is the name applied to a form of licensing that gives the right to freely use, modify, copy, and share software, works of art, etc., on the condition that these rights be granted to all subsequent users. Licenses of this kind are described at Creative Commons: <http://creativecommons.org/about>.

FIELD

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The Paradoxes of Design Activism: Expertise, Scale and Exchange

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Illustration 1. Students from the College of Environmental Design (CED) at UC Berkeley float tents carrying the message "Our Space" over Sproul Hall, the campus administration building, as part of the Occupy Cal demonstrations in 2011. Photo courtesy of *Frameworks* online journal, CED Berkeley.

Introduction

One of the most poignant moments during the protests associated with the Occupy movement took place in the winter of 2011 on the campus where I teach, at the University of California, Berkeley. Students set up tents on the campus in solidarity with the Occupy protesters soon to be evicted from various public spaces across the U.S. Their encampment was abruptly terminated by UC Police and sheriff's deputies from Alameda County, who arrived at the scene in riot gear and forced the students to leave.¹ Immediately after the eviction, students in the Department of Landscape Architecture gathered some helium balloons together and filled several lightweight nylon tents with them. They marched with other CED students to the steps of Sproul Hall (the campus administration building), where the floating tents, tethered to a large crowd below, hovered above the entrance, with a sign dangling below that read "OUR SPACE".²

At once memorable and disarmingly simple, the gesture captures some of the open-ended potential of the loosely aligned practices that are sometimes referred to as "design activism." The floating tents existed long enough to be filmed for the evening news. (ABC News, 2011) As such they mark one end of a diverse field of activist practices, one that has expanded rapidly in its scale, complexity and goals over the last decade.³ The other end of the field is exemplified by the rise and fall of the nonprofit architectural practice Architecture for Humanity (AFH). Initially started 15 years ago as two-person operation run out of a small apartment, AFH grew rapidly into a global network of significant size. When founders Cameron Sinclair and Kate Stohr announced they would be leaving the organization in September, 2013, AFH launched a major fundraising campaign, linked to a strategic plan for the next five years. The plan outlined a series of priorities, collectively designed to guarantee the future of AFH, including calls to "Grow General Fundraising," by recruiting "high net worth individuals" to join the Board of Directors. A "SWOT Analysis" in the concluding

section of the report identifies “brand confusion” and “competition from other design non-profits for mindshare” as a competitive threat.⁴ A little over a year after the hard-nosed business plan was released, AFH declared chapter 7 bankruptcy.⁵ At its height, AFH was perhaps the world’s leading example of a nonprofit architectural firm dedicated to humanitarian aid through architecture, with over 32 full-time staff and 45 Design Fellows, 64 local chapters, and 107 structures in construction or development worldwide. (AFH 2012, 46) In both its scale and scope, it represented for a brief time at least, the possibility of the nonprofit sector performing in ways that exceeded the scope and ambition of many “for profit” firms.

In between these examples—one a temporary, one-off project, and the other a large nonprofit professional firm—are a complex range of institutions, professional practices and diverse coalitions of practitioners, students and community groups. There are, for example, many other nonprofit firms, some of which have been in existence for several decades. Perhaps the most high profile next to Architecture for Humanity on the west coast of the U.S. is Public Architecture, which seeks to bring “good design” to the nonprofit sector through a combination of paid and pro-bono work. In recent years, major philanthropic organizations such as the Rockefeller Foundation and the National Endowment for the Arts have also become involved in funding initiatives that foster public discussions, exhibitions and publications around the subject of design activism, not only in relation to buildings but all forms of design, from products to urban space.⁶ The influx of foundation money has also led to the expansion of web-based portals, webinars, conferences and print publications that seek to share information and direct the emerging field along particular lines.

The existence of a network of competing organizations in the U.S. that each claim to act in the “public interest” while seeking “social impact” through design gives some indication of the institutional jostling and realignment that is now underway. Some of these efforts are concerned with redefining the field at a national scale. The Impact Design Hub provides the first centralized database

listing resources and funding opportunities for those committed to “designing a better world,” and is an outgrowth of a national workshop sponsored by the NEA, the Smithsonian Institution and the Lemelson Foundation; The Public Interest Design Institute provides a mobile training program that stages professional development conferences across the U.S. related to “Sustainable Environmental Economic Design (SEED).” The Center for Public Interest Design, based in the School of Architecture at Portland State University (PSU), offers one of the first certificate programs in the country. In addition to coursework organized around social and environmental issues, there is a notable emphasis on fundraising techniques, grant writing, and discussion of how “money matters for non-profit organizations.”⁷

The new program at PSU is part of a growing number located in institutions of higher education across the country. Some, like Yale School of Architecture’s program, have been in existence since the 1960s and were at the forefront of community-based design at that time.⁸ Others have started more recently, alongside the much larger expansion of “philanthrocapitalism” during the last three decades, in which state-supported relief activities have been partly or completely replaced by private subcontractors and NGOs, including nonprofit companies and faith-based organizations. (see for example, Addams 2013) At the same time, universities are under increasing pressure to demonstrate their social utility and impact in order to justify their funding streams and attract donors. In an era of declining state funding, design activism, and more broadly the huge expansion of community “outreach” programs also meshes well with the public university’s urgent need to demonstrate its efficacy to legislators.⁹ Commonly referred to in schools of architecture as “design/build” programs, these institutional frameworks mobilize students to design and build facilities—often for marginalized communities—using labor and materials that have been donated or paid for through grants with faculty oversight.¹⁰

The “active” part of design activism is defined in a critical relationship to an implicitly inactive and moribund professional

culture, which the “activist” highlights and ultimately backs away from, sometimes by taking the entire process, from design to production, into his or her own hands. In the discussion that follows, I employ design activism as an umbrella term for many initiatives that share overlapping modes of practice and ways of thinking. While design activism is first and foremost about making and doing, the effort is expended on behalf of the “common good,” in the “public interest,” or to achieve “social impact,” however ambiguously these goals may be defined. Design activism is therefore a useful categorical gathering point because it summarizes an ambition that links many divergent approaches together: to solve social problems through design.

This simple definition was the starting point for the influential 2008 collection edited by Bryan Bell and Katie Wakeford, entitled *Expanding Architecture: Design as Activism*. As with other books produced around the same time, this one is notable for its deft combination of social responsibility and market pragmatism. In his introduction, Bell defines design activism as something that is carried out in the interests of the common good, and is also good for business. The activist professional uses her skills and expertise to discover the design problems of communities, and then develops innovative ways to solve them. The linkage underscores a recurring theme in the literature: that design activism is as much about creating new, ethically surcharged markets for professional services as it is about social responsibility. Ideally, the two are seamlessly fused. Bell argues that a long history of professional disconnection has meant that many potential clients are not aware of how much their lives could be improved by “good design.” He suggests that impoverished or marginalized communities can gradually learn to think of themselves as empowered clients through benevolent interaction with designers, in the process creating more work for them:

“Designers can also easily increase the number of clients we serve. Right now, there is a large contingent of potential clients that we are not reaching, and there is no competition for their

projects. These clients have needs that represent the most exciting design challenges in existence. Yet the great majority of the public does not know what design is or why they might want it, or how it could help them. It is our job to explain this, to define and communicate architecture. If we do, we will all have enough work for many lifetimes.” (Bell 2008, 15)

The process of professional communication and persuasion implicit in this approach can be slow, sometimes taking years to move towards some form of resolution (if at all). Yet design activism can also happen immediately: urgency is rendered as a positive condition, one that offers a way to sidestep the burdens of regulation and established assumptions. Climate change events, earthquakes, and crises resulting from the displacements of war and other forms of collective violence within and between nation-states, all create the context for involvement, sometimes in tandem with humanitarian organizations. This form of “rapid response” practice was a significant part of the work undertaken by Architecture for Humanity. In the process AFH’s operations became synonymous with the temporality of crisis: each new disaster or catastrophe brought more work, and with it, urgent demands for fundraising. This approach also forms the basis of many of the most prominent design/build programs located in schools of architecture across the U.S., which have grown rapidly in number over the past two decades together with the impact of overlapping disasters and decreasing government involvement in their aftermath.¹¹

The question of time—and the capacity to respond quickly, even spontaneously to emerging conditions or events—also shapes a wide range of installations concerned with events in the public sphere. The range of participants is diverse, from practitioners seeking a more direct outlet for their creative thinking than what the slow pace of practice can provide, to emerging social movements that may include architects, designers, artists, urban planners and others amongst their numbers. The strategy embraces a lack of advance planning, and direct, off the cuff responses to existing situations, which many regard as a way to unshackle innovation from well-

established routines and practices. Immediate action has also begun to develop into a specialized subfield in its own right, perhaps best exemplified by the successful entry for the American Pavilion at the 2012 Venice Biennale, entitled "Spontaneous Interventions: Design Actions for the Common Good." The exhibition, which has been traveling through the U.S. since the biennale, showcases a range of projects, from urban farms and bike lanes to "crowdsourced" city planning. (SIDCG 2015; see also Thompson 2004)¹²

Though the speed and modes of operation vary, all these approaches share a common emphasis on action. Because the activist stance begins by backing away from normative modes of practice, it is often assumed to already be critical, and its outcomes therapeutic, empowering or socially transformative. The recent cascade of books, articles and exhibitions on design activism, with numerous parallel and competing approaches, remains largely consistent with this action-oriented direction, largely stressing descriptions of procedures and results, with critical reflection limited to criteria developed by those with a stake in advancing design activism as an emerging professional subfield.¹³

My goal in this two part essay is to identify and draw into relief some of the widely shared assumptions that now shape and delimit the field, and to assess their consequences. A central line of inquiry concerns the paradoxical relationship between design activism and the practices and processes associated with the terms in my title: expertise, scale and exchange. Although design activism seeks to solve problems in the world at large, I will suggest that a focus on problem solving, and "design action," often displaces consideration of how a given problem is constituted, and for what purpose. The detour away from the complex power relations of specific contexts and conditions begins, as I will explore further, by thinking of design in the first instance as a practice of problem solving rather than one of problem setting. I will develop my argument in two ways: first, although I will address a limited number of examples from the realm of professional practice in the nonprofit sector, most of my subsequent discussion will deal with architectural education.

This is partly because I teach in the field of architectural education, where instruction in the practice of community based design was an integral part of programs across the country in the 1960s and 1970s, but faded into invisibility thereafter. This reflects not only changes in funding mechanisms, but also the impact of more than two decades of architectural postmodernism, where object-centered debates around form and style predominated.

I was drawn into the realm of design activism through the experiences of students who faced limited or non-existent job prospects following the 2008 credit crisis and were searching for ways use their skills and knowledge that could not be accommodated in practice at the time.¹⁴ Through contact with their student-led organizations, and a parallel sequence of colloquia I co-organized with other faculty,¹⁵ it became clear to me that while a renewal of interest in “other ways of doing architecture” was underway, many of the core assumptions were either unexamined, or consciously derived from positions developed under completely different conditions more than four decades ago.¹⁶ I will argue that the basis of design activism needs to be re-conceptualized in relation to the radically different forces that shape the production and use of the built environment today. As I will suggest below and in the second part of the essay, this involves much more than simply “trusting the local,” and replacing “experts” with “communities,” while leaving the modes of understanding unchanged.

My starting point is therefore the ways of thinking that inform design activism, or what I'll refer to as the social epistemology of expertise. Architecture schools are locations where expertise is produced and exchanged, in this case through the pedagogical experiences of design/build. It is for this reason that I devote considerable attention to the design theories of Horst Rittel. I will suggest that many of the critical insights Rittel voiced about the shortcomings of problem solving methodologies during the 1960s continue to be relevant now. Indeed, if anything, we live in a period in which the heroic claims of technical rationality have expanded into the background of everyday life in ways that vastly exceed

Rittel's object of analysis at the time. One of my goals is to bring his work, and the critique it contains, into contemporary debates. In this way, the essay undertakes a double movement: revealing the continuing influence of prior modes of rationalizing thought in the present, while drawing on some of the critical insights of the same period to do so.

Rittel's trenchant analyses of the paradoxes of technical rationality ultimately led him towards a mode of design thinking based on argumentation and debate that became influential in early experiments in community design and participatory planning. A concern with social epistemology, or how we understand and intervene in the world, was central to Rittel's arguments. In calling upon his arguments here, I also identify my own bias, which is to regard any form of expertise as a social construction, sustained through practice, and various forms of institutional support. This makes the knowledge associated with design activism both socially and historically contingent, and by extension, open to change. While this point may seem rather self-evident, I maintain that much of design activism treats the question of technique in an instrumental manner, meaning that modes of thinking and forms of practice are deployed unselfconsciously as socially abstracted "tools" in the problem-solving endeavor. In doing so, an understanding of the way in which those tools have been shaped by historical conditions is lost, and with it any recognition of their practical and theoretical limitations.

The most obvious difference between the context for community design of the 1960s and today's design activism is the transformation of the economy, and with it, state power and related institutional structures: something that is very much in evidence in the U.S. where I will base this discussion. The rise of neoliberalism has meant that today's activists have had to find different institutional supports, and sources of funding that are markedly different from their historical predecessors. As a result the field is generally more competitive, but it is also, as I will argue further, very much concerned with developing design activism as a facet of

mainstream professional practice. Indeed, the major organizations in the field today have all sought support and recognition from the American Institute of Architects as well as many other high profile philanthropic and non-governmental organizations, some of which I have noted already. This is radically different from the prior period, which began by criticizing the profession and was deeply skeptical of expertise. The goal of prior models of alternative or community-based practice, however mixed they were in their success, was to distribute expertise away from the expert and towards the “user;” in today’s design activism, the authority of the expert as the center of the design process remains largely intact.

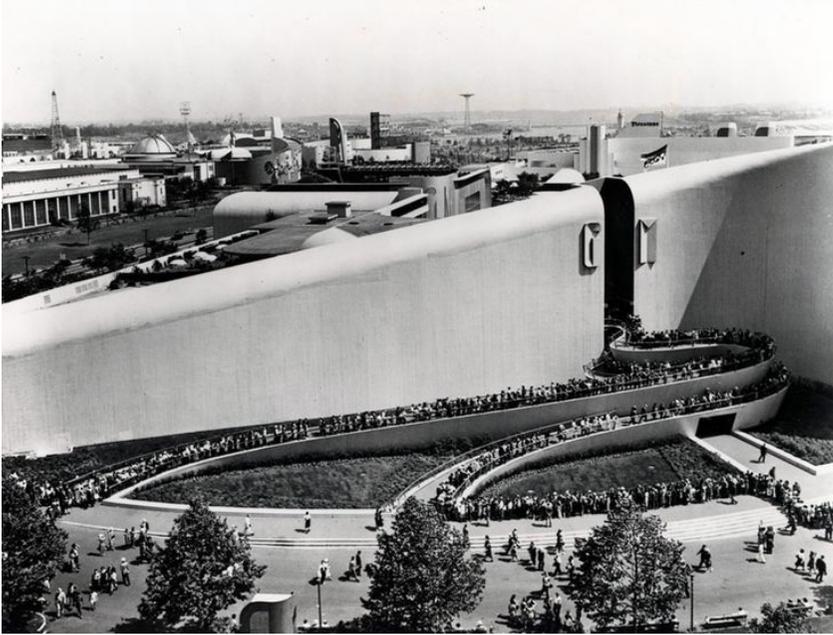
While an emphasis on epistemology is useful in directing attention towards how problems are framed in design as a decision-making process, it can also be problematic for the same reasons. Epistemology can sometimes displace consideration of the role of institutions, along with historical forces such as the economy, the state or education, in favor of discrete and socially abstract patterns of reasoning. In the discussion that follows, I address the problem of abstraction through the idea of entangled practice, in which ways of thinking and acting operate at the intersection of material spatial practices and social and historical processes. (Bennett and Joyce 2012) From a practical standpoint, this requires an emphasis on the contingency of practice, or as Jeremy Till argued in his 2009 book, a commitment to the idea that “architecture depends” on a complex array of enabling conditions, which are often messy, inconsistent, paradoxical, and intrinsically tied to what is happening in the social world beyond the artificially bounded space of disciplines and professions. Far from being something that needs to be cleaned up and rationalized, this space of contingency is also one of creative potential, where the practices of everyday life and design are interconnected. (see also Blundell-Jones et al 2008)

I will focus on three concepts that are central to design activism as a mode of understanding and action: expertise, scale and exchange. Though my emphasis is on the last decade or so (and for reasons of space will be limited to examples and conditions

based in the U.S.)¹⁷ I will use the first part of my discussion on the relationship between activism and expertise to provide a historical context for the subsequent two sections. Before turning to my argument on expertise, a brief note on neoliberalism. While I will be addressing the question of the wider social and political context in which design activism takes place at various points in the essay, I will step back from giving an overview of neoliberalism and the built environment in the first section. Instead, I plan to introduce it as part of my discussion at the end of the second half of this essay (which will be published in the spring issue of FIELD) in an effort to avoid the problems of base/superstructure analysis and other determinisms that can sometimes accompany a framing of history through the processes of neoliberalism. My concern will be familiar to readers of contemporary Marxist analyses. Despite genuine attempts to deal with forces such as culture, the professions, and education, such analysis almost inevitably returns to embrace the capitalist mode of production as the source of social determination. The result is to position institutional processes as reflections of the economy. I return to the question of political economy and the theoretical legacy of Marxist thought in the concluding section of the second part of this essay, where I explore forms of feminist, post-Marxist theory that offer situated representations of capitalism from within, that are contradictory, non-unified, and therefore malleable and subject to change. This rethinking of the terrain of capitalism—at once shaped by global processes and inflected by the specificity of agents and institutions operating in specific sub-national contexts—offers a starting point for transformed ideas of design activism.

Expertise

The forerunners of today's design activists began their work as a response to what has been called the "epistemology of technical rationality," a way of thinking that achieved a powerful institutional status in the postwar period in the U.S. as the role of professionals, or credentialed experts, expanded rapidly. (Shon 1987) The period



Illustrations 2. Streamlined entrance to the Futurama Pavillion, sponsored by General Motors and designed by Norman Bel Geddes at the 1939 World's Fair in New York City.

following the end of World War II in the U.S. marked the beginning of what Eric Hobsbawm famously called the “golden years” in the industrialized economies of the West. (Hobsbawm 1996) The rapid growth of the period was rooted in the transformation of urban space, as cities underwent massive modernization programs to accommodate the infrastructure associated with a new wave of capitalist development. U.S. cities—unaffected by the devastation that shaped the post war development of European economies—became the subject of large-scale planning interventions. Many of these initiatives, closely intertwined with the Keynesian economic theory that dominated public policy of the day, were funded by the federal government, but also advanced the interests of various aspects of the private sector. Road-building is just one example, but a telling one: the federal government financed the infrastructure necessary to expand to the suburbs, setting in motion the expansion



Illustration 3. Visitors sit on moving seats that circled around Bel Geddes's design for a city of the future, organized around functional zones and freeways with radio controlled traffic management. Photo courtesy of GM Media Archives.

of the rubber, asphalt, petroleum and automobile industries; and creating access to land for privately built suburban houses, each of which needed to be filled with goods, which also spurred growth. (Lefebvre 1990, 2003; Harvey 1989, 2012; Graham and Marvin, 2001)

There is probably no better specter of the postwar period than the strange dream of modernity embodied in the 1939 World's Fair in New York City. "The World of Tomorrow" celebrated a future of mass consumption, with displays featuring everything from Heinz food products and Goodrich tires, to Elektro, a talking robot and mascot of the Westinghouse pavilion. The entrance to the fair was flanked by monumental displays devoted to the automobile industry. The most popular of these was Futurama, designed by Norman Bel Geddes, for the public relations department of General Motors.

After ascending a sinuous circulation ramp that recalled a freeway overpass, visitors were presented with an elaborate model of a city, replete with skyscrapers in a central business district surrounded by verdant suburbs, all connected by ribbons of apparently non-stop highways. (Fotch 2001; Marchand 1992; Moreshead 2004)

Bel Geddes' dream of a postwar future in which a technocratic government enabled corporate development represented a distinctly U.S.-based translation of arguments about the functional city, the merits of zoning and the importance of traffic that were a prominent feature in professional debates about urban modernization in the period leading up to World War II. His model for a "City of Tomorrow" dramatized some of the formative ideas of the Congrès Internationaux d'Architecture Moderne (CIAM), an international network of planners and architects that operated under the sway of Le Corbusier from its inception in 1927 until well into the postwar period. (Hall 1997; Mumford 2000) Beginning with the influential Athens Charter of 1933, a succession of congresses and related manifestos issued by CIAM positioned the city as an artifact of expert control, to be managed from above through processes of abstraction and scientific reordering. (Schwarzer 1997)¹⁸ The scientifically rationalized urban organism, it was argued, would generate healthy and productive inhabitants through the transformative experience of everyday use. (Gans 2014)

The realization of large-scale, systematic planning was deferred by the Great Depression and World War II, after which it became integral to modernization programs internationally, and was put into action on a large scale. In this respect the 1939 World's Fair can be understood as premonition or a nightmare, depending on your point of view. In the two decades following the end of World War II, purpose-built cities such as Brasília emerged as spectacular embodiments of scientific planning based on expert theories. With its functional planning and promise to spur national development, Brasília was as much a national exhibition as the 1939 World's Fair, though a permanent one, and far more ambitious in the social experiment it proposed for its inhabitants. But there

were also efforts to apply the same ideas of functional and social reorganization to existing cities. (Scott 1998; Holston 1989) In the U.S., urban initiatives involving the large expenditure of public funds, either directly through the production of infrastructure and public goods, or indirectly, through tax subsidies, incentives and various appropriations, dominated state-led efforts at “urban renewal.” Such projects were typically realized through the displacement of poor, mainly people of color, out of existing inner city neighborhoods. (see for example, Sugrue 1996) Perhaps the most notable figure in all this was Robert Moses, a transformative figure in the postwar history of New York City. Moses came up through the bureaucratic ranks during the New Deal and eventually coordinated twelve New York City agencies, ruling them with considerable autonomy and drastically reshaping large parts of New York City in the process. (Ballon and Jackson 2008; Caro 1975; Gratz 2011) A coalition of citizens led by the journalist and neighborhood activist Jane Jacobs, contributed to his downfall. Jacobs helped to crystalize citizen opposition over his plans for the Lower Manhattan Expressway and other projects, through recourse to an anti-suburban vision of the city that revalued its nineteenth-century urban fabric and its apparent capacity to engender processes of self-government.¹⁹

The struggle in New York City over Moses’ plan was one part of a much larger set of events, where citizens reacted against the technocratic administration of everyday life through planning, whether of cities, war, housing, or universities. The reach was extensive, and it is not surprising that, for a brief period, both the left and the right were united in their suspicion of, and hostility towards government. (Harvey 2007; see also Castells 1983) The corresponding crisis of legitimacy expanded to include what came to be known as the “professional managerial class,” or the “new class,” a paradoxical formation positioned between capital and labor, charged with managing capitalism and ensuring its reproduction. Students themselves rejected their incipient roles as technocratic managers of capital, as well as the curricular structures that had been generated in the postwar years to produce a new

generation of bureaucrats, scientists, economists and planners, amongst others.

The student revolts at Nanterre, France in 1968, for example, were as much about rejecting the university as an incubator of technical rationality as they were about an at least temporary rejection of the social role to which that knowledge would be assigned. (Schnapp and Vidal-Naquet, 1971; Seidman 2004) In the U.S., the Civil Rights movement, along with decolonization struggles in the developing world and the antiwar movement soon overlapped with a broad-based rejection of the role of expert knowledge in everyday life. The challenges and ensuing protests were repeated in other national contexts, many of which were covered and transmitted across national borders through mass media and television. The student revolts and the general strikes in France in May, 1968, together with growing mass protests in other national contexts, gave the crisis of the professional managerial class geo-cultural dimensions. (Debray, 1981; Barbara and John Ehrenreich, 1971; Torraine 1971; see also Barbara Ehrenreich 1990; Wright 1998)

I raise all these issues in part to underscore the difficult and increasingly tense national atmosphere that Lyndon Johnson entered after his election in 1964. It was Johnson's first administration that created the programs of the Great Society, designed to end poverty and spatialize equality in U.S. cities through improved facilities and services, to be implemented through the doctrine of "maximum feasible participation." One of the core aspects of the legislation associated with the Great Society was the creation of Community Action Programs and other outreach mechanisms that sought to empower marginalized communities to improve their neighborhoods. During the first wave of programs within the Great Society, architects and built environment professionals operated as advocates for poor communities, attempting to use their skills to ensure an appropriate distribution of resources. They also set up storefront offices and community design centers—often in conjunction with schools of architecture, in order to bring

their services to poor communities. (Comerio 1984; Dutton 1996; Goldstein 2012; A. Goodman 2015; Phelps 2014)

Horst Rittel was a keen observer of the transformation of planning discourse and practice in the postwar period in the U.S. He was a German academic who came to UC Berkeley from the Ulm School of Design, which was set up by the Scholl Foundation after World War II as the postwar equivalent of the Bauhaus. Its goal was to promote approaches to design that were committed to an ethical version of modernism. Rittel arrived at Berkeley in 1963 when public dissent over large scale planning projects was already well advanced. He wrote a number of seminal articles about the underlying paradoxes of planning rationality, the most famous of which was entitled "On the Planning Crisis" (Rittel [1972] 2010). This article not only astutely dissects the logical failures immanent in the bureaucratic planning apparatus of postwar development; it also begins to suggest a different methodology. Though Rittel's work has not received the widespread recognition it deserves, it remains as relevant today as it was when it was first published in the 1970s.

Two popular books published recently underscore the latter point. Both adopt theoretical frameworks that resonate closely with Rittel's formulations, by launching powerful criticisms of the assumptions at work in the seemingly endless discourse of techno-utopianism in the U.S. today. Evgeny Morozov takes up the heightened cultural status of computer-based "solutionism" (his term for technical rationality) in his 2014 book, *To Save Everything Click Here*. He refers to solutionism as the tendency to "recast all complex social situations as neatly defined problems with definite, computable solutions, or as transparent and self-evident processes that can be easily optimized . . ." (Morozov 2014) Similarly Jaron Lanier, one of the inventors of Virtual Reality and now a prominent critic of social media, argues that today's "siren servers" beckon us into asymmetrical relations of power, where data aggregation and crowd sourcing displace the messy arguments of unfiltered public discourse. (Lanier 2014)

Rittel's work translates well into present arguments like these, not only because of the points he makes, but the way he makes them: he focuses on styles of reasoning, how they came about and their consequences. He was an intellectual mischief-maker of this first order—rigorously anti-foundational but at the same time committed to an ethical world-view founded in argumentation and debate. For Rittel, design arguments were inseparable from civic life and tied to the circumstances in which they emerged. As such there could never be universal truth in design, and by extension, no "right" or "wrong" solutions, only good or bad ones, determined by the mutable relations of communicative ethics.

For Rittel, design problems cannot be neatly bounded because they involve human values and situations; they can't be solved in the same way a mathematical or computational problem might be. They are not, to use Rittel's terms, tame problems, which have an enumerable list of permissible operations, and definitive formulations. The expertise of technical rationality argues that correct solutions can be developed if the right "tools" are applied to a problem. From Rittel's standpoint, many design problems become "rational" only by bracketing out the things that make them messy, uncontrollable, or (to use his term of choice) "wicked." (Churchman 1967; Krippendorf 2006; Protzen and Harris 2010) The way the problem is defined determines the solution. Hence, as Rittel and his colleague Melvin Webber famously said "the formulation of the wicked problem *is* the problem." (Rittel and Webber 1973, 161) This directs our initial attention towards how problems are framed, rather than how they are solved.

Wicked Walls within Walls

If Rittel's arguments are taken to their conclusion, rethinking design problems as wicked problems means not only that there is no definitive solution or endpoint to the design process, but also that in some cases what is initially posed as an "architectural



Illustration 4. UC Berkeley Chancellor's House. Photo courtesy of C. Greig Crysler.

problem” might be best addressed in an entirely non-architectural way. Here is a brief example of what I mean, one that is also a spectacular demonstration of the contradictions now eating away at the heart of higher education in California—the very same ones that the students floating the “Our Space” tents over Sproul Plaza in 2011 sought to draw attention to. Like some of the other university campuses in the U.S. that date from the nineteenth-century, UC Berkeley has a neoclassical mansion set within a picturesque glade at the edge of the campus for its Chancellor. In the disturbances that followed tuition hikes in 2009, then Chancellor Birgeneau and his wife, Mary Katherine, were awakened from their sleep by the sound of bricks being thrown through their windows, and light fittings outside the building being broken. Eight people were eventually arrested in relation to the incident. Of those charged, Birgeneau said “These are criminals, not activists . . .the attack at our home was extraordinarily frightening and violent. My wife and I genuinely feared for our lives.” (Lee 2009)

In the summer of 2015, almost six years after that first incident, it was quietly announced that the campus would be constructing a black chain-link security fence around the Chancellor's mansion. An article about the fence in the *Daily Californian*, the campus newspaper, represented the new construction as a cost-saving measure, designed to reduce the number of police assigned to the Chancellor's security detail. (Shih 2015) At first glance, the fence would seem like a perfectly rational solution to the problem of the Chancellor's security, one that was formulated by calling upon the expertise of the University's Campus Police, and one that would save, rather than cost, money.

From Rittel's standpoint, the fence is a tame solution to a wicked problem, and can only be regarded as a success if its contradictions are bracketed from understanding. As the undetected crashing of a personal drone onto the lawn of the White House in January 2015 has shown, a fence—no matter how imposing, is a weak match for the high-tech projectiles of the digital age, which can pass over physical barriers and slip through gaps in military radar at the same time.²⁰ But practical considerations aside, if we move back to a different starting point—that of how we understand the problem of security—we will quickly discover that there are no right or wrong answers to this problem, only ones that are good or bad, as defined by the criteria used to form and evaluate solutions. The tangle of issues that have emerged reveal that security and politics cannot be separated, though this is precisely what the technical discourse of fences and walls attempts to do.

Let us assume, for example, that despite the growing threat of mini-drones, the Chancellor's fence will decrease the proximity of the protesters from his windows, lessening the possibility of bricks and other objects being tossed or shot through them; it may also signal the presence of surveillance and security to would-be offenders, discouraging vandalism or attacks on the mansion. On this basis, we can argue that the wall is a success. However, this evaluation does not take account of the unintended consequences of the proposed solution. The wall's symbolic function (to frighten

or discourage offenders with a symbol of strength) generates a tangle of other problems. The Berkeley campus, influenced by the principles of City Beautiful planning, with picturesque vistas intersected by axial public spaces and avenues, has been subtly transformed by the intrusion of a fenced domestic compound. The change makes a powerful statement about the Chancellor's relation to the campus, underscoring the forces of institutional segregation that already separate him and other upper echelon officials from the campus community. It signals an official willingness to make the campus landscape less open, and more divided—a point that has already been lamented by campus faculty and students.²¹

Attempts to challenge the fence on financial terms have been anticipated in the cost-saving arguments that accompanied the announcement of its construction. However, this standpoint relies on excluding immaterial costs: to the reputation of the campus as an open and democratic space, and to the Chancellor as an accessible leader, each of which generates its own set of problems. The fence also inserts the campus into debates that conflate the maintenance of individual and collective sovereignty with physical boundaries. As Wendy Brown, a UC Berkeley faculty member, has written in her 2010 book, *Walled States, Waning Sovereignty*, the hyperbole of walls within walls, fences and other border infrastructure reveals “a tremulousness, vulnerability, dubiousness or instability at the core of what they aim to express—qualities that are antithetical to sovereignty and thus elements of its undoing.” (24, see also *Dear 2013*)²² The latter point holds a charged meaning for the campus's Latina/o population, who are now witness to escalating and vitriolic calls for a wall between Mexico and the U.S. What started as a technical solution may well become a potent icon for multiple scales of inequality and injustice, and as such, a target for future protests rather than an oasis of domestic security. Such is the spiraling quality of wicked problems.

Wicked thinking shifts the practice of design back to an earlier stage, so that the project brief (which ultimately determines the outcome of the design process) becomes a site of contestation and

debate. Such debates may lead to decisions to cancel a project, or achieve its goals in an entirely different way. Stepping outside the bounded reality of a specific regime of decision-making may reveal, for example, that the money targeted for a new security fence may produce unanticipated costs that exceed those of the original proposal. Once these costs are acknowledged, a different framework of evaluation is activated, one that includes the ethical dilemmas that surrounds the fence's construction. Rittel's arguments have sometimes been interpreted as meaning that we simply need to do a better job of listening to those who will be affected by a particular solution: if we somehow include more opinions, we will be acknowledging the complexity of design problems and embracing their wickedness. Yet adding more voices, or developing "techniques" of participatory design for a given problem, is, from Rittel's standpoint, simply another version of technical rationality, because the problem to be solved, within certain margins of adjustment, is given, and because a routine methodology (as with post-it notes or facilitators with armed with colored magic markers) is applied to a problem, regardless of the context and whether the problem actually needs to be solved or not. In the example above, we do not need a participatory approach to the design of the wall, but rather, an argumentative process about whether it should be produced at all.

Community Design as Technical Rationality from Below

Though Rittel's ideas were directed towards the kind of systematic and institutionally based decision-making associated with planners of high modernism, they apply equally well to the mechanistic forms of community design and participatory planning that had already taken hold in the wake of the radicalism of the 1960s. It is to this point that I now turn, in order to show how a way of thinking that set out to challenge technical rationality gradually turned into what it sought to critique. As I will suggest, one way of reading Rittel's writing is as a reaction to the supposed alternatives



Illustration 5. Urban renewal protest, n/d. In Robert Goodman, *After the Planners* (New York: Touchstone, 1971), p.62.

to technical rationality taking shape at the time. He was not alone in his skepticism towards predefined models of “participation”. Sherry Arnstein’s famous “Ladder of Citizen Participation” (first published in 1969) is notable for the way the steps on the ladder towards “full citizen participation” describe various forms of social management from above. The citizen seeking a genuine form of collective decision-making needed to climb past manipulation, tokenism, and subordinate partnership—all failed variants of participation operating through the anti-poverty programs of the Great Society.

There are many issues raised by Arnstein’s ladder, perhaps most notably that the topmost rung excludes experts. For Arnstein, this was presumably necessary to ensure democracy, but it is a position that Rittel himself would have opposed. He argued for a “symmetry of ignorance” in which there was no a priori hierarchy or value judgment imposed on those taking part in decision-making

processes. His position was not “anti-professional.” He regarded professional epistemologies as one distinctive way of knowing amongst many others. In his view, architects and ordinary citizens could, under the right circumstances, recognize that each had knowledge to share of different but equal value. The contribution of Arnstein’s ladder is thus perhaps less in the hoped for utopia of the last rung than in its diagnosis of how fully and quickly the techniques of grassroots activism had been converted into a system designed to manage dissent and achieve policy “solutions.”

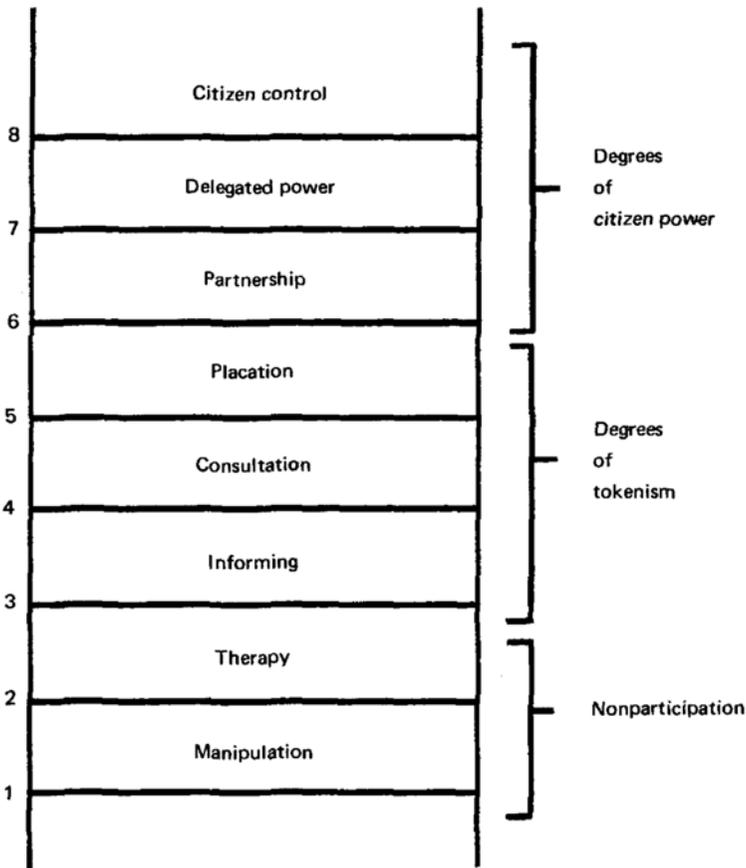


FIGURE 2 *Eight Rungs on a Ladder of Citizen Participation*

Illustration 6. Sherry Arnstein’s “Ladder of Citizen Participation” (1969).

These points have been developed more fully in subsequent research, beginning with Barbara Cruikshank's landmark 1999 study, entitled *The Will to Empower*. (Cruikshank 1999) She identifies the primary goal of citizen participation during the Great Society programs as "empowerment." The goal of many of these initiatives was to "empower" the poor and disadvantaged to voice their problems and recognize their capacity to improve their lives. But as Cruikshank shows, empowerment discourse was typically based on first classifying groups as "disempowered" in specific ways, in order to enable empowerment to proceed according to the government's goals and methods. The most common reaction to empowerment practices was apathy, which partly explains the lack of concrete results from the many community design initiatives of that time. (see also Dean 2009, 82-88)

The flattening of participation by government agencies through funding criteria, performance guidelines and other regulatory structures designed to orchestrate consensus is thus continuous with the technical rationality activists initially set out to oppose. But it is more difficult to recognize as such, because it draws so effectively on the language of community and participation. Clearly any form of activism that relies on governmental, institutional or private funding needs to include "objectification" of the problem space, so that the existing assumptions and lines of influence become clear.²³ Otherwise the aims of a group can quickly be assimilated to the logic of participation already in place, in turn resulting in outcomes that serve the funder or administrator, rather than the participant.

Many activist groups in the 1960s gained this kind of knowledge gradually, through experience. And as recent research by Alyosha Goldstein shows, some that were organized through government funding into programs concerned with self-help often evolved into more radical (and unmanageable) forms of self-determination. (2012, 111-154) Rittel's point was that understanding the embedded practices involved in any situation and how they might shape the agency of participants was essential to considering how problems are framed. Knowledge of the competing and sometimes blurred

or overlapping power geometries of participation is integral to the realist vantage point his thinking offers.

The paradoxes of community empowerment I have just outlined included architecture from the beginning. Some of the most notable early battles against the planning apparatus in U.S. cities included architects and architectural educators. Community Action Programs provided part of the funding for the first wave of community design centers based in architecture programs, including the one where I teach, at UC Berkeley.²⁴ But even in the initial phase of experimentation, when architectural educators, practitioners and students worked together in an effort to turn the struggle against modernization projects into political frameworks for transforming society, the process was shrouded in ambiguity. There was, for example, the question of how professionals could both provide expert assistance to help affected people, and mobilize them into political action when the communities in question were loosely formed, heterogeneous and often holding contradictory goals. Much of this has to do with the ambiguous status of the professionals, who never really abandoned their roles, and always had the freedom to come and go.

The ill-defined boundaries of community groups, and the exteriority of the professionals drawn to them meant that they were never able to fully identify who they hoped to help, or clearly determine what problem needed to be solved. And even if a specific community could be identified, the problem could never be solved in the rationalist sense, because of its intrinsic wickedness. We can see this struggle at work in the career of Lucien Kroll—a Belgian architect who attempts to include participant voices in his work but who ultimately retains final control over the projects. The housing for medical faculty at the University of Leuven, an early and widely cited project of Kroll's, employed a range of techniques to solicit the participation of future inhabitants in its design, ranging from small group discussions, to the use of random decision-making techniques based on chance. Here, as in other projects executed over his long career, a residual level of determination

by the architect is retained, but placed off the table, so to speak. The degree of expert control over the project is not theorized as a part of the distributed model of decision-making, but instead remains invisibly in the background, unless it is recognized as such and challenged.²⁵

The Business of Empowerment

The inability of community-based design methods both within and beyond architecture to accurately identify and understand the people they intended to help, and the problems they hoped to solve, underscores the challenges posed by attempting to treat wicked problems as tame ones. As my earlier example of the Chancellor's fence suggests, the arbitrary bounding of a given problem only serves to disable the analyst's ability to understand the complex intersection of forces at work in a given situation. One way to resolve this conundrum is to make the role of the designer more frankly concerned with bounded problems—in effect to give up on the challenge posed by Rittel's idea of wicked problems.



Illustration 7. Spyfish STV underwater drone by H2Eye International, a product cited by David Kelley to illustrate the successful application of Human Centered Design (HCD). See: <https://www.ideo.com/work/spyfish-stv>

Rather than contend with the complexity of wicked problems, and the arguably radical challenges it poses to conventional modes of practice, the designer embraces the limited, and predetermined aims of “solutionism” through a new form of expertise, that of a fully instrumentalized “community practice.” This is essentially what happened in the wake of the unfulfilled agenda of radicalism in the 1960s. As Mary Comerio notes, the shift from “idealism to entrepreneurialism” in community design was fueled by the practical failures of the first wave of activism.²⁶ (Comerio 1984)

The speed of the shift was intensified by sudden and systemic changes in the U.S. economy, as the country moved from state intervention to neoliberal restructuring following the oil shocks and stock market collapse of the early 1970s. The Reagan presidency brought an end to many of the funding sources that had supported community design centers, and they began to close or develop different agendas connected to private sector funding sources.²⁷ The shift to a market-based model demanded a problem-to-solution model to show that results were being achieved for money spent, even if the results were generated by the artificial bounding of the problem space. As we will see in my subsequent discussion, it is this market-based determinism that dominates design activism today.

It was during this period that community action was converted to community practice, effectively reshaping empowerment activities once supported by various government agencies into a subfield of the architectural profession. The new configuration was entrepreneurial not only in the sense that nonprofit firms now had to compete for clients in an intense marketplace for low cost architectural services. It also meant that whatever remained of the goals of community empowerment now depended on either private sources of funding, or a hybrid of diminishing government grants paired with private sector investment. Thus in a relatively short period of time, the underlying institutional framework of community design was transformed from a logic of state intervention, to a model that made market forces its default starting point. It is this model that continues today, but (after three decades of social

restructuring) in an intensified form. The goal now, as then, is solving immediate, practical problems of specific communities, rather than, as had been the case in the 1960s, broader political transformation through what Robert Goodman once called “spaces of liberation.” (R. Goodman 1972)

I now want to illustrate the entanglement of design activism, technical rationality, and free market thinking today through the example of IDEO, a design firm based in San Francisco. IDEO has become internationally renowned for its approach to problem-solving. And over the last few years, partly as an acknowledgement of the rapid growth of the nonprofit sector, and partly as a way to bolster its reputation for corporate social responsibility, it has also entered the field of design activism, through a nonprofit division of its firm. IDEO’s nonprofit arm is organized around “human centered design” or HCD. The approach was initially codified in a guidebook commissioned by the Bill and Melinda Gates Foundation, along with three other organizations. *Human Centered Design. A Toolkit* (HCD Toolkit hereafter) adapts techniques used by corporations in their market research to the process of designing for people living on under two dollars a day. (HCDDT 188) Though developed to inform IDEO’s nonprofit activities, the approach has been widely influential in other sectors of the nonprofit world, not only in the realm of product design, but also for initiatives ranging from the implementation of microfinancing in Bangladesh²⁸ to the recently proposed plan for an “African Bauhaus” organized around “Human Centered Design Institutes.”²⁹

Employing a mixture of colorful graphics and synoptic text the HCD Toolkit begins by explaining that human centered design regards “people as the experts.” People (or “end customers”) are reconfigured within a modified version of the social-scientific dyad of participant-observation, a method of qualitative data collection that, in modernist ethnographic accounts, typically positions the observer (in this case, the practitioner of HCD) in an exterior but dependent relation to the individuals or groups that are the subject of inquiry. The tools freely translate the loosely derived

methods of participant-observation into a checklist of “techniques, methods, tips and worksheets to guide you through a process that gives voice to communities and allows their desires to guide the creation and implementation of solutions.”(HCDT 5) As noted in the Table of Contents, a Field Guide at the end of the book “contains worksheets that will help you prepare and conduct field research. The Field Guide and the Aspiration Cards are all you need to take into the field with you.” Before reaching the Field Guide, the reader is presented with two-page summaries of different ethnographic methods, from “Individual and Group Interviews,” to advice on how to “Seek Inspiration in Unusual Places.” The collage of techniques is left unqualified and readers are encouraged to pick and choose according to their needs.

While offering a seductive gloss on “participant-observation” methods of research the HCD Toolkit fails to acknowledge the partial, and highly limited understanding provided by its tools. While claiming to provide a way to simply enter the social realm and empower people to reveal their inner desires, the Toolkit-by virtue of the assumptions embedded in the tools—constructs the very reality it seeks to discover. The Toolkit is thus a problem-taming device, one that makes the messy complexity of the participant’s world manageable, by boiling it down into an exercise in aspiration research. The IDEO Toolkit individualizes subjects by asking them what they want, outside consideration of the social and historical circumstances that inevitably shape their responses. The reduction of poverty to individual desires sidesteps collective societal issues that can’t be “solved” with aspiration cards. It also establishes the Toolkit, like the populations it is used to investigate, as trans-historical, somewhere beyond time and culture. The Toolkit is thus also a travel kit, with assumptions about mobility and universal applicability built into its concept of utility.

HCD achieves a semantic repositioning of social problems within the logic of consumption, by emphasizing “end users” and redefining everything from philanthropic programs to portable toilets as “products.” This market orientation is much more in

the foreground when the methodology is applied to product development and market research in the first world. The approach was first outlined by IDEO founding partner David Kelley at his 2002 TED talk, where he introduced his firm's new interest in the methodology to a wider audience. Kelley explains that HCD's purpose is to "design behaviors and personalities into products." The range of examples presented extends from interactive dressing room mirrors at the Prada Store in New York City to the Spyfish camera—an underwater drone that allows the deep seas to be observed from the deck of a yacht. Of the Spyfish, Kelley notes, "Many people have boats or enjoy being on boats, but a very small percentage actually have the capacity or interest in going under the water . . .this product has two cameras, you throw it over the side of your boat and you basically scuba dive without getting wet." (TED 2002)

While solutionism generates ingenious responses to narrowly framed questions, here, as in the examples cited in the Toolkit, the method has no way to evaluate whether solutions are socially useful and ethically sound, or indeed to distinguish between them. Presumably the market will decide. The point is underscored by the final example presented by Kelley, a water pump developed by Martin Fisher (a California-based mechanical engineer and social entrepreneur), called the "Super Money Maker." The portable pump, first developed for use in Kenya, enables farmers to access water on a small-scale basis in situations where the necessary infrastructure for irrigation is not available. Though the pump has clearly benefited many farmers, because the design problem is framed as providing individual access to water, the larger consideration of collective supply coordinated by the state is removed from consideration.³⁰

The "money maker" is intended to free its owners from the burdens of government bureaucracy and NGOs, which are cast as impediments to market innovation and self-realization. The pump's network of production, sales and use provides a practical introduction to the discourse of "ethical capitalism," where individual entrepreneurship is aggregated (or "scaled up," in the

parlance of social entrepreneurship) to reform society from below. (Roy 2010) The net result, an aggregated privatization of irrigation, is particularly ironic in light of the recent discovery of two massive aquifers 300 meters underground that have the capacity to meet all of Kenya's water needs for the next 70 years.³¹ In its support of free market ideologies, its endorsement of external expertise to solve national problems, and the implied withdrawal of citizens from collective self-government, the pump aptly signifies the historical reversal of design activism from its idealistic starting point to its current affiliation with private market forces.

Conclusion

In the argument I have presented thus far, I have tried to show how changing conceptions of expertise have shaped the epistemology of design activism. The main paradox I have investigated concerns the transformation of design activism into the ways of thinking it initially sought to challenge. The goals of social transformation through collective participation were initially developed to challenge expertise. The same techniques of participation and community outreach now operate as forms of expertise in themselves, with their own well-defined and formulaic problem-solving techniques. In short, we see technical rationality, previously used to instrumentalize state power and manage the economy through Keynesian strategies, now emerging as means to do the same thing, but this time through the mechanisms of the free market. The target of both operations is the poor, and from the standpoint of today's economy, a potentially dangerous precariat. These techniques attempt to achieve an alignment between "economic potential" and "social need" through practices that conflate the free market with freedom.

IDEO represents one facet of this transformation. In the second part of this essay, I will take the points I have made here further, by exploring them in relation to architectural education. My focus will



Illustration 8. Aspiration cards from *The Field Guide to Human-Centered Design* (IDEO.org, 2015), p.168.

be on the interrelated questions of scale and exchange. Scale is one of the unavoidable starting points for design, and as it turns out, a key term in contemporary practices of design activism. Almost without exception today's design activists argue for a return to small scale, "locally based" design. I will explore how scale can either operate as the unstated frame for design activism, implicitly shaping how the extent of a problem is defined, or become an active consideration in the way a problem is framed, leading to radically different results. In my concluding discussion I will examine design activism as a practice of economic exchange. I consider the emergence of interest in alternative modes of practice alongside the wider transformation of

professional labor, particularly since the credit crisis of 2008. I argue that with their emphasis on the provision of skills, and exchange of symbolic capital within a predefined system of expertise and authority, design/build and other “service learning” programs have the potential to reinforce economic inequality, and in a larger sense, participate in the privatized restructuring of welfare. I will conclude by exploring what J.K. Gibson Graham refers to as “weak theory” and discuss its potential to rethink the paradoxes of design activism in the global present.

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Notes

1. The Occupy Cal movement at UC Berkeley was loosely affiliated with the Occupy movements elsewhere in the US, including encampments in nearby Oakland, and San Francisco. The primary focus of the Occupy Cal movement was the privatization of public education, including significant rises in student fees and tuition, necessitated by the withdrawal of public funding for higher education in California, following the financial crisis of 2008. (See for example, Brown 2015, pp. 175-200)
2. The floating tents were captured on the evening news on Bay Area network affiliates (ABC News 2011); the footage remains on YouTube (YouTube 2011). The impromptu intervention is also discussed by Jennifer Wolch, Dean of UC Berkeley's College of Environmental Design in *Frameworks*, the newsletter of the College of Environmental Design, where she characterizes the action as the continuation of a long tradition of student activism in the CED. (Wolch 2012)
3. The resurgence of interest in alternative forms of practice, design/build and community-based design, along with attempts to define and claim definition of the expanding field, was signaled at an institutional level by the Museum of Modern Art's 2008 exhibition, *Small Scale. Big Change. The New Architecture of Social Engagement* (Lepik 2008)
4. The Five Year Strategic Plan was announced publicly with news of the departures of Cameron Sinclair and Kate Stohr on September 4, 2014. Although the report attempted to mark the opening of a new era, it also revealed the scale of the financial challenges that were to later bring down the firm. (AFH 2014)
5. The bankruptcy of Architecture for Humanity has been linked to an imbalance in its revenue. While fundraising generated revenue for new projects around the world, the organization lacked sufficient funds to pay for operations at its headquarters in San Francisco. (Ferro 2105; Lee 2015; Stott 2015)
6. In 2012, The Smithsonian Museum's Cooper Hewitt Museum National Design Museum, The National Endowment for the Arts, and the Lemenson Foundation sponsored a one-day "summit" on "design and social impact" at the Rockefeller Foundation offices in New York City. The resulting White Paper, published by the Smithsonian Institution, reflects an effort by over a dozen foundations that support social programs and 34 designers to determine the challenges faced by the field and consider how to resolve them. The White Paper describes

the lack of agreement about what “social impact design” means. (Smithsonian, 2012) The summit and publication are part of a much larger effort by institutions and various nonprofit organizations over the last decade to define the field as a coherent set of shared assumptions and practices, with all the ensuing struggle such an effort entails. See for example the online “webinars” on the same topic launched in 2015 by the National Endowment for the Arts with some of the participants from the Smithsonian summit. (NEA 2015)

7. The now defunct web portal, Public Interest Design.org, was started by John Cary, former Founder, with John Peterson, of Public Architecture, in San Francisco. After leaving Public Architecture, Cary first established the public interest web portal, which was later taken over, and “rebranded” by Autodesk, the software corporation as the Impact Design hub. Cary then established JohnCary.Org, where he is described as a “connector, writer, speaker, and curator focused on social change, with an emphasis on design for the public good” who also helped to launch FRESH Speakers, Inc., “a next generation speakers bureau, focused on diversifying thought leadership.” Bryan Bell, editor of *Good Deeds, Good Design* (Bell 2003) and co-editor of *Expanding Architecture: Design as Activism* (Bell and Wakeford 2008) is also the founder of Design Corps and the Public Interest Design Institute, a facilitator for the annual “Structures for Inclusion” conference, an independent gathering for architects and designers active in the field of Public Interest Design; and teaches in the certificate program in Public Interest Design at Portland State University. The fuzzy boundaries of the field, and the presence of different institutional and individual actors with competing ambitions has fueled multiple claims to (and uncertainty around) its core mission.
8. The design/build program at Yale, was initially developed in response to conditions in Appalachia and the coal mining region of Kentucky. Known as the Yale Building Project, the program was part of a wider reorientation of architecture programs in the U.S. in tandem with community-based anti-poverty measures initiated under Johnson administration’s War on Poverty. (A. Goodman 2015; Hayes 2007)
9. For more on the shift in higher education from a broad-based concern with a nationally oriented liberal humanism, to performance-based determinations of efficiency and social utility, see Bill Readings’ *The University in Ruins* (Readings 1996). The general pattern of public disinvestment and its impact on the structure of higher education is extensively discussed in Christopher Newfield’s *Unmaking the Public University* (2008)

10. For a detailed history design/build programs in U.S.-based architectural education, see Anna Goodman, *Citizen Architects. Ethics, Education and the Construction of a Profession, 1933-2013*. (2015) Design/build has also been examined under the broader category of "service learning," or education based on outreach to often marginalized communities in need of specific amenities that are provided as part of the pedagogical framework. (see Angotti, et al 2011)
11. Notable examples include the Gulf Coast Community Design Studio at the University of Mississippi; the UrbanBuild program at Tulane University School of Architecture—both of which developed in the wake of Hurricane Katrina; and the Detroit Collaborative Design Center, operated by the School of Architecture at the University of Detroit, Mercy, which addresses the impact of economic disinvestment and inequality in Detroit.
12. What is now referred to as "spontaneous intervention" can be connected historically to the post-WW II urban interventions of the Paris-based Situationist International and their strategy of "detournement" or the temporary highjacking and transformation of given meanings in urban space. The strategy was revived in the 1990s by groups such as Multiplicity, who drew explicitly on the language and tactics of the Situationists. (For a full accounting see Awan et al, 2011, 83-215)
13. A prominent example of recent attempts to develop national criteria for evaluating Public Interest Design is the "SEED Evaluator 3.0." This design protocol and online evaluation methodology attempts to define a nationally consistent but locally negotiable set of criteria for "social, economic, environmental design." The evaluative framework is loosely derived from the "three pillars of sustainability" defined by the 1987 Brundtland Report which seeks to reconcile economic development with environmental protection. (SEED 2015)
14. A firm survey by the American Institute of Architects in 2012 revealed that 28% of the positions in architectural firms had been cut in the wake of the 2008 financial crisis, and aggressive management by developers and client groups, combined with a general loss of fee revenue meant that the replacement of lost positions was deferred past 2012. The long stretch of reduced employment prospects created a crisis for recent graduates, and may have helped to explain the parallel explosion in interest in alternative forms of practice, including design activism. (AIA 2012)
15. Two colloquia on design activism, and a symposium exploring methods for teaching design activism in architectural education, were staged

in the Department of Architecture at UC Berkeley between 2011 and 2013, in collaboration with faculty members Margaret Crawford and Jill Stoner.

16. I borrow the phrase “other ways of doing architecture” from the authors of *Spatial Agency: Other Ways of Doing Architecture*. They use the term to avoid using “alternative practice,” which they claim reinstates the dyad of a dominant center and peripheral alternatives that are nevertheless remain determined by their critical relationship to the center. (Awan et al 2012, 26)
17. For an excellent overview of international developments in the field with an emphasis on the Middle East, see Ipek Tureli, “Small Architectures. Walking and Camping in Middle Eastern Cities,” *International Journal of Islamic Architecture*, Vol. 2 No. 1 (2013): 5-38
18. The pathological metaphor of the city as diseased urban body, a consistent feature of urban reform discourse of the early 20th century, became part of the foundational logic of Le Corbusier’s heroic alternative, The Radiant City of 1933, which exemplified the functionalist principles of CIAM’s Athens Charter, published in the same year. The Radiant City was organized as a machine-like body, with a head (where brain-like management functions were to be located), and various urban organs concerned with social production and reproduction. A seamless system of arterial roadways matched another circulatory system below ground containing a Metro and sanitary infrastructure. For a comprehensive discussion CIAM’s history and related planning ideologies, see *The CIAM Discourse on Urbanism. 1926-1960* (Mumford 2000)
19. For a detailed account of the battle between Moses and Jacobs, see Anthony Flint’s 2012 book, *Wrestling with Moses: How Jane Jacobs Took On New York’s Master Builder and Transformed the American City*. (See also Laurence 2008; Page and Mennel 2011; Shubert 2014)
20. In January 2015, a personal drone, too small for the White House security radar to detect, crashed on the South Lawn. (Schmidt and Shear 2015) Even more dramatically, a homemade gyrocopter, built by U.S. Postal Service employee Doug Hughes, flew into the Capitol on April 15, 2015 undetected by NORAD. He was transporting letters he had written to each member of Congress demanding campaign finance reform. (Jaffe 2015)

21. The Chancellor himself expressed reservations about the scale of the original fencing proposal, which was subsequently reduced by moving it closer to the house. (Daily Californian 2015)
22. In his recent book *Why Walls Don't Work: Repairing the US-Mexico Divide*, Michael Dear writes "Walls don't work simply because people are too inventive in circumscribing them." (Dear 2013, 173).
23. Rittel uses the term objectification to describe the techniques that can be employed to overcome the pathologies of design. Through objectification, or the explication of judgments, the participants "are likely to learn more about each others' bases of judgments. This in turn may lead to understanding, if not appreciation, of different value systems..." Other techniques include "forgetting less," "stimulating debate," and "identifying the right issues - the ones where there is the greatest disagreement," all as starting points for the processes of argumentation. (Protzen and Harris 2010, 222)
24. The Community Design Center at UC Berkeley, founded by Faculty Member Claude Stoller, began in 1965 as a program in continuing education in collaboration with the University of California Department of Extension Education. An internship program was added a year later that became the core of the San Francisco Community Design Center, located on Haight Street in San Francisco. The Center, the second of its kind in the country after the one founded at the Pratt Institute, became a prototype for others across the country. (A. Goodman 2015)
25. The question of exactly where and how the autonomy of professional expertise is asserted in the process is explored in Nan Ellin's fieldwork on the Vignes Blanches housing project in the suburban periphery of Paris. Her study revealed that Kroll's decision-making process was ultimately as dominated by expert autonomy as the approach Kroll claims to challenge: "At the Vigne Blanches, Kroll presupposed that 'the people' want to live in rural villages that grew spontaneously and that they want the rich social networks associated with these. But when his actual discussions with them proved otherwise, he insisted nonetheless on the supremacy of his vision." (Ellin 2000, 181)
26. As Comerio argues, "Unfortunately, a large percentage of designs and plans in the early years of community design were never implemented. Advocates could often not identify their constituencies, social research could not reduce the gap between professionals and clients, and the participatory process could not change the system." (234)

27. As Henry Sanoff notes, “the 1964 Economic Opportunity Act’s Community Action Agencies and the Department of Housing and Urban Development’s Office of Neighborhood Development, the economic development role of grassroots organizations and the usefulness of professional advocacy networks, such as the Association for Community Design, were strategically enhanced. CDCs became the staging ground for professionals to represent the interests of disenfranchised community groups . . . Support for design centers came from Community Development Block Grants (CDBG) [from the federal government] and other sources of funding to facilitate volunteerism.” (Sanoff 2006)
28. HCD is central to the operations of the Grameen Foundation, a global nonprofit now based in Washington DC that initially became prominent through its efforts to replicate the microfinancing programs in Bangladesh launched by the Grameen Bank. The Grameen Foundation employs HCD to match its programs in microfinancing, as well entrepreneurial programs in agricultural management and health services, to the needs of the “end users,” who are typically impoverished people in the developing world. Like IDEO, the Grameen Foundation redefines its nonprofit services as “products” which are “designed” through field research to match the perceived needs of the end user, who is represented as a potential entrepreneur. See for example: <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=6mcZKWhjr9o> The Grameen Foundation’s operations are consistent with the larger shift towards development practice based on market principles under global neoliberalism, characterized by Ananya Roy as “poverty capital.” (Roy 2010)
29. In 2015 MASS Design Group, a nonprofit design company based in Cambridge, Massachusetts, announced plans to launch an “African Bauhaus,” initially composed of three Institutes for Human Centered Design with the goal of expanding to other cities across the continent. (Sisson 2015) The idea was presented at a “Solutions Summit” hosted by the United Nations on September 27, 2015, a part of the events surrounding the UN’s adoption of Sustainable Development Goals. (UN Web TV 2015) Cathy Calvin, a well-known advocate of public/private partnerships, former CEO of AOL, and currently the President of the UN Foundation (created with a \$1 billion donation from Ted Turner) coordinated the summit with other UN partners.
30. According to Fisher, the water pump has led to the successful formation of over 170,000 businesses. The pump was initially developed and distributed through a nonprofit company started by Fisher and Nick Moon called Approtec, which was later superseded by the San

Francisco-based nonprofit concerned with social entrepreneurship, Kickstarter. The Money Maker Pump has been embraced as a precedent in social innovation circles, where it represents the potential of unregulated capitalism to transform the lives of the poor; the water it extracts is, according to Fisher, “there for the taking, it isn’t a zero sum game,” a calculus that assumes resources exist to be freely appropriated and converted to private profit. (Russell 2004)

31. Scientists using satellite images and seismic data discovered two aquifers in northern Kenya, containing billions of gallons of water. The discovery was widely reported in the international news media (see for example Kulush 2013). Subsequent reports have focused on the slow pace of extraction (Plaut, 2015)

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SITAC XII

Just Art / Arte Justamente: State of Exception

Mariana Botey

Translated by Sara Solaimani

Introduction by Sara Solaimani

*When Mariana Botey delivered her paper “State of Exception” at Just Art/Arte Justamente, the twelfth International Symposium on Contemporary Art Theory (SITAC), she spoke directly from the gap between art and justice that the panel’s title left open to question. The misunderstanding that art is inherently a space of justice is an important problem for Botey; SITAC XII provided an opportunity to open a critical discourse around it. The scholar has devoted her life’s work to actively grounding and locating art practice, history, theory, and criticism as zones of disturbance that mirror the political struggle of the people against the injustices of the State. Her central argument is that art has no significant claim to justice otherwise. Botey stresses that rooted in a French Revolutionary tradition, the sovereignty art actually enjoys is a state of exception. By the power vested in art, its institutions have historically been “granted the sovereign power”¹ to act in the interest of the elite heads of State. In her recent book, *Zones of Disturbance: Specters of Indigenous Mexico in Modernity*, Botey’s synthesis of theory around Georges Bataille’s *The Accursed Share* to the historiography of a particular moment in Modern Mexico*

defines her thesis. "Sacrifice is the cryptonym of sovereignty."² As art was historically cultivated into a space from which to propagate the messages of the powerful, so too must we scrutinize its sovereignty, or institutional role in bringing artists to justice or in effect, sacrificing them to the law. More importantly, she insists that art must contextualize itself among the other spheres engaged in the fight for justice, namely the sphere of education. Botey invokes as a pertinent contemporary example, the bloody political struggle in late September 2014 that led to the disappearance of forty-three normalists from the Ayotzinapa School during an excursion in Iguala, Mexico. Mexican students and their families ran head-first into this struggle after the disappearance of the forty-three, undeterred by the imminent risk of police brutality and unlawful arrest. Botey's political conviction and pedagogical stance is this: the space of education ought to be recognized as one that confronts injustice actively and constantly. Politically charged art made by and about the Ayotzinapa students is one example of this resistance and solidarity. This year in Oaxaca, Francisco Toledo organized an international poster competition Carteles por Ayotzinapa/Posters for Ayotzinapa. Of over seven hundred submissions, only forty-three were selected. Sebastian Fund's bloodstained poster shows screaming heads of deathly figures rising up from the periphery to haunt the viewer with the students' unrelenting cry for justice and remembrance, even in death (Illustration 1). Amir Khademsharif's forty-three decapitated raised fists represents the students' sacrifice and resolve to challenge their individual fear of the government and law enforcement in the name of a greater struggle (See illustration 2). Botey's message in short is that art, too must give serious consideration to this ongoing struggle if it aspires to be a vehicle for justice.

The play on words "Just Art"³ that the International Symposium on Contemporary Art Theory (SITAC) adopted as the title of its twelfth annual conference, assembled the participants in a somewhat unequal space of reflection. As justice and art have a connection that is intensified in moments of social confrontation and struggle,

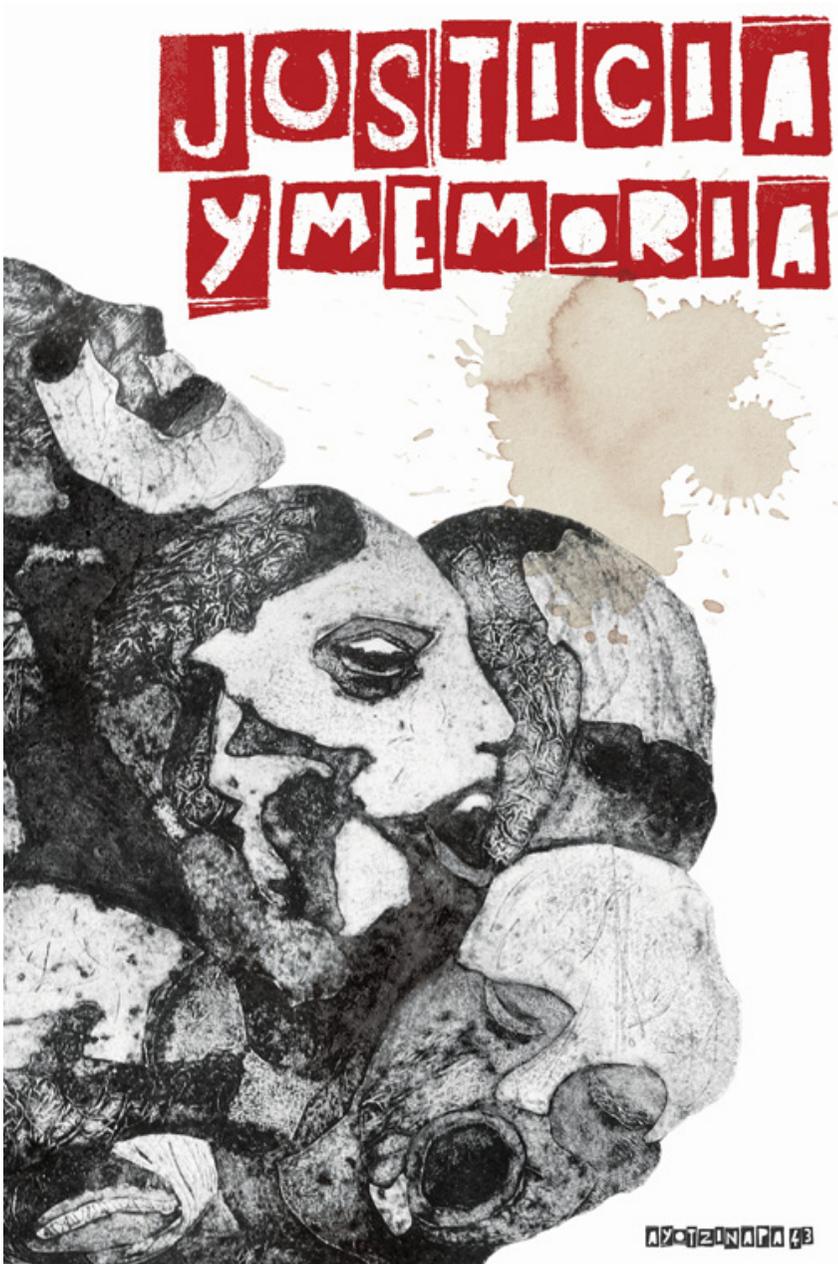


Illustration 1. Sebastian Fund, Carteles por Ayotzinapa international poster competition in Oaxaca, Mexico, digital print, 60×90 cm.



Illustration 2. Amir Khademsharif, Carteles por Ayotzinapa international poster competition in Oaxaca, Mexico, digital print, 60×90 cm.

it is important to differentiate between the two bodies of concepts and notions in their totalities or nexuses. They do not correspond to the same sphere: whether a work of art is just is not a fundamental criteria for its circulation and is by no means an intrinsic demand of its function or definition. Paradoxically, at times art is summoned to speak of justice, and at other times art is brought to justice. Curiously, and by way of creating a primary estrangement in the copula of these two concepts, it is worth a review of the historical archive specific to art history to situate us in the perspective of what in the majority of cases—that is, when art is summoned to appear before justice (the law)—it is to be judged before a court for “obscenity,” for “corrupting the public morale” or for being “subversive and revolutionary.” Here I am thinking of emblematic and obvious cases such as: against Gustave Flaubert for *Madame Bovary* accused of obscenity in January of 1857; against Oscar Wilde, for immorality and indecency [homosexuality] in 1897; and again, symbolically against Oscar Wilde 18 years after his death, this time for perversion and decadence in the staging of *Salomé* by Maud Allan in 1918—the case of a second generalized campaign of vigilance over forms of sexuality that escaped the sphere of reproductive heteronormativity. These emblematic cases range from censorship, to the regulation of the space of sexual freedom to the construction of what is or is not allowed in the field of poetics and representation. A more contemporary Latin American example that comes to mind is the case against Alfredo Marquez, the Peruvian artist of the collective NN, who during the age of persecution of *Senderismo* in 1994, was detained, accused and sentenced for terrorism. I bring together these cases as they offer diverse examples of the possible normative and repressive attitude to the relationship between art and justice. In these specific examples of the confrontation between art and justice, what is at play is an operation via the negative. The juridical statute of art enters the crisis provided that it is constructed as a territory where minority forms of subjectivity occupy a space of definition that in legal terms allows the staging of the dimension in which art is a space destined to explore. From its condition of

a state of exception within the bourgeois order, the possibility of opening the public discourse to the need for radical change in what is politically and socially allowed and not allowed. It is important to bring these historical examples to the discussion, albeit briefly, in part because they return us to concrete cases where justice is the space of juridical normativity that enters in a vigilant or repressive way to control the latent power of the transgression that art entails in its position as an outside to the norm of ideological and hegemonic order and the constitution (making) of subjects, but also to politics and the ordering of power.

In the limited space that this short paper allows, I am determined to advance a field of differentiation between the spheres of art and justice. The immediate problem that calls my attention is the uncritical assumption/adoption of art's idealized role, in which it would appear that art were being summoned to *do* justice. What is the function of art in intensifying and amplifying the channels of order of a civic discourse and politics around an urgent and concrete social call for justice? The assembly of art and justice in a single phrase requires the critical understanding that this call should emphasize the transcendental dimension that the notion of justice implies, and of the historically limited and defined sphere as a field of action and transformation that art possesses as an institution of free expression and ideological critique. The mobilization of these concepts entails a differentiated accent or intensity. Returning to the concrete situation of this moment in México, the international discourse about the potential articulation⁴ of these differentiated spheres calls us to meditate the ethical position of art in the face of the intensification of social violence and profound cultural transformation that the country is undergoing, and that could become a political change—a political change that we hope will transform the deep crevasses of injustice and violence into which the country falls; which threaten a full-blown confrontation between civil society and political power.

I cannot but think immediately of the necessity to discuss the highly urgent and concrete issue of demanding justice for

the parents of the disappeared students of Ayotzinapa and the necessity to open a space of civic discussion about the absolute and radical demand to transform the dominant sphere of political order that has been destroying and diminishing civil rights in a spiral of unlimited violence. We are at the point of fracture of a political order and it necessarily shores us in a call to arms where art, in its dimension as a space of freedom and expression, could enter to supplement or aid cultural and subjective forms from which we imagine and construct a more just civic and political space. The common ground between art and justice, then, or what we properly consider “just art,” would need to play the role of mediator: an instrument that helps mediate the abyss of violence and the scandal that political power has imposed as the only horizon.

Once while abroad in the Palestinian territories, Jacques Derrida said that the notion of justice, as that of love, could not be deconstructed. These are notions or concepts that in their hard nuclei come from an outside that is absolutely and radically *Other*. In this sense, justice is a terminal of theological order, a call for intervention of the truth from a radical outside against the collapse of peace and social order. Art, on the other hand, has a function that corresponds to the process of secularization of the historical project of Modernity. Art can be or not be an instrument of struggle and resistance; it can help or not help a political project of emancipation. I am very concerned that often, and far too often, art is in fact an accomplice to power, the forces of the market, and violence. And in this debate, my intervention is to launch the question: *How easy is it to assume immediately or transparently, that art is on the side of justice—or worse yet—that art in its political function is on the side of the vulnerable, marginalized, and exploited populations?* Art is always a space of freedom, at times it is a space of critique and in this sense an actor in processes of emancipation, but also in many cases art is a space of privilege, and in this sense its connection with power and politics is complicated. This is especially true if the urgent demand is for justice and equality before the law.

Thus, other concepts and notions from outside the fields of art and justice are equally important and critical arms for the transformation of society and the cultural sphere. The space of education and the practice of everyday life can be understood here as necessary mediations between an absolute notions such as justice, and historically and socially defined dimensions such as art. If justice calls art to the podium, if the popular and civil assembly summons creativity, the imagination, and the profound liberating quality that aesthetics embodies in its historical formation, I think that art should respond. But how and from which positioning in a complex relationship where art is also an irresponsible space and often ideologically aligned with power and privilege?

We are in a moment in which the space of fracture of juridical order has entered a spiral of violence that can easily be defined as a state of exception, as a radical fracture in legal and political order. This conjuncture positions us before a call from within a radically Other sphere, to demand justice. To what degree can art function as mediator? To what extent is art a field that is relevant to educational or daily practices? Perhaps given its historical definition as a space of freedom and its critical character—its transgressive character—we could define it as a sort of state of exception to the dominant order and the cultural forms that reproduce normativity and the diverse ideologies of domination. But we should also be alert to the somewhat uneven dimension of the terms in their overlap. Art, in the consciousness of bourgeois modernity, is fundamentally tied up with justice in its definition as critique and negation. Art does not need to be defined as just or unjust; art's space is juridically a space of transgression—and in its strongest cases a form of radical relationship with the truth. The civic function of art is progressive in that it expands the definition of freedom/liberty and intervenes by collapsing the difference between what is and what is not allowed.

The notion of state of exception is important here as it conceptually leads us to rethink the limits of the ordering of power and political violence. The state of exception is a juridico-political term that reminds us of military and police control, of civil war or

war as the explicit content of the neoliberal capitalist order in its conquering of territories, markets, resources and populations; that is, the suppression and collapse of the social contract as such. The state of exception is the failure of the law precisely in its expressive correlation with justice as a transcendental concept. The situation of the historical moment that we are living is transformed into the social effervescence of a civil insurrection. Here art would seem to have a site of convergence⁵ with justice. Considering the connections between the field of relevant discourse around this relationship, I think that the fracture of legal and social order, the systematic abuse of political power, the inequality of rights, and the inconceivable economic gap (that is another space of systematic violence) summons art to the political struggle. Remember that another way to conceive the notion of "state of exception" is as Revolution. Clearly here the genealogy that maps the production of theorizations on the notion of state of exception as an apparatus of analysis and critique returns us to Walter Benjamin and his description of the relationship between divine and mythical violence, and concretely to the relationship between power and violence.⁶ The topics of this assembly merit a collective reflection, but also a critical discussion about the differentiated/distinguishable spaces of politics, art, and the call to justice as a fundamental right of equality and freedom. The concepts do not link up in a superficial way, rather they refer us to the fractures and gaps that allow us to find a collective imagination against the difficult and serious circumstances that the historical moment demands.

The specific topic of *Just Art* brings to the discussion another space of action that would seem absolutely fundamental to understanding the channels of action, mediation, and articulation between the political sphere and the sphere of aesthetics or art. Education as a fundamental right to freedom and equality is a privileged space of social and critical transformation. A pedagogy of liberation returns us immediately to a call that intersects the sphere of creativity with the sphere of critical thinking. Education is a fundamental right of democratic political order against

injustice and violence. Education is a space constantly threatened by economic and political violence, through the normalization of state of exception defined as war, police state or militarization of society that affects daily life and the exercise of freedom that we associate with education as a space of growth and development. Similarly, the juridical fracture that unleashes the confrontation of social actors with the demand for justice, in the specific case of Ayotzinapa, reminds us of the political character of education as a democratic right and a space of transformation and social critique. The recognition of art's relevance to these spheres is necessary and important. Nonetheless we ought to maintain a critical distance as to what degree art can pass for an agent of transformation, or to what degree its function is transparently and directly connected with the state of exception in its complicity with power. I suppose that we could understand it in its ethical and emancipatory role, but only if we redefine and push art in its inflection as an immanent field of transformation of the order of imagination, subjectivity, critique, and truth and live it as a space of expression of freedom.

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SITAC XII's *Just Art/Arte Justamente* proceedings were directed by Carin Kuoni and took place at the Teatro Julio Castillo in the Centro Cultural del Bosque in Mexico City, January 22-24, 2015.

Notes

1. Giorgio Agamben's *State of Exception*: Article 14 of the *Charte* of 1814 granted the sovereign the power to "make the regulations and ordinances necessary for the execution of the laws and the security of the State." Agamben, Giorgio. *State of Exception*. Translated by Kevin Attel. Chicago and London: University of Chicago Press, 2005: 11

2. Botey, Mariana. *Zonas de Disturbio: Espectros del Mexico Indigena en la Modernidad/Zones of Disturbance: Specters of Indigenous Mexico in Modernity*. Mexico City: Siglo Veintiuno (UNAM), 2014:135.
3. As in both *art that is just* and *only art*.
4. Translator's note: Botey's term *articulación* carries a double meaning of lingual articulation and as a juncture, meeting point, or hinge, making the literal translation "Here art would seem to have a place of articulation with justice." Although in American Academic English articulation is recognized as the act of jointing, in this definition it more commonly means written or verbal expression, or a joint of the skeleton. In English, articulation experiences a lingual disjuncture. It means two separate unrelated things, scientifically and linguistically, and therefor is rendered a neutral and sterile term. In Spanish, the articulation between art and justice signifies where the two worlds meet and are expressed through one another in an active jointing.
5. See Translator's Note above.
6. Giorgio Agamben in his essay "State of Exception," analytically isolates and traces the relationship of the political concept of "state of exception" in Carl Schmitt vis-à-vis Benjamin's formulation. In the case of the Marxist philosopher we are before a figure of Revolution in its sense as potentiality that is radically outside of time (an eschatology) and political order (*nomos*). For Schmitt, and in response to Benjamin, the question is that of suppressing the divine character of violence to suspend the law and be able to access a form of power (sovereignty) outside of the legal framework, that is, as a beginning of the order of dictatorship, authoritarianism, and militarization—a fascist conceptualization of power.

Book Review: John Roberts, *Revolutionary Time and the Avant-Garde* (London: Verso, 2015)

Noni Brynjolson

In *Revolutionary Time and the Avant-Garde*, John Roberts defends a concept of the avant-garde rooted in Marxist theory and reworks it in order to take into account shifts in contemporary art towards the conceptual, the collaborative and the everyday. Roberts is Professor of Art and Aesthetics at the University of Wolverhampton, England, and his research focuses mainly on the relationship between art and politics. He has written about the role of the philistine in aesthetic theory, representations of the everyday in art and the role of photography as an oppositional practice. In his most recent book, Roberts focuses his attention on the avant-garde and aligns himself with other critics working to salvage its political potential (the majority of whom are male—an issue worth further analysis).¹ This attempt to refunction the term is something of a daunting task.

As many art historians have pointed out, the mid-twentieth century saw the avant-garde merge with the canon of modern art and become fragmented and weakened through decades of postmodern criticism that pointed out its failure to remain uncoopted, questioned its presence as a heroic master narrative, highlighted a multiplicity of geographically dispersed avant-gardes and shed light on a range of identity-based social signifiers that

claimed equal footing with class disparity. From a contemporary perspective it can be difficult to disentangle the avant-garde from notions of progress and aesthetic autonomy, which clash with recent shifts towards cultural democratization that promote the Beuysian idea that 'everyone is an artist.' In addition, most contemporary artists would not use 'avant-garde' to describe their work without a sense of irony. The term exists in our collective mindset mainly as an art historical concept, evoking Courbet's self-identification as a member of the working classes, the radical abstraction of Malevich or the communal practices of Die Brücke.

The 1960s saw the emergence of the neo-avant-garde, in which the energy of unrealized utopian political aspirations was absorbed by poststructural theory. In a 2010 essay, Peter Bürger responded to criticism of his book *Theory of the Avant-Garde* (1984). Reflecting on the period in which it was written, he described a sense of failure associated with the aftermath of May 1968 and wrote about the transfer of practice into theory, which for him at the time "seemed to be the key that could keep open the door to the future that I imagined...as a finally livable world."² Our contemporary understanding of the avant-garde has its roots in the utopianism of events such as the Paris Commune, Russian Revolution and May 1968. These events are important historical markers for recent theorists of aesthetic autonomy, for whom the concept is a defense against the constant threat of co-optation posed by neoliberal culture.

These are the problems that the avant-garde must face today in order to be refunctioned for contemporary art and aesthetics. Roberts uses his adept command of critical theory to present a nuanced account of the current relationship between art and politics, revolving around the concepts of aesthetic autonomy and negation. He argues that an updated avant-garde must stand in advance of bourgeois culture, meaning and values—it must be an art "in advance of capitalism."³ This argument highlights some of the main features of the historic avant-garde, including the notion that art possesses a unique potential premised on critical

distance from everyday life. The gap or space that is implied here also emphasizes the experimental nature of the avant-garde and its ability to test out new ideas in a zone free from compromise and bias. 'In advance' implies distance as well as externality, two characteristics that enable avant-garde artists to supposedly see past the confines of everyday life under capitalism, expose the untruths of neoliberalism and create revolutionary change. The idea that art possesses an innate criticality that is capable of posing a challenge to the capitalist domination of society is worth defending. But it is also worth thinking through the extent to which, in laying the groundwork for such a challenge, Roberts and other current theorists of the avant-garde structure their arguments around autonomy and negation, drawn primarily from the critical theory of Adorno and other Frankfurt School theorists.

Roberts' understanding of political transformation is premised on Hegel's concept of absolute negation. For Roberts, any concept of the avant-garde that lacks or abuses this principle will be incapable of developing an authentic sense of aesthetic autonomy, thereby foreclosing a full understanding of the dialectical relationship between art and life. He uses the terms 'first negation' and 'second negation' to refer to this process. First negation refers to art's autopoiesis, which involves the way in which it becomes marked off from everyday life and takes on a determinate commodity form that can be transmitted and reproduced. Following this, Roberts writes that second negation involves "the leap to freedom through the negation of the negation that Hegel understood as the force of liberation immanent to human subjectivity and to human praxis and which he termed Absolute negativity, and that is identifiable here with revolutionary cultural praxis (absolute negation)."⁴ Roberts points to Marx's adaption of Hegelian negation, in which the struggle of workers directs the dialectical process and opens up a new relationship between theory and practice. He offers the examples of Russian Constructivism and 1960s conceptual art as moments when first and second negation occurred and autopoiesis

merged with political resistance in the name of the revolutionary transformation of society.

It is this second negation, and its emergence in forms of contemporary art, that leads Roberts to think a refunctioned avant-garde might be possible, since it involves a dialectical interplay between art and the social. However, he cautions that “Hegel’s impatient servants of second negation”⁵ risk skipping the crucial step of first negation, thereby dissolving art into the social without a fully defined sense of autonomy. He argues that the avant-garde must be viewed as a ‘suspensive’ category, which means that “any identification of it with a premature escape into politics and instrumental reason—irrespective of art’s alignment with political praxis, or with the ‘end of art’, or with art’s embrace of non-artistic practices and disciplines)—dissolves its non-identitary functions and ambitions.”⁶ The view of political or activist art as premature is often repeated by contemporary theorists of the avant-garde who rely on concepts of Hegelian negation, in which theory remains a privileged site of experimentation while practice is construed as impatient or misguided.

Adorno’s *Aesthetic Theory* (1970) is a key reference point for Roberts’ notion of a refunctioned avant-garde. This must necessarily take into account the current field of ‘art after art in the expanded field,’ as Roberts refers to it—a terrain that includes a range of post-conceptual art practices such as relational and digital art. Adorno wrote *Aesthetic Theory* after experiencing fascism in Europe and witnessing the totalitarian aftermath of the Russian Revolution. He was critical of the German state during its reconstruction after the Second World War, and viewed art as a realm that must always remain separate from a totally administered society. For Adorno, art that created actual social change in the world risked complicity with the instrumentalizing powers of growing state bureaucracies. He argued that a strong defense of aesthetic autonomy was the only way to preserve art’s political powers of negation. Modern art must exist solely for itself and must resist bourgeois cravings for “a sort of use-value modeled on sensual pleasure.”⁷ Viewing the modern

world as dominated by utility, he believed that the utopian function of art should be to resist the objectification, commodification and alienation associated with capitalist reproduction.

Adorno comes up repeatedly in *Revolutionary Time and the Avant-Garde*, and in other books by Roberts as well. In 2002, Roberts and Dave Beech wrote several essays on the philistine that were collected and published, along with a series of responses, in a book called *The Philistine Controversy*.⁸ In it, they argued that the philistine does not possess an innate culture of his or her own, but instead, is a position defined through class division and exclusion from the realm of fine art. They also wrote about the ways in which a further theorization of philistine modes of attention could play a role in unsettling the boundaries of traditional aesthetic discourse and potentially create a more permeable border between art and non-art.

Beech and Roberts' discussion of the philistine was one of many debates that would follow over the next decade relating to cultural democratization and deskilling in art. Greg Sholette has written about this as well and uses the term 'dark matter' to refer to activist art and tactical media practices that fly under the radar of the official art world.⁹ Referencing Sholette's book, Roberts discusses art's 'second economy' in a similar light and looks at its relationship with the avant-garde. The second economy of the art world is made up of individuals and groups who tend to work outside mainstream channels of artistic production and exchange: artists who are unemployed or underemployed, amateurs, hobbyists and art students, for example. As Roberts points out, it is the space where the majority of artists now labor. He argues that in the face of artistic movements towards the everyday, the social and the popular, it is more important than ever for art to maintain and defend a sense of its own autonomy and that this involves a negation of the values of profit and status that define the first economy (characterized by salesrooms, auction houses, museums and large public galleries, according to Roberts). It is important to Roberts that art is understood as a distinct form of labor set apart from the practices it represents

or comments upon and as not subject to the alienating, reifying tendencies of work under capitalism. While art might comment on design, fashion or theory, for example, it must maintain critical distance in order to resist morphing into those disciplines. In other words, for Roberts, art must operate within the everyday but maintain its outsider status “in order for autonomy to do its work of revision, extraction, subjection, subtraction, negation, etc.”¹⁰

Roberts goes into detail in discussing two projects that he views as demonstrating aspects of a refunctioned avant-garde: the British conceptual group Art & Language, active during the 1960s and 70s, and the Russian group *Chto Delat*, formed in the early 2000s (*Chto Delat?* was the title of Lenin’s 1902 text advocating for a professional revolutionary class that would overthrow the Russian monarchy). Roberts views Art & Language as coming out of a moment in Britain when post-minimalism was shifting towards conceptual art and an autonomous zone of art practice was understood as a defense against the bourgeois values associated with American modernism. This was catalyzed by a growing awareness of Soviet and European avant-gardes that had been obscured or omitted from art history up to that point and that offered inspiration and legitimation. Roberts views this as a moment in which the first negation of autopoiesis—form becoming autonomous—moves outwards to act in and upon the world. As in the historic avant-garde, this is a moment that he views as possessing the potential to reinvigorate art practice and produce social transformation.

This is a fascinating point, but the actual social transformation produced by the group is unclear here. Instead, it seems that its significance lies mainly in the lineage of art theory and is more akin to commentary or investigation than action. Like much conceptual art, the work of Art & Language was focused on questioning the boundaries of art, highlighting power structures in the art world and undermining modernist or bourgeois notions of subjectivity and authorship. For Roberts, the group demonstrates the ‘suppression of the beholder’ tactic common within conceptual art, as well as a new conception of collective intellect built around the scriptovisual,

which “defines the possibility of a new sociality for art not on the basis of a programme of social intervention, but on the basis of extending the work of reception as a theoretical dialogue. In this the scriptovisual possesses a negating force: it sets out to turn away those who are not willing to engage in the given terms of the theoretical exchange.”¹¹ He discusses Art & Language’s commitment to collaboration and collective intellect as a means of restructuring modernist artistic subjectivity, but with the caveat that their practice was premised on theory as allegory. Similarly to the historic avant-garde, viewers needed to possess a certain level of artistic awareness or aesthetic education in order to fully comprehend or participate in the work.

Analyzing Art & Language in Britain allows Roberts to formulate a vision of the avant-garde in relation to conceptual art of the 1960s, in which modern artistic subjectivity, collaborative practices and political commitments in art were being reworked. Chto Delat offers a more contemporary example—the collective of artists and writers is based in Moscow and St. Petersburg and formed in 2003 in the context of the increasing privatization of the Russian economy. Roberts considers their work to be influenced by relational art in France but sees it as shifting away from the neo-avant-garde associated with Bourriaud and moving towards a revolutionary mode rooted in the historic Soviet avant-garde. Drawing from Hal Foster’s critique of Bürger in *Return of the Real* (1996),¹² Roberts refers to their practice as exemplifying a ‘belatedness,’ which involves reworking an original idea in a different time and context. One of the projects organized by the group is a collectively written newspaper, *Newspaper of the Engaged Platform, Chto Delat/What is to be Done?*. They aim to take up the unfinished project of the historic avant-garde, much of which has passed into the realm of a depoliticized national culture. In addition to the printed newspaper, their work has included videos, installations and performative interventions in public spaces, influenced by the practices of Bertolt Brecht and Augusto Boal. Roberts emphasizes that their work draws on the eroded, yet still embedded histories of the Russian avant-

garde and describes its potential to “expose the impostures and political weaknesses of global neoliberal power.”¹³ He discusses the staged nature of their performances and interventions, which demonstrate “a key aspect of what they do not want the political agency of the avant-garde to be seen to be doing: to embed itself completely in the heteronomous particulars of the everyday as form of post-autonomous, instrumentalized practice.”¹⁴ Roberts does not include much detail on specific performances or discuss the audience reception of Chto Delat’s work, nor does he consider what they might have produced in terms of actual social transformation. Instead, the performative act is valued on its own as a kind of revolutionary utterance. He views their work as illustrative of the ‘suspensive’ avant-garde, which possesses the quality “of being both in the world and athwart it”¹⁵ and is therefore able to avoid the “instrumental-activist shift”¹⁶ associated with post-relational aesthetics, including various forms of social practice.



Illustration 1. “Illegal Migrant,” performance by Chto delat/What is to be done?, on top of the installation “Offshore/Onshore” by Zoro Feigel from De Service Garage (Amsterdam, NL), 2009. Subvision Art Festival, Hamburg, Germany. Photo: Jennifer Smailes.

The examples provided by Roberts point to the importance of considering new theories of the avant-garde in relation to socially engaged art, much of which might be defined as ‘instrumental-activism’ in Roberts’ account. Many words have been exchanged on the benefits and/or pitfalls of referring to social practice as art. Roberts’ position seems to be that without a well defined sense of aesthetic autonomy, such work is fated to disintegrate into life: it becomes part of the indefensible zone of social welfare work associated with non-profits, benefits creative entrepreneurs or generally works alongside rather than in advance of capital. Greg Sholette has commented on the problem of avant-garde collapse as well, writing that “if art has finally merged with life as the early 20th Century avant-garde once enthusiastically anticipated, it has done so not at a moment of triumphant communal utopia, but at a time when life, at least for the 99.1%, sucks.”¹⁷ What Roberts and Sholette make clear is that art’s dissolution into life and the social is not an inherently political gesture—hence, Roberts’ argument that an updated avant-garde must stand in advance of capitalism. But one problem with this position is that many ‘heteronomous’ practices move imperceptibly both in and out of the spheres of art, life and the social, to the degree that ontological boundaries have become blurred beyond recognition. This poses a problem for a good deal of current art theory devoted to defending the political potential of the avant-garde, in which critics focus on weeding out vulgar, non-art or activist art practices that are seen as compromised and corrupted as soon as they leave the protected world of aesthetic autonomy.

Hegel’s writing stressed the conflict and antagonism at the heart of subjectivity and our relationships with others. This accounts for some of the bias towards negation present within contemporary critical theory, including Roberts’ defense of the avant-garde and its reliance upon a model of oppositional autonomy. In this account, the task for art is to undo meaning and deconstruct power, not to test out or practice models of social change that might alleviate social conditions—thereby becoming complicit with capital. In *Aesthetic*

Theory, Adorno laid out a vision of aesthetic autonomy that both strengthened art as a form of critical theory and defanged it as a form of political practice. In drawing upon these sources, Roberts theorizes a refunctioned avant-garde that stands in advance of capitalism but lacks the ability to act in the present moment.

In contrast, Stephen Wright argues in *Toward a Lexicon of Usership* (2013) that “the price to pay for autonomy [is] the invisible parentheses that bracket art off from being taken seriously as a proposition having consequences beyond the aesthetic realm.”¹⁸ Wright also envisions a refunctioning of the current theoretical frameworks that structure contemporary art, but he takes a different approach from Roberts. Instead of a model of autonomy premised on negation, he sees the possibility for a different understanding of art that shifts the focus away from ontological boundaries and towards attention and activation, in part through the use of Duchamp’s notion of “art coefficients”: the recognition that “art is not a set of objects or events, distinct from the larger set of objects and events that are not art, but rather a degree of intensity liable to be present in any number of things indeed, in any number of symbolic configurations, activities or passivities.”¹⁹ While Wright is not necessarily writing about art in advance of capitalism, his discussion of coefficients offers an alternative to understanding the political nature of art as tied to autonomy. Instead, he emphasizes the actual moments in which ideas or forms are taken up by a group of ‘users’ and become meaningful. The concept of ‘coefficients’ also allows a rethinking of Roberts’ focus on dissolution; instead of seeing art as merging seamlessly with life in social practice-type work, the value of describing such projects as art is in the potential to frame a particular set of issues through varying intensities of attention and activation and to test out different practicable models of sociability and activism.

Revolutionary Time and the Avant-Garde is an important read for those interested in the critical potential of contemporary art, and in current debates about the relationship between art and politics. The critical potential of art—and its ability to interpret and envision

the world differently—is worth defending, and Roberts’ book is a passionate defense of these principles, laid out in impeccable detail and with a great amount of theoretical complexity and inventiveness. In drawing from Hegel and Adorno, he outlines several of the critical frameworks that could be described as stumbling blocks in current theories of socially engaged art. In doing so, he offers readers a chance to think through the roles that negation and autonomy might play in refunctioning the avant-garde and contributing to a shared project of social transformation.

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Notes

1. A partial list of critics who have recently written about the avant-garde includes Marc James Léger, Gene Ray, Gerald Raunig, Mikkel Bolt Rasmussen, Brian Holmes, Greg Sholette and Borys Groys. Léger has edited several books that reconsider the avant-garde; see *Brave New Avant-Garde* (London: Zero Books, 2012) and *The Idea of the Avant Garde: And What It Means Today* (Manchester: Manchester University Press, 2014).
2. Peter Bürger, “Avant-Garde and Neo-Avant-Garde: An Attempt to Answer Certain Critics of Theory of the Avant-Garde,” *New Literary History* 2010 (41): 698.
3. John Roberts, *Revolutionary Time and the Avant-Garde* (London: Verso, 2015), 31.
4. *Ibid.*, 59.
5. *Ibid.*, 61.
6. *Ibid.*, 15.
7. Adorno, *Aesthetic Theory* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1997), 14.
8. Dave Beech and John Roberts, *The Philistine Controversy* (London: Verso, 2002).

9. Greg Sholette, *Dark Matter: Art and Politics in the Age of Enterprise Culture* (London: Pluto Press, 2011).
10. Ibid., 110.
11. Ibid., 152.
12. Hal Foster, *Return of the Real: Art and Theory at the End of the Century* (Cambridge, Mass.: MIT Press, 1996).
13. Roberts, 176.
14. Ibid., 177.
15. Ibid., 178.
16. Ibid., 178.
17. Greg Sholette, "Delirium and Resistance after the Social Turn," *FIELD: A Journal of Socially Engaged Art Criticism*, Spring 2015.
18. Stephen Wright, *Toward a Lexicon of Usership* (Eindhoven: Van Abbemuseum, 2013), 12.
19. Ibid., 13.

Socially engaged practices within La 12 Bienal de La Habana, May-June, 2015

Paloma Checa-Gismero

Between May 22nd and June 22nd, 2015, the 12th edition of the Bienal de La Habana was open to the public in the Cuban capital. Over seventy-five venues hosted a number of projects fitting under the umbrella of the biennial's title: Between Idea and Experience. The purpose, to highlight processes of urban transformation active in Havana, as well as to defend the space for socially aware ethics within the discourses of global contemporary art. The experience, a permanent travelling through the city, from venue to venue, between a number of different urban sites, changing frameworks and reminding oneself that regardless of how well constructed the architecture of an art biennial is, it always happens in a place that was already there.

Entering the Casa de las Américas, a friendly receptionist walks you up to the second floor, where you're welcomed by a gallery assistant eager to discuss with you the details of Luis Camnitzer's multiple Exercises, instances of his contribution to this year's Bienal de La Habana, a workshop on the basis of conceptual art. On view, around sixty ephemera items produced by workshop attendees at the Bienal's inaugural day, May 22nd, 2015. This time Camnitzer, who has been exploring art's pedagogical value for a long time and has been a permanent presence through multiple iterations of the



Image 1. Echando lápiz, a drawing workshop in the community of Casablanca. Credits: Graciela Duarte, Manuel Santana.

Bienal de La Habana, seems to defend a more hands-on approach to learning about art through its practice. For instance, in his show, Exercise #3 reads: "Choose any word and add to it the suffix 'ism'. In not more than a page, write a manifesto stating the goals and purposes of that philosophical-aesthetic movement. Design a flyer for the text and assure proper distribution of this manifesto so as to gather the biggest amount of followers possible, both creators and consumers."

However, this emphasis in practice as source of knowledge is not exclusive to Camnitzer's work. In its 12th edition, the Bienal's title was "Between Idea and Experience". Accordingly, its catalog essays drew an exhibition's anchoring terminology that pointed to the value of community relations as grounding loci for art processes: the plural first person 'we', its role as both art's makers and audiences, the importance of social movements and neighborhood

relations in art making, global margins and non-Western imagined worlds, transversality, ethics, and inter-disciplinarity. But the ideas put forward by biennial curators as parameters of action for the exhibition do not necessarily translate in form and content to all of the artworks displayed in this year's iteration. La Biental de La Habana featured a mixture of white cube like exhibitions and a variety of proposals that, unrelated to the constrictions of a gallery space, sought to direct visitors' attention to the lives of Havaneros and the multiple instances of transformation that the Cuban capital is undertaking in the present.

The ideas elaborated in the catalog are more evidently present in the multiple community based projects curated for this year's edition spreading through different areas of the Cuban capital. Initially part of the Biental's program, the Museo Orgánico Romerillo opened in the neighborhood of Romerillo, West of Vedado. In addition to its central venue, Museo Orgánico Romerillo includes family houses, parks, bus stops, streets, walls, and multiple community places, and turns them into exhibition spaces for works by local artists working in different types of media. Slowly adopting the identity of a neighborhood center, since its opening on May 2015 this project has gathered media attention, thus achieving a remarkable notoriety in the Cuban capital. Led by well-known artist Kcho, the museum engages a sizable number of neighbors and local cultural producers into the celebration of workshops, community dinners, music performances, and the reception of national and foreign academics as well political figures such as Cuban President Raúl Castro. Museo Orgánico Romerillo is an interesting case of socially engaged art project that, despite breeding from an institutional critique tradition, does not position itself in opposition to the sources of political power, but accommodates its action in a decades long tradition of state-sponsored community centers.

Another of the works that inserted itself in the city's mesh was Echantando lápiz, an 8 years long project by Colombian artists Graciela Duarte and Manuel Santana that brought its last iteration to Havana. Hosted in a local family house, Echantando lápiz consisted of a month-

long series of drawing workshops, gathering community members and artists to wander the streets exploring the city's autochthonous vegetation. These conversation based events forged community relations and the recognition of neighbors' knowledge about the properties of wild urban plants in particular and, more broadly, their immediate citiscape. Echando lápiz also shared a venue with Puno MoCA, a reconsideration of what constitutes a museum, by Peruvian born-Florida based César Cornejo. Built on a small scale exchange economy of its own, Puno MoCA employed community members into performing several museum duties: remodeling rooms in a family house to be turned into exhibition spaces, working as gallery assistants, and building large-scale sculptural interventions. How can a state sponsored art biennial enter the private space of a family house? These two works reflect on this conundrum during the duration of the Bienal. Also in the district of Casablanca, Venezuelan architecture collective Colectivo Pico Studio moved temporarily to an empty street lot for their project Acupuntura urbana, a series of conversations on low-tech collaborative architectural actions, involving specialized and non-specialized local agents into the picturing of imagined solutions to some of the city's most urgent urban problems.

As part of the exhibition *Entre, dentro, fuera / Between, inside, outside*, Mexican artist Pedro Lasch held a workshop on the nature of biennials. Linked to his work *Islas de tragedia y fantasía*, a commentary on art's lasting critical potential in the format of banners, a three day-long workshop problematized the differences between natural and cultural disasters, pointing to a discussion on the multiple discursive frameworks that overlap in an art biennial. Participants in the workshop dealt with issues of collective memory, social justice, pressing urban needs, collective and individual desires, and the representation of tragedy. Structuring conversation over round tables and small discussion groups, the artist orchestrated a dialogue involving city planners, biennial visitors, school teachers, art students, local and world-known artists, biennial curators, neighbors, and culture officials. At the end of this

workshop its venue was opened to be programmed by workshop participants. The rich and fruitful nature of the initial discussion was however tamed when exhibition purposes required its concretion in objects and images, an alteration of discourse that is indicative of the separation between public and private realms of speech operating in Cuban society.

Luis Camnitzer had long ago incorporated in his practice the programmatic character of art that bred out from the upheaval of the first and second avant-gardes. This feature became as well integrated into the biennial as form, and some of these big exhibitions have acquired an unquestionable experimental character, as do the workshops led by the Uruguayan conceptual artist, Colombians Graciela Duarte and Manuel Santana of Echando lápiz, the team behind Museo Orgánico Romerillo, and Pedro Lasch's workshop. All of these pieces push back on the Bienal de La Habana's declared attempt to showcase the reality of a city. They propose new forms for this portrayal, forms that may only be successful during the duration of the biennial. They underline the necessity of learning through making and chatting. They speak of exceptional utopian instances of a global contemporary art world pursuing its own ethical reform, and in so doing they engage with a city, its buildings, and its people.

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