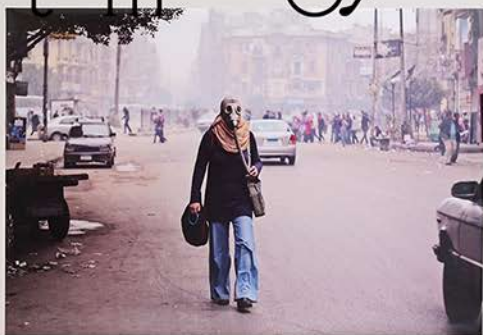


# riotolls epistemology



Imaginary Power, Art, and Insurrection

Richard Gilman-Opalsky &  
Stephen Shukaitis

Riots. Revolts. Revolutions. All flashing moments which throw the world – and our relationship with it – into question. For centuries people have pinned their hopes on radical political change, on turning worlds upside down. But all too often the ever-renewed dream of changing the world for the better has ended either in failure or has been crushed.

*Riotous Epistemology* explores the significance of taking seriously the intellect of revolt, uprising as thinking, art as upheaval, and other forms of philosophy from below. To theorize revolt and subversive art practices as philosophy from below, it is necessary to refute conventional understandings of art and philosophy.

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Richard Gilman-Opalsky & Stevphen Shukaitis



**Riotous Epistemology. Imaginary Power, Art, and Insurrection**

Richard Gilman-Opalsky & Stephen Shukaitis

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## Images

#WorldsUpsideDown installation shots courtesy of Firstsite appear on the title page and page 1.

Flyers produced during #WorldsUpsideDown appear on pages 9, 15, 20, 24, 30, 34, 39, 43, 46, 51, 55, 58, and 72.

Work from Mosa'ab Elshamy appears on the title page and page 76.

Work from David Mabb appears on the title page and page 63.

Posters from the Justseeds' "Celebrate People's History" Poster Series appear on pages 18–19.







# introduction

## A Riotous Epistemology

Richard Gilman-Opalsky

I WANT TO INTRODUCE YOU TO A TEXT ON NON-TEXTUALITY, TO INTRODUCE the text of a non-textual event. This book is a text of image, speech, and movement. What have we done? We have rendered a collaboration as a text, but it is a collaboration that aims to move both beyond and against text. Therefore, what follows is to some extent a betrayal.

Wait! Don't go away. Let me clarify the confusion of these opening lines.

The text of this book is an edited transcription of a two-day seminar offered by me, Richard Gilman-Opalsky, and my dear friend, colleague, comrade, and publisher, Stephen Shukaitis.<sup>1</sup> The seminar took place at Firstsite, an art, performance, and cultural center in Colchester, Essex, UK in March 2017. We sat in an exhibition called “#WorldsUpsideDown” organized by Stephen and were surrounded by photographs, paintings, Xerox posters (and the Xerox machine they were made on), and other visual art – all of which variously aimed to capture and convey the present and past of global revolt.

The seminar occurred shortly after the publication of my *Specters of Revolt* and Stephen's *The Composition of Movements to Come*.<sup>2</sup> Those two books provided the basic streams of thought that would gather in a pool of conversation. But, we also conversed in loose relation to an idea I proposed early in the planning stages for this event on the subject of “riotous epistemology.”

By “riotous epistemology” I meant the exploration of the kinds of “knowledge” and “knowledge production” carried out in unconventional practices and activities, in atypical locations of criticism and human understanding, and in the non-textual spaces in which expressions of disaffection and hope can be communicated in disruptive and moving ways. In my work, an atypical epistemology finds knowledge and knowledge production in riot, revolt, and a diversity of local and global uprisings. In Stephen's work, such locations are found in an array of visual-sonic expressions and art experiments, as well as in diverse prefigurative practices in alter-relationship.

Despite many differences (and some disagreements), the two of us are interested in possible and desirable ways of knowing, and we both seek to interrogate what constitutes that which is normally recognized and accepted as knowledge. We are also interested in thinking about who possesses and uses their creative powers to produce and circulate knowledge, and in this, we are both especially drawn to the subversive. All of this comes

through clearly in the present book, which should appeal (we hope) to anyone interested in art, social upheaval, and creative deployments of theory. Together, we consider forms of knowledge expressed in radical movements, riot, and revolt, and in what Stephen calls “the art of the undercommons.”

Fifty years ago, in conversation with Gilles Deleuze, Michel Foucault commented on the uprisings of May 1968:

In the most recent upheaval, the intellectual discovered that the masses no longer need him to gain knowledge: they know perfectly well, without illusion; they know far better than he and they are certainly capable of expressing themselves... In this sense theory does not express, translate, or serve to apply practice: it is practice.<sup>3</sup>

In certain moments, everyday people (workers, students, the unemployed, etc.) rise up and teach the teachers (if the latter will listen), revealing that they know more about themselves and their reality than those intellectuals who would translate and express that reality into words. There are moments when everyday people both produce and demonstrate their knowledge in the upheaval. This is a moment when theory is practiced, or rather, when the theoretical field of analyzing social crises is undertaken directly not in writing things, but in breaking things – in the case of 1968, breaking rules and laws, windows and cars, and breaking with the expected behaviors of the usual order of everyday life.

In my book, *Specters of Revolt*, I explore what it means to take seriously the intellect of revolt, uprising as thinking, upheaval as criticism, and other forms of philosophy from below. To theorize revolt as philosophy from below, I claim that we must refute the conventional vilification of insurrection as irrational and violent. And, I apply that refutation to a consideration of the communicative content of recent revolts and global uprisings.

Stephen’s *The Composition of Movements to Come* is not about revolt in the sense defined in *Specters of Revolt*. But Stephen looks at radical art-politics and creative practice in much the same way that I look upon revolt. We both have a shared interest in different ways of doing, or in what John Holloway calls “other-doing.”<sup>4</sup> Other-doing includes different ways of thinking and of imagining other worlds. Both of our books confront certain impasses in the revolutionary trajectories of past radicalisms,

in variously anarchist, Marxist, and autonomist contexts. We both want to think about “revolutionary alternatives to revolution,” as I call them in *Spectacular Capitalism*,<sup>5</sup> and we both look for politics by other means than the conventionally political, looking for new forms of action large and small.

In *The Composition of Movements to Come*, Stephen discusses avant-garde practices, art activism, and creative cultural production. He is interested in what he calls “art activism against art.” You could say that my own interest is politics against politics, which is to say political activities that distinguish themselves from the most recognizable and conventional modes of politics.

I think what we both want to convey is a certain “counter-professionalization.” We know there are professional artists and professional politicians, we know there are conventional forms of established art and politics that are “respectable,” well-funded, officially accredited. But we are more interested in the art and politics of other-doing, and while we try to draw art and politics together, we also try to draw certain conclusions about their fragmentary and cumulative powers.

In *The Composition of Movements to Come*, Stephen asks: “How do avant-garde practices shift what is said, and how it can be said?”<sup>6</sup> In *Specters of Revolt*, I ask: “What is the critical content, at least paradigmatically, that the qualitatively different logic of revolt poses to the logic of the established order?”<sup>7</sup> So, each of us on our own wants to know how to say different things in different ways, and we are interested in logics oppositional to the logic of the existing order of life. Avant-garde practices and social upheaval challenge epistemological assumptions about what knowledgeable speech looks like because they are full of knowing, and thinking, and criticizing, and imagining, and yet they do not look anything like “knowledgeable speech.”

But in the seminar, there is also a reckoning with the desperation and smallness of the “other-arts” and “under-politics” we pursue. We are appropriately cynical (decidedly “postmodern”) about subjects like total revolution. The conventional is quotidian, which means that what we want to challenge is everywhere every day, while avant-garde practices and revolts only challenge the existing reality in the form of fleeting interruptions and hiatuses. To put it simply, sometimes we work from the margins not because we want to, but because the center is occupied (colonized) by other things. One answer to the question “what is to be done?” is “only so much.”

Maybe this is the reason why we are attracted to the Situationist praxis of disruption and interruption, of interrupting the logic and operations of power. The art of the undercommons and insurrections in the world are not even close to capable of seizing and transforming the world in any grand and lasting way. Often, the activities that Stephen and I discuss don't even interrupt, let alone transform, so interruption remains a kind of aspiration. And we know that longing to interrupt normal life is rather far from the revolutionary transformation of life. One could say that we are more interested in the possible and desirable *preludes* to new revolutionary forms than we are in any revivification of the classical revolutionary idea.

From a political point of view, to be in such a position is not nothing-but-bad-news. It is more than a little bit desperate, yes, but not entirely sad. We do not stand on the same trembling ground as the 1871 Paris communards, as Rosa Luxemburg or Nestor Makhno in their lives and times, or even the FLN in Algeria at a high point in the 1950s, or the Zapatistas on the eve of NAFTA, where it must have seemed and felt like it was time to prepare for a total change – a life-changing transition to a new world. That is not our present sensibility. But that sensibility never meant success anyway, and in each case where the ground shook with liberatory hope there was a devastating realization and disillusionment waiting right around the bend. The fact is that there is some joy and hope in times that demand the creative and imaginative production of new thinking about desirable forms of life, artistic experiments and rebellious surprises. This can be a time of improvisation and collaboration, much like the example we present in this book.

We want to communicate and collaborate, but not to and with everyone or anyone. Both Stephen and I are interested in the incomprehensibility of the undercommons of art and revolt, an incomprehensibility born of the limited understanding of capitalism and its impoverished points of view. Subversive art and global uprisings *are* comprehensible as, for example, practices of radical criticism, even while our enemies declare them incomprehensible. Perhaps it is necessary to be incomprehensible in the worlds of professional and capitalist art and politics. We should not try to make too much sense in those worlds. Let the professional artists and politicians find us confusing, or better, totally incomprehensible. If the sense and sensibility of capital is what we oppose, let us become capital's *non-sense*, its opposite sensibility.

At the end of *The Composition of Movements to Come*, Stevphen recalls an interesting discussion he had with Konrad Becker about strategy. Stevphen tells us that Becker defined strategy as something akin to wisdom.<sup>8</sup> In their new book, *Assembly*, Michael Hardt and Antonio Negri oppose the old notion of strategy as wisdom, arguing that this notion is responsible for vindications of the wise leader, the military general, and the head of state, all of whom are given the role of long-term envisioning while the rank-and-file soldier and everyday person can only be tactical in the face of immediate obstacles. Hardt and Negri argue that this old “centaur” notion of wisdom as the strategic top half of the beast needs to be overturned, making everyday people and non-professionals into the new strategists.<sup>9</sup> They call for something like strategy from below. Stevphen and I have long been interested in strategy from below. In this book, we think specifically about the strategic wisdom embodied and reflected in subversive art practices and revolt.

We did not originally plan for this seminar to be turned into a book. However, several things transpired in the seminar that led us to think that a book was a good idea. Aside from the fact that we had a recording and transcription of the seminar, we also prepared an excerpt from one of the days for publication in a scholarly journal. We were both very pleased with the content and readability of the text. Reviewing the seminar, some other things also became clear.

First, the seminar generated a new discourse on the diverse micro- and macro-political concerns of our work, synthesizing the aesthetic dimensions of art with the political activity of revolt. This led to meditations on the problems of scale, as we attempted to think through the largeness of little things and the desperate inadequacy of big things. In the process, the seminar became an inquiry into possibility and power that do not appear in either of our single-authored books. Second, the conversational format and subsequent feeling of this “textified” event allows for an immediate access to the ideas and arguments, which may be more enjoyable than reading single-authored monographs full of theory written in a more academic style. I sometimes tell students who want to read Jacques Derrida that it may be best to begin with the interviews. Stevphen interviews lots of people. He interviews musicians, and artists, and activists. I read lots of interviews. We like the conversational format. Reading interviews and transcripts of conversations is a more dialogical and dialectical experience than reading the typical monograph. Also, in conversational settings, authors are compelled

to be more concise and clear than they may be in their writing, and if they are not, good follow-up questioning won't let them obscure things. But this book is even friendlier to the reader than a book of one scholar interviewing another because this is an open seminar that includes conversation with non-academic participants. Finally, because this book is full of images from the actual exhibition, we'd like it to bring more people to that seminar in 2017, readers who may have liked to be there but did not or could not come.

Indeed, we have given the seminar this new form so that you may go back in time to join the discussion here again underway. Although we cannot now hear your voice, somebody else can. Maybe you would like to add something.

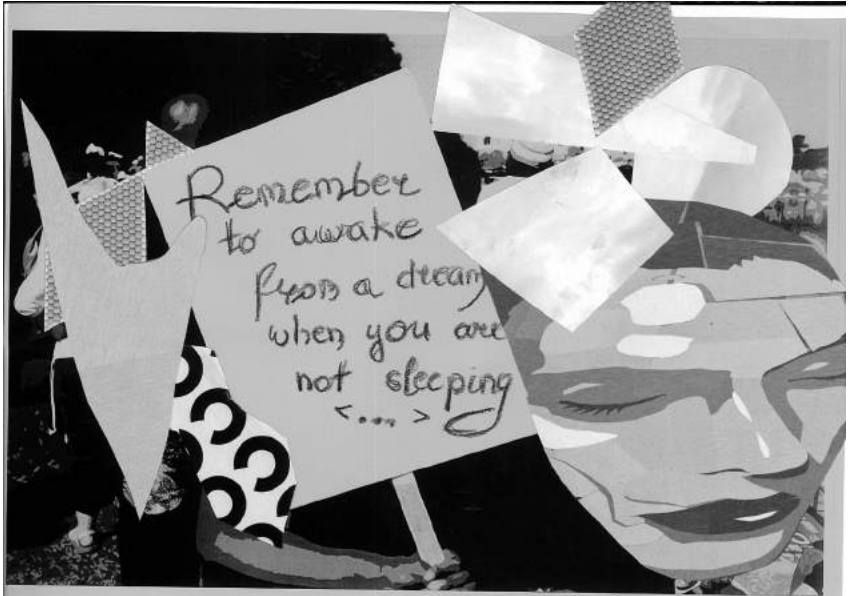
– Written in Xi'an, Shaanxi Province, China, July 2018

## Endnotes

- 1 The “textification” of this seminar/exhibition offered us the opportunity to lightly edit the transcriptions in order to (a) provide helpful citations for references made in the discussion, and (b) clarify our ideas and intentions where such clarification seemed useful or necessary.
- 2 Richard Gilman-Opalsky, *Specters of Revolt: On the Intellect of Insurrection and Philosophy from Below* (London: Repeater, 2016). Stevphen Shukaitis, *The Composition of Movements to Come: Aesthetics and Cultural Labor after the Avant-Garde* (London: Rowman & Littlefield, 2016).
- 3 Michel Foucault, “Intellectuals and Power,” *Foucault Live: Collected Interviews, 1961-1984* (New York: Semiotext(e), 1996).
- 4 John Holloway, *Crack Capitalism*, (London: Pluto Books, 2010)
- 5 Richard Gilman-Opalsky, *Spectacular Capitalism: Guy Debord and the Practice of Radical Philosophy* (Brooklyn: Autonomedia, 2011)
- 6 Shukaitis (2016: 6)
- 7 Gilman-Opalsky (2016: 245)
- 8 Shukaitis (2016: 142)
- 9 Michael Hardt and Antonio Negri, *Assembly* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2017, 5-21)







## day one

RICHARD GILMAN-OPALSKY (RGO): Yes, absolutely, this is what I was talking about. The one you put on the chopping block. What shall we do? Shall we start with a plan or shall we talk a little more, or what?

STEPHEN SHUKAITIS (SS): But we've already started.

RGO: We've already begun?

SS: I think that's an important thing to say in the sense that there's always already something happening. This is something Stefano Harney and Fred Moten explore in *The Undercommons*.<sup>1</sup> Rather than saying "now you must talk about politics, now you must talk about knowledge" – you're always already in it. When you say let's start, you've already started. But I think we'll keep going.

## Art, Revolt, Organization

SEMINAR PARTICIPANT: I'm interested in what you think are the potentials of moments of uprising and their limitations, and how that translates into art. I mean, not just about being against the institution but the types of models that arise from spontaneous revolts. I'm interested in what we've learned from other models, from the uprisings that have been happening.

SS: Recently I was one of the curators of the Gee Vaucher exhibition held a few months ago at Firstsite,<sup>2</sup> and that weirdly came out of a conversation with a few friends about how the university markets itself as a place for rebels and free thinking. I'd like to think it was an amazing exhibition, not just for the works shown within it, but also through what was created around it. What did having the exhibition create? That's not just asking what did it create for people getting to see Gee's work, but what kinds of social relationships happened through and because of the exhibition? There was a pop up Syrian café, discussions with veterans about the nature of war, many different things happening coming out of the exhibition. For me, that's just as important as the exhibition itself. How can art extend and develop forms of revolt, or exist as a form of revolt in itself?

RGO: Those are exactly the questions that I've been asking, too, with the recent research for *Specters of Revolt*, and I still have a lot of these questions.<sup>3</sup> Some of the answers are "to be determined." We always have to wait and see what comes out of the uprising, just as Stephen was saying about the exhibition. One of the things you said about the so-called "spontaneous" revolts, and part of my own thinking on that, is that they are not spontaneous. They're surprising and they *do* look spontaneous. Part of the reason why a lot of these recent uprisings look spontaneous is because we see them as discrete events – as events that start on a certain date and end on another. Whereas I see what they're doing as taking up unfinished business from within the society, from where previous revolts left off. And so, when they're not happening, the possibility that they will resume to take up their unfinished business haunts the society. When these uprisings aren't happening, their specter haunts in their absence. In that sense, the revolt never really

ends or goes away. There's plenty of evidence that this is true, for example in the police and military preparations that anticipate revolts before they happen. Indeed, the keepers of law and order are always counting on revolt with some confidence.

I see revolts as expressions of earlier grievances, sometimes staged and framed in new ways for the new situation. In the US, one of the realities that provoked my questioning on this very subject was the staggering number of unarmed Black people who are killed by police officers every year. In total, cops killed over 1,000 people in the US in 2014, over 1,000 in 2015, and over 1,000 in 2016. The question is really why is there *only* a revolt in Ferguson or Baltimore, and not in many dozens of other cities in response to other cases? Why a revolt in some cases but not in others? Why here and not there?

**SEMINAR PARTICIPANT:** That's also the question of long-term organization, which Black Lives Matter was able to catalyze. Why do so many of these uprisings fail, while others can hold for a long-term and have this ripple effect, something that's actually sustained throughout time? What are the types of long-term organizational qualities that some have that others don't? Something that could perhaps relate to the structure of art, as a ripple without long-term plans. How do you shift? How do you continue it? What are the logistics of a continual revolt that's not a revolution but that doesn't peak and finish?

**SEMINAR PARTICIPANT:** In certain circumstances, like in Egypt, certain revolts become almost stupid and trivial compared to when you get something when there's a lot of logic, that's when they become serious. This is why you're talking about Black people being shot by the police and talking about Egypt, there's a lot of blood. That's when it becomes, where the spontaneity is actually exploited by people who are not spontaneous. They're well organized.

**SS:** One of the things Richard writes about is this idea that forms of revolt or upheaval develop as modes of collective thinking and philosophizing. The suggestion is not that you have to develop an analysis of them, but to look to teasing out the analysis that is already embedded within and developed by the revolts themselves.

It's not that we have to explain to people in Egypt what they're doing, they already know. Connecting that to art, in moments where nothing appears to be happening, often times the publics being organized through other means, through artistic forms, not necessarily in content but in terms of what are the skills, the forms of cooperation, and the networks developed through artistic activity that then at a certain point blossom into something else. There are forms of social interaction, from dinner clubs to sports teams that do not appear to be political, let alone revolutionary, that can at times blossom into forms of organization that feed into full-fledged revolutionary movements.

**RGO:** These questions about organization and art specifically, they're really big questions and in some ways are some of the most important questions to raise, because art and organization are categories that we regard as categories for ongoing activities that don't depend upon major ruptures or disruptions of everyday life. Whereas revolts are characterized precisely in that way. So, art and organization suggest to us a modality of sustaining activities and radical criticism in between and through art, through organization.

I really like the way that Rosa Luxemburg challenged the German Social Democratic Party on the question of organization where, when she talked about the mass strike, by which she meant not only strikes as we think of them today, but also things like insurrections, rebellions, revolts, like the uprisings we've seen in Egypt or in Occupy or when the Indignados in Spain rose up, or in many other examples in Greece.<sup>4</sup> Luxemburg looked to be guided and informed by these uprisings all of the time, but what she noticed (and criticized) was how the political organization was always trying to figure out how to make use of that energy.

**SEMINAR PARTICIPANT:** To control it.

**RGO:** Right. The organization would always try to figure out how to take the social energies of the revolt and convert them into a platform for a political strategy, for the building of the party. And what Luxemburg said – which made her very unpopular within her own party that she ultimately left for this reason and many others – is that the organization should strive to be an articulation of the uprising itself. The mass strike is already saying exactly what has to be said, and the organization is at best really just a

way of continuing to give voice to those disaffections when the upheaval simmers down and stops voicing them directly against the existing law and order.

Now, that's one thought on organization, but I would take it further: What if the upheaval itself is already an organization? In this way, precisely:

Consider that people hated Hosni Mubarak in the 1980s and 90s, but that it wasn't until January 2011 that they actually occupied Tahrir Square and were able to push him out in 18 days. They hated him for decades. A gathering of people so massive that it is able to push out Mubarak is an organization; it's an organization of disaffection that has a decades-long prehistory in Egypt. People hated Mubarak, and parents and grandparents saw their young people in the square and in the streets and they said, "That's our aspiration." But it required a moment of organization. The disaffection needed the organization of the occupation.

One of the problems may be that when we think of organization, we tend to think about some kind of an infrastructure, a building with offices and regular meetings, to keep it going. But I think that the uprising is already an organization. Consider, now, that racism exists in the US. Black Lives Matter is not really a formal organization or a political party, it's just a name given to certain expressions of disaffection that happen in different places in different ways at different times. And yet, Black Lives Matter is a kind of organization of that disaffection.

So, in a way, stepping beyond Luxemburg's position, I think of the revolt as an organization.

Now, what if the uprising is an artwork? That's the other dimension we've been discussing. This picture here, where the man brings the picture frame to the uprising to look at the events through it as if they were a painting... But also, Brian Holmes has written a lot about the theatrical and artistic dimensions of social upheavals.<sup>5</sup> One of the first subjects I did research on was the uprising of Zapatistas in Mexico and how they came out of Chiapas with fake guns carved out of wood and painted. They didn't have enough rifles, so they carved some props out of trees.<sup>6</sup> In this way and in other ways it was performance art. They read poetry from the balconies. What confounded the Mexican government was that the uprising was too artful and appealed too much to peoples' creative sensibilities with humor and charm to simply crush it as if it were a conventional guerrilla operation. There was, in a sense, too much art in the uprising to end it with a massacre,

and the government didn't know what to do with that. So, there is art in the uprising that is, after all, full of creativity, creative energy, and artistic creation. I don't want to say that the revolt is everything. That's exactly not my point. The point is that maybe we should think differently about organization and art.

**SEMINAR PARTICIPANT:** I completely agree with you. I think revolt is absolutely organization. But there are different levels of organization, different types of organization happen simultaneously. If you think about evolutionary theory, drawing order from chaos, there are different types of order that work simultaneously.

**SEMINAR PARTICIPANT:** One of the things is to try and undermine the existing organization, because obviously there is the existing organization, which can be turned around, used, and completely turned in a different direction. The actual power of the organization that exists used to be used for and by the people. Somehow the elements, the positive elements, have got to sort of completely undermine the existing organization, so any use that it has would be completely transformed so any outlets to the media can all be used but not in the way that the actual people in charge of the so-called organization would want them to be used. The positive thing is always to turn things around.

**SS:** Yes. One of the interesting things is that it's easy to think of institutions as being stable, permanent bodies that are very planned out and know what they're doing. But often times they're contingent and unknown and improvised, built on the fly anyway, even as they appear to be stable and permanently structured.



## The Party Form & Its Discontents

RGO: The recent development of institutional politics in Greece with Syriza is worth some attention here. Syriza was really an unviable (in terms of conventional electoral politics) loose coalition of left-wing organizations in Greece. For a long time (since 2004), it didn't have any sort of formal political aspirations as a viable and cohesive national political party. But then, the Greek revolts of 2008 broke out and for several years there were waves of upheaval pressing on the political situation, pressing against a brutal regime of austerity. Syriza can of course see that they and the uprisings are making similarly radical criticisms of the relationship between Greece and the EU and many other things. Eventually, a decade after Syriza was founded, and some years after the revolts first broke out, Alexis Tsipras and Yanis Varoufakis and others associated with Syriza started to realize that it might be possible to convert Syriza into a serious contender in conventional party politics.

One of the things that's missing from most discussions about Syriza, including those on the sympathetic left, is a serious appreciation and



understanding of how the revolt made the political organization possible to the point of Syriza winning the 2015 election and Tsipras becoming Prime Minister of Greece. People talk a lot about Syriza, about what it means and what its failures are, but what we need to be talking about is how the evolution of Syriza into a party in power was made possible through the social energies and disaffections of a revolt that compelled it to this development. So the revolt is necessary before, but then again after the elections, because there's another moment, of course. There is the moment when Tsipras is himself shocked to be in the position of Prime Minister of Greece: "What the hell am I doing here? This is very strange! Now I have to go to a conference with the Troika! I don't know what to do. I'm a very handsome man, I was a radical and an activist, but I never thought I'd be here!"

One of the things that Varoufakis immediately recognized – and I think Tsipras must have realized it too – is that the position of power is very different than the position of the revolt against power. So many critics on the left said that Tsipras didn't have the political will to say no to the Troika. People were angry with Tsipras for his acquiescence as if it was a character flaw. This is bullshit, and it misses the real point. This failure was not a limitation of Tsipras's personality, but rather a limitation of the political institution.

**SEMINAR PARTICIPANT:** Absolutely, yes.

**RGO:** The problem is not that if it were somebody else, he or she would've said "no" to the Troika. Tsipras went in and said "no," and the next day he said "yes." That's a feature of the institutional politics of state power, and that's "professional" politics. Varoufakis resigned and gave lectures around the world about these failures and frustrations. But I think all of this shows us that even if we make an effort at political-institutional and formal organizational power, we should expect severe limitations and capitulations there, and ultimately, that those organizations are bankrupt.

And I interpret Varoufakis's disappointments differently than Varoufakis himself. I see Varoufakis's experience with the Syriza victory and the politics of Europe to be essentially telling us this: What we need are totally different ways of thinking about organization and politics. We don't want their ways of organization or of doing politics. When we take their ways of organization or of doing politics, when we get their ways into our hands, they

are already their ways, not ours. Their ways of doing it. Radically different approaches to politics and organization have no place within the limits of their ways of doing it.

What people see in the Greek situation, what we could call the latest Greek tragedy, is that what we need to do is to either think *against* the institutions or to totally rethink their meaning and structure and become very imaginative, more imaginative and creative than ever before. And this is precisely where art comes back to being central to the task. Inasmuch as art is about imagination, inasmuch as art is about the radical imagination, politics needs it. Art can really participate in productive ways in helping us discover what to do with our disaffection, what to make of it.

**SEMINAR PARTICIPANT:** You were talking about art actively taking a role, actively imagining a future otherwise. I would see a lot of critical art, or engaged art, as doing a different kind of work. It makes that visible, all the invisible structures. I see art acting in the same way where it takes what power is and tries to make it visible. And art reflects why the world is so bad, usually; instead of actually engaging in a different way, it usually tends to just reveal power structures that are there, that are hidden.

**SS:** I'd agree that's exactly the case for a lot of political art. Personally, I'm more interested in forms of artistic practice that go beyond the making visible of power structures and move into changing them. Or, to paraphrase Brecht, in art that doesn't just attempt to mirror the world, but that works as a hammer to shape it. But then you get into the question of how that process of shaping the world through art works – is it even art anymore? This is often the charge against art that is deemed to be too political, or too didactic.

I have a friend, Alan Moore, who does a lot of work around squatting and art, squatting and cultural production. A few years ago, he organized this event about the relationship between art and squatting. It was really interesting, and it took place in a squatted building. At some point I asked him “what does it do for you to call it an art exhibition? What's the gain of even calling it art?”

His response was that it's important because if it were a political, rather than an artistic event, people would engage with it through the usual consideration of whether or not it has succeeded, what did it accomplish?

Was it effective? Calling it an exhibition at least partially created a space for stepping outside of that means-end calculation.

The animating principle was keeping open spaces where you can do things together in a more open fashion, where it's not necessary to think in the logic of accomplishment or measurement. And in a way that gets back to an almost traditional, Kantian view of aesthetics, of purposeless purpose. And that seems really valuable, having a space where the outcome is not the main worry. I was thinking about this working on the Gee Vaucher exhibition because one of the important things that was hard to convey in the exhibition is it's not just what she produces – but the very space of Dial House. She's lived there with Penny Rimbaud, running it as an open house, for fifty years. And that creates the possibility to live and work differently. But you can't take the house and the garden and put it in the exhibition.

And Dial House is just one example of a much longer history of how artists have organized cooperatively, whether living together or not. Just Seeds, the artist cooperative who produced the “Celebrate People’s History” poster series that are a part of the exhibition here now are another good example of artists organizing cooperatively. But again, you don't see that organizational process in the posters. And how could you see that, how do you make that visible? Draw a chart?



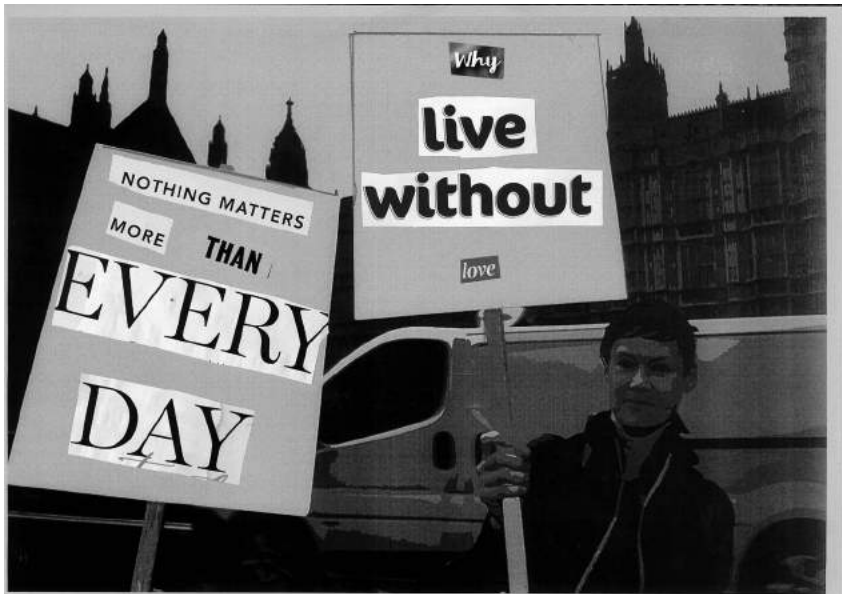
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**SEMINAR PARTICIPANT:** There's been a couple of times in my artistic practice where I've asked, when is art going to actualize itself in a way that people are collectively working towards one goal? But can we all be working towards a goal? Maybe what you're describing is closer to the way that science operates. It doesn't operate all that well most of the time, but it's where there's a cumulative knowledge that gets built upon and everyone is feeding into it, where it's not really about one person. If you could all be working together collectively, so that doesn't mean you're necessarily collaborating, but there's this progressive and cumulative aspect... that's more the model of the sciences.

**SEMINAR PARTICIPANT:** Over the years, there are various models of groups living together and producing things that people don't forget. Once a model has been produced, it sort of stays in the memory of the people. And these models stay there and are recorded and they'll always be there to be referred to. There have been collectives; there've been art collectors in groups in history that inspire. And that's where true learning comes in; when you know the history you want to know. And so Black people would learn about the previous struggles of Black people that inspire them in the present, even though it's the past. It's the present inasmuch as the sentiments are the same.

SS: An exhibition I saw 10 years ago in Budapest was about the history of self-organized spaces, self-organized art groups in Budapest. But what they did is when they opened it up it was basically an empty room, and they invited people to narrate their own history. The exhibition was making the exhibition. It wasn't really an exhibition until everyone was done. It was called *We Are Not Ducks On A Pond But Ships At Sea*.<sup>7</sup> What they also did was they decided to put together a cultural on Budapest, but they forward-dated it 20, 40, and 60 years. They produced a magazine about the state of the arts in Budapest in 2039. It was interesting playing with time so that you considered how you would want to represent your own history but also how you would want the present to be represented now. And it's an interesting project for thinking about how to represent and narrate histories of political revolt or of artistic histories. How do you organize histories from below or histories that don't freeze up or close them?



## Out of This World

RGO: One thing about the epiphanic role of art is that it shows you, or exposes something about, the world. That's entirely true. One of art's powers is the power of epiphany. When you see something reflected visually, or through sound, it shows you something in a different way than you're used to seeing or hearing. It's an epiphany, an *exposé*.

But there is another power to art that has to do with imaginary power. The imaginary power of Dial House, for example. One of the things I said to Stephen on the way out, after visiting the garden and having coffee with Gee... as I walked out I said, "If the whole world lived in this way the only problem would be cancer."

It's a hyperbolic statement, of course, but the history of Dial House imagines such an incredible and different way of living in the world. It's almost *not in the world*. It's almost a way of fleeing the world, or creating a new world – it's world-creating. This is imaginary power. In politics, it's typically discounted because who would want imaginary power? What people want is *real* power, not imaginary power. But I think that imaginary power is real power. And this is where I think that art as something more than epiphany is very important, because if you can't imagine other ways of life, other forms of life, then you cannot demand them. You cannot build what you cannot imagine, and you cannot try to create other worlds, to create something like Dial House, without imaginary power first. In this way, art is part of the production of power. Its imaginary power can become real power, or already is real power, in the sense that it helps us to think about *real* possibilities beyond the existing realities.

Uprisings and revolts often exercise imaginary power as they experiment with new forms and possibilities. This is one of the things I like in Alain Badiou's book, *The Communist Hypothesis*,<sup>8</sup> where he comes very close to making a certain apology for 20<sup>th</sup> century socialism. But he says something really interesting that can help us think about what comes from revolt. One of the things Badiou says is that we always think about collapsed and corrupted communist or socialist projects as being total failures, but what if we think of them as experiments instead? When you think about experiments, you think about trying something that may very well not work,

but it doesn't mean you won't try again. Badiou's claim is that the communist hypothesis depends upon trying again, in different ways with different kinds of creativity and experimentation, trying still to create new forms of life. This is how he wants us to think about extending the communist hypothesis into the 21<sup>st</sup> century beyond the failures of the 20<sup>th</sup>. We can think of both revolt and art as coalescing around this notion of imagination and experimentation. Both revolt and art are very experimental, and they're both activities of *exposé* and epiphany, but at the same time, both revolt and art seem to grasp that imaginary power is close to real power, or maybe that imaginary power already is real power. The communist hypothesis, for Badiou, needs fresh imagination and experimentation. And in something like Occupy Wall Street, the imagination and experimentation change people forever.

So the event comes to an end, or the experiment is called "a failure," but actually, I have students who were changed very profoundly by their participation in those types of events and experiments. People and their understanding of themselves and their world change there, and actually become something else in those movements. I know it happened in Egypt; a whole generation of young people changed their sense of what was possible, of their own power.

It's terrible that you have generations of people under Mubarak who felt that it was impossible to not have Mubarak, and now there are other problems of great severity. We cannot minimize the catastrophe of Mubarak, Morsi, and of the military regime. We shouldn't minimize or reduce these catastrophes. But also, there's an imagination now, a living imagination in a generation of people who now know that they don't have to accept any of this. A major military power, a UK or US kind of military power, couldn't change a regime with all their might as effectively as 18 days in Tahrir Square could do it. That is amazing. And that is real power. So there is a mix, as in every revolt. You don't want to romanticize. We must absolutely not romanticize because we're talking about real lives and things that really matter to real people. So, there's no simple victory there. But also, there's no total failure either. We're talking about experiments that might become integral parts of victories.

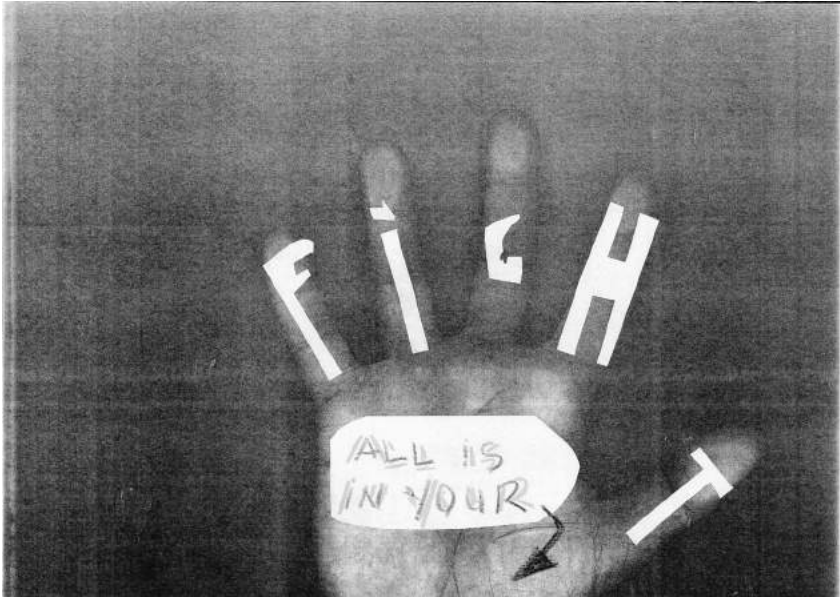
**SEMINAR PARTICIPANT:** I completely agree with this point. The measure of success is completely different. But the other day was also Women's

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International Day. We had this very successful march after Trump came. It was so peaceful. It was brilliant. And then we all go back and do our work and we have changed affectively, forever, you know?

It feels so warm, people from the offices coming out to their first protest. It's political... So you have this affective part of the revolt that's beautiful and experimental. And you feel it – there are all these invisible connections that suddenly come to light in this moment. When I'm alone in my office I don't feel my connection with all these people. I know they're there, but when we come together, it's tangible. But then there's a meeting afterwards. Is there a meeting after that? Is there a meeting after that? That's the more boring part. Art is beautiful, experimental, affective, and warm. It's like the release of punching a wall when you're angry, but then comes the boring part... using that strength and that energy of what you were initially excited about. What we were talking about before – the different levels of organization, different levels of affectivity, and the work. It's a lot of work.





## Lingering Spirits of Revolt

**SEMINAR PARTICIPANT:** One of the great worries is that all the activity, all the revolt that's gone on in the last 100 years has had an effect, has had a result, but unfortunately, it's been contained within the existing system. That's the big problem.

**RGO:** Contained, yes, but also disguised.

**SEMINAR PARTICIPANT:** 100 of years of spontaneous revolt have been completely and utterly eaten by this exiting system... I'm not saying it's a failure. I'm just saying that's what's happened, and that's what always will happen, and it is continually happening.

**SS:** It's there in the ways, for instance, in which the US military strategy has adapted because of the anti-Vietnam war protests. That's why the military wants wars that are decisive and short so that people don't get angry about them. Not that it would be admitted or framed that way. This is very much

how Richard describes how previous revolts haunt the decisions and working of the state.

But back to what you were saying, there's a thing about this outpouring of creativity. The moments you're describing are valuable and powerful, but the danger is wanting that feeling of inclusivity and how it becomes a substitute for having to deal with the actual ongoing work.

**SEMINAR PARTICIPANT:** That's what I mean. If you think about it as a kind of investment... it's an investment that has probably no long-term rewards. Maybe. If that's what you define as success, and it's this investment in our lives when we think about, it's under this sort of capitalist logic. This type of investment doesn't give you anything back in terms of security. A lot of work without any kind of guarantee. It doesn't give you housing. It's a different type of investment that a lot of people are not so inclined to take because it's a difficult road... and it's not a sure road.

We can do beautiful experiments. But that's what I mean about long-term. Infrastructure is maybe the wrong word, but long-term planning and that difficult investment... that's why I was interested in the original question, why certain things are continuing and other things are not... we're all affected and it really is valuable on a certain level, but also it's sort of a movement on a different level...

**SEMINAR PARTICIPANT:** And certainly, people have been very ambitious in the past in situations like the bonfire of the institutions, and all that sort of grand turn, somehow, in 1968. The students in 1968 were going to completely and utterly change society. And some artists have said that, but it can't happen. It goes back to what you were saying, that you were trying to judge success on the basis of the existing criteria.

**RGO:** There is success and failure, that's one frame, which I consider to be hostage to capital. But I think what you said about going back to work after a weekend of joyful street protests is important. What I would prefer over "success versus failure" would be to think instead about "temporary versus permanent." This is where I'm critical of some of the influential thinkers on this subject. Guy Debord, for example, did not in my view take seriously enough the relative permanence of his opponent, which was basically spectacular capitalism. Debord looked at the situation, the rupture,

and the *dérive*. These are mainly temporary derailments that understand themselves, from the start, as momentary interruptions that end very soon. Later, in the 1980s, Hakim Bey wrote a book that became very popular in the 1990s called *Temporary Autonomous Zone (TAZ)*.<sup>9</sup> There are sometimes festivals of disruption that take place over the weekend, but then you have to return to normal, or as they said in France in 1968, “retour à la normale.” You have to go back to work.

The problem is that there is in fact a structural reality; real material conditions of life in the existing society, and the breaks we make are temporary inasmuch as they don't lead to structural transformations. Marx thought of structural transformation as revolution. There's a difference between an interruption and a transformation. Something is transformed in an affective sense, but the material conditions of life, of society, are left just as they were. This is the sense in which I would agree that the revolt gets eaten up by the existing system.

So, what about a real revolution of the conditions of life itself? The revolution of everyday life doesn't change the existing conditions of life itself. And in this way, I tend to prefer Marx's idea that we have to be abolitionists, to abolish the existing situation.

Moving from temporary to permanent is the big and difficult question. It drives me, personally, back to crisis theory, where the bigger and more difficult change can only occur when the existing situation enters a phase of existential crisis, where it simply cannot continue. This crisis theory also comes from Marx, but has been rearticulated in very important ways by other thinkers, such as Franco “Bifo” Berardi. Bifo talks about the factory of unhappiness and the psychological crisis of our existing society. We return to normal, yes, but what is normal, and can we even survive the normal situation?

What is permanent and normal is, quite possibly, an unbearable and unlivable situation. We have incredible suffering around the world. We don't see it right where we sit, perhaps, but there are billions of people living all kinds of precarity that are almost impossible to imagine. It really requires an impossible imagination to see it in many cases. And you also have people who aren't subject to such insufferable conditions, but who are facing different dangers psychologically, emotionally, and affectively.

But the whole field of psychology is mainly *not* about changing the conditions of life – but rather about changing the condition of the psyche

to accept the conditions of life. The whole thing is completely backwards because it's the conditions and not the psyche that have to be changed. So there's a possibility of a crisis on the horizon. We need a different version of Marx's crisis theory, because I don't think the capitalist political-economic structure is going to just break down or collapse. I think it's nearly common knowledge now that this was one of places where Marx was just dead wrong. He simply didn't or couldn't understand the incredible malleability and flexibility of capitalism to deal with and survive major crises.

But there are other crises. People speak of ecological crisis, and there is psycho-social crisis too. I have two young children. I don't know that the society they're being raised in is livable or bearable. I don't know that it's psychologically or ecologically survivable. One cannot stupidly expect that their problems will be exactly the same ones faced by my generation and me. A new crisis might create an opportunity for taking what we experience in temporary moments of rupture and revolt and making them more permanent. It's not a light switch, where we go from temporary to permanent like the light goes on and off. But I do think that we want to – that we have to – find ways to survive beyond temporary interruptions of what is killing us. We've created conditions that we can barely survive.

**SS:** But that's one compelling aspect of somewhere like Dial House, that it's been there for 50 years. Penny and Gee move there in 1967. They find this farm cottage and decide they're going to move in but want to live differently. So they take the locks off the doors. They have lived in an open house for fifty years with no locks on the doors. Even now I'm not sure I could do that... just realizing that anyone could walk in at any time. I want to believe in the world as a benevolent place, but that's pushing it! Yet, they just decided that this is how they want to inhabit the world and it basically works for them. But it's almost like taking a huge gamble and just hoping.

**SEMINAR PARTICIPANT:** Yes, you've got the mainstream communist people who always despised any form of experiment, despised as communism in one home, communism in one country, communism in one commune... it can be comical. But it's not comical because what's the alternative? It can only be small-scale. Large-scale is dangerous, so this sort of experiment is positive but then, it can only be done on a small scale.

RGO: Perhaps the question is how to move between scales: how to go from a small-scale experiment to an experiment of longer duration, larger scale?

SEMINAR PARTICIPANT: The danger of the large scale is always that you would get a large political organization and then you would get oppression... That's the anarchist critique, isn't it?

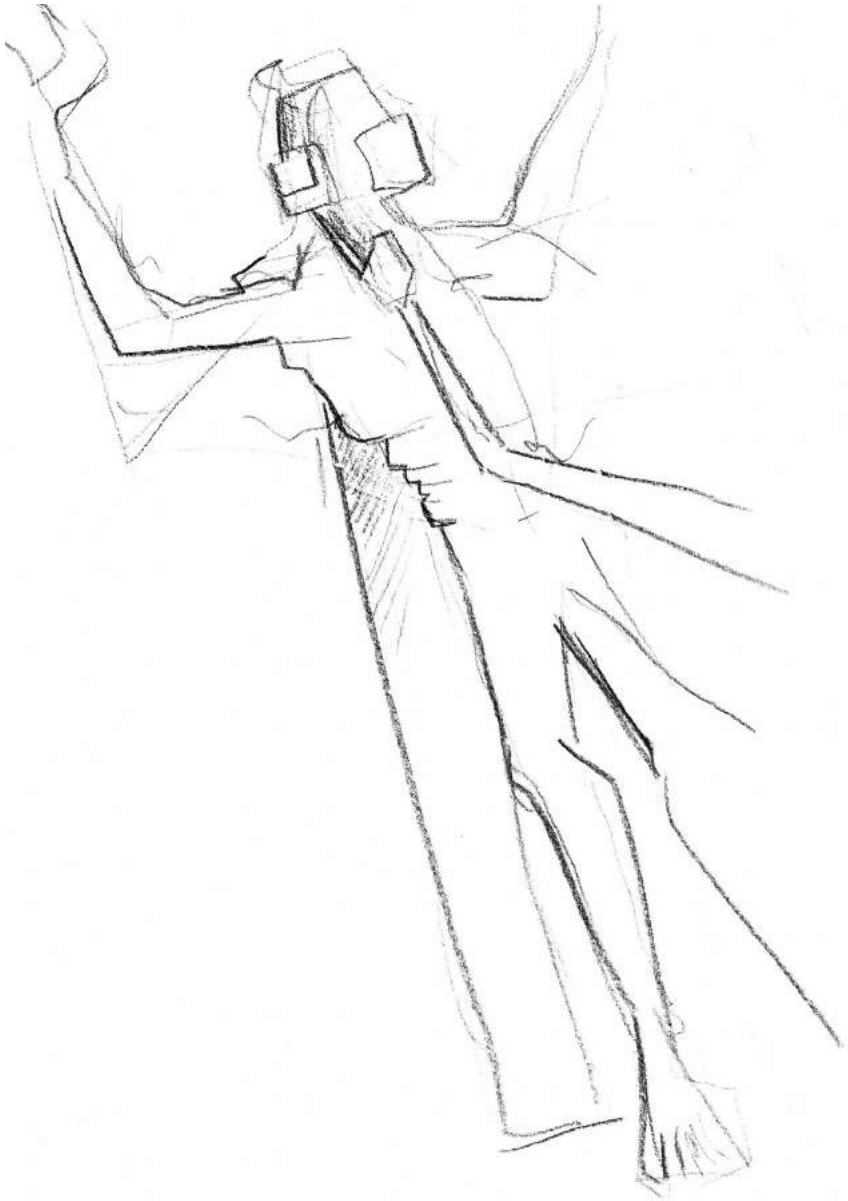
RGO: Yes. When you go to the family it's a small-scale thing, a tiny private home or a little gathering or a small group of people. And, the more work becomes insufferable, the more basic security and healthcare and the future itself becomes increasingly precarious, the little home appears as a kind of refuge.<sup>10</sup> It's perhaps a little tiny thing, but Saskia Sassen points out in an essay about Latin American workers in the US, that they go back to their neighborhoods and their mothers and sisters and brothers and families and fathers and their familiar food and language after work as both a refuge from, and a shield against, what happens when they are out in the service sector being subjected to abuse, racism, and degradation every day.<sup>11</sup> What happens if, and when, the outside world faces a crisis that compels us to think about new possibilities, new ways?

What happens is that the logic of the family, this small thing, this tiny communist thing (when it is not itself abusive), has to extend outward. The example I think of is Cuba after the collapse of the Soviet Union. Cuban agriculture was subsidized for decades by the Soviet Union, and they had massive industrial-agricultural farming and big machinery. Cuba couldn't afford it on its own. It was subsidized by the Soviet Union because the Soviet Union looked at Cuba as a satellite power and prime strategic ally during the Cold War. Then from 1989 to 1991 that subsidy was withdrawn. In Cuba, in the middle-to-late 1990s, up to the present day, the people had to figure out how they were going to do agriculture, how they were going to feed the country. Now, that's a real crisis, and if you go to Cuba today you would see that all of that Soviet-sponsored machinery is overgrown with weeds and out of commission. They've gone to an almost anarchist and communist agricultural format, but not because of ideology – because of the crisis.

What I find most interesting is that they always had this capacity to enlarge and expand, or even to “nationalize,” what might have previously looked like community gardens. But those earlier gardens were tiny,

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trapped, small, walled-off, until the Soviet Union was no longer able to subsidize mass industrial farming. At that point, the gardens were extended out from their small spaces, and this has actually become a model for the future.



## Unique Compositions of Continuity in Space

**SEMINAR PARTICIPANT:** The avant-garde has become the establishment, to put it in a very simplistic way. Avant-garde has been completely and utterly taken as the norm and the establishment actually embraces the avant-garde and they sell it and they buy it in business...

**SEMINAR PARTICIPANT:** But maybe you have a different strategy than what the avant-garde art was doing. What could art do now in this day and age, in this time? Power has shifted and changed, and yet our strategies are somewhat similar to when power relations were so much different. That's also what I was asking about protest movements. We still have bodies on the streets, which is really great in some way, but also, the power relations have changed over the last 30 years. We still have the same, or at least the left still has the same sort of tactics.

**SEMINAR PARTICIPANT:** It takes us a long time to understand what has changed. Isn't that the problem? I don't think we understand what's changed, especially with things like the internet. Maybe art still hasn't changed in relation to the things that have changed? The gallery experience is exactly the same as it was thirty years ago.

**SEMINAR PARTICIPANT:** We are talking about wanting different things to happen in galleries. We want something different from it. That's based on the idea that what we had was just not really enough. How does art join up with different sorts of knowledge? That's one thing that has come out of neoliberalism and art that is actually kind of a good thing. It can no longer remain as a self-contained professionalization of art. It means that you can deal with other fields of knowledge in a more serious way.

**SEMINAR PARTICIPANT:** At one stage the art colleges were one of the few places where people could have a little freedom.

**SEMINAR PARTICIPANT:** I don't believe in that freedom.



**SEMINAR PARTICIPANT:** But there was freedom... there were certain outlets where even people with little education could go to art colleges, because art colleges have taken on the university model. In the old days there were certain humble outlets where people could rise up, people who weren't so well educated as perhaps the average art student is now. There were more outlets. Gee Vaucher had this. She went to this place that was local to her. And she was in a very oppressive situation, and so the art college gave her an insight into the possibilities. She in turn has created possibilities for other people. Again, it's a failure, isn't it? Everything's a failure in some respects.

**SEMINAR PARTICIPANT:** Could art also be... it's in-between all the time; it's always in-between different knowledges. It's becoming less like a subject in itself but more of something that's imagined as this in-between-ness. Rather than the atomization of knowledges or disciplines – when you talk to people in different fields... it's different in the arts because we're a little bit here, there, and everywhere. Could you take seriously the being in-between knowledges to think about what this atomization is and how you could draw that back to integrate things more? And today we need more integration, more and more different knowledges coming together, not in a superficial way.

**SEMINAR PARTICIPANT:** Theatre comes in here. It's an integrated factor because you have the theatre where you have the stage sets. Theatre and revolt present a good tradition, considering how they come together. This can still happen. I don't think there's anything old-fashioned about that. Around this town theatre is absolutely part of the establishment, with a few exceptions.

**SS:** I don't think it's so binary. I like the idea of using a gallery as a social space and having things happen there, but I also realize that this is a part of how corporate institutes are regulated. Moving to a model of a gallery becoming a space where things happen, where social things happen, doesn't necessarily mean it's totally changed the role of the institution. It's just being articulated in a different fashion. How do you organize the relation to that different form of power? It's not either that it is a part of governing or not – it's ambivalently embedded in power.

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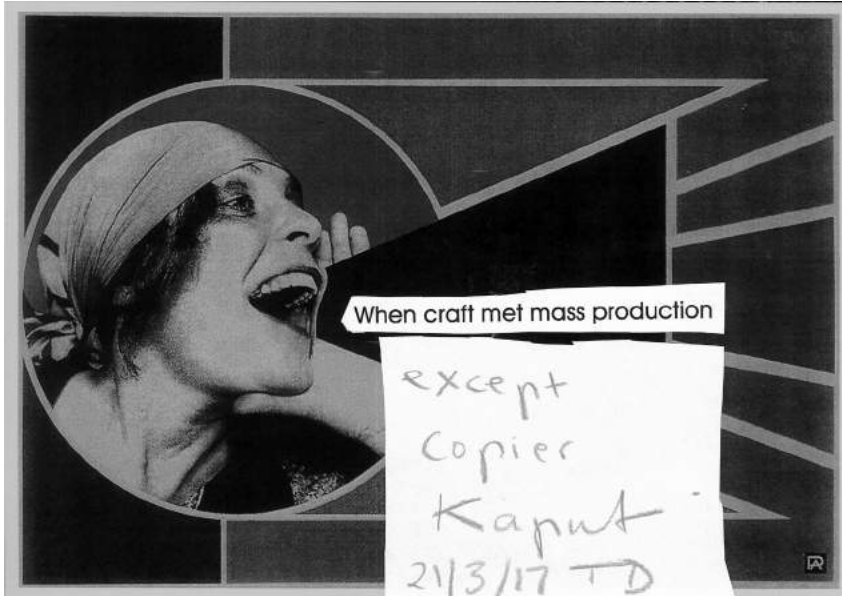
**RGO:** The conversion of spaces like galleries and libraries and universities and other institutions into open spaces for non-expert creativity ties into the earlier question about organization. Perhaps organization is such a challenge in part because existing institutions need to be cracked open and redeployed. What could we organize if we could do this? It seems fairly obvious to me that improvising music is art. When I listen to late John Coltrane, Ornette Coleman, or others, I think: “That’s art!” But galleries are not typically spaces where people go to just pick up instruments and create with them. It has happened, it’s in the history. People like the saxophonist Peter Brötzmann from Germany would get invited to blow a saxophone to smithereens in the art galleries.

**SEMINAR PARTICIPANT:** It sounds like the art laboratories, a thing called “Art Labs.” It was a mixture of all different types of music, art, and theatre, there’s no disqualification. The Living Theatre in New York.

**RGO:** In New York, yes.

**SEMINAR PARTICIPANT:** They caused quite a political stir.

**RGO:** That’s right, they did. But the main thing with the photocopied posters here on this board is that they’re not the production of an artist with a résumé or portfolio who sees him or herself as “an artist” as such. This kind of opening is something that we really need. Marcuse would’ve talked about it as a form of democratization, as the critical spirit of a new sensibility.



## Everyone An-artist

SS: There's something quite important about opening up spaces for non-expert creativity. It reminds me of a story about our mutual friend John Gruntfest, who is a free jazz saxophonist. John organized events where anyone could come along and play. He'd have some virtuoso high caliber players – but John wanted anyone to come along. So you'd have someone come along who could barely play a note. And for John that's great because it's about creating things together. He told me that sometimes the virtuoso people were upset by this and then didn't want to take part because of it. They fell back on those hierarchies rather than seeing how they could interact differently, with a different logic.

RGO: And I do think it's not just capitalist power that blocks this. As with the virtuoso players, I think that the gallery wants to defend itself against an overly wide opening up, and I think the library wants to defend itself from the challenges of non-textual knowledge. It's the people we would often regard as colleagues or comrades who are sometimes the problem because

once they start to make a space for themselves to do their specialized craft they have to defend that and their specialization. So, let's say you're an artist and you declare that anybody can come in and produce content for the gallery walls, that any child can do it. There's actually a book in the gallery store here at Firstsite with the following title: *Why Your Five Year Old Could Not Have Done That*.<sup>12</sup> It's a reaction against people who see abstract art on a wall and say, "What's that!? My five-year-old child could do that!" In this way the artist becomes defensive and is put in the position of having to explain why a five-year-old *cannot* do it. The *real* artist can elucidate the different methods and history of the art, and can point out a whole language that makes it the purview of specialists.

**SEMINAR PARTICIPANT:** Yes, there's a whole history this kid doesn't understand.

**RGO:** But I actually think that the really powerful possibility is that a five-year-old can do it. Do you know what I mean? And I think that these spaces – the art spaces, information spaces, spaces for intellectuals and highly educated people, philosophers, whatever else they are – they're often defended by rank-and-file participants, not some sort of mysterious person in an office with a tie with dollar signs on it. It's often your colleagues or comrades who actually say, "No, that can't be allowed here, that's not philosophy, that's not art, that's not music."

**SEMINAR PARTICIPANT:** The ideology of professionalism. This is something that has occurred to me over the years. There's a lot of stuff that goes on in these professional organizations, like in trade unions, but they actually create their own rules that are defensive and go against ordinary people who are not the professionals.

**SS:** But I don't think it's about wanting to prevent autonomous creativity. Take for instance how art galleries and other kinds of cultural institutions function. It might be easy to fall back on the assumption that the people who run them don't want them to become spaces for the flowering of radical forms of creativity. The museums must remain the guardians of "high art" and "good taste." Perhaps there are some people who still buy into such notions, but these days they are far fewer. It would be much more common

that you'd find people working in the arts who want to embrace the energies that come with more participatory and open-ended engagements, to open up the spaces to all kinds of activities, but at the same time can only do so by putting limits on them.

Let's say you work somewhere like here and your job is to keep the space open, to organize the funding, to organize the structure, and you're highly invested in keeping this space open. It takes a lot of courage to let go of control, to let go of a thing that you're trying so hard to defend and keep open, not because you're defensive or angry but because it's hard, it's really hard. Being able to develop the courage and the trust to actually turn over spaces like that and have it work, it's not purely defensive. There are reasons why it's hard to do.

RGO: Yes. But I may have a disagreement with you on this. On a certain level I agree. I think we have to appreciate what it takes to keep a place like this running, but the question is: *Why is it so hard to do?* Why can we not have spaces that are open and not professionalized or curatorial and guarded in terms of the perspective of the craft and everything else? The answer to that question cuts deeper because, while what you say is right, it is only right in the context of the basic level of functioning cultural institutions in a capitalist society. This is the missing piece because you *must* have a whole set of concerns about operational costs. This building isn't cheap – maintenance of this beautiful building – it must cost an enormous amount of money. So you've got to be careful with every move you make, and you've got to bring people in. But I think that what really has to happen simply cannot take place within these limits. It's exactly what you said, and it is defensive. Cultural institutions always have to defend themselves and their basic existence, against capitalist concerns about operational costs, work, and profit.

Let me use a different example to make the same point. Consider the example of Socrates who would walk around the streets, and people wanted to talk to him so badly that, at the beginning of Plato's *Republic*, Socrates is actually held hostage and forced into discussion. People often overlook this detail, but at the very start of the text Socrates is walking away with his friend Glaucon, and along comes Polemarchus and several others who say that they want to talk to Socrates. But Socrates tells them that he is hurrying to get away from a festival he'd just attended. Right away, Polemarchus

asks, “do you see how many of us there are? ... either prove stronger than these men or stay here.”<sup>13</sup> Socrates was surrounded by men who were much stronger than him, including people like Thrasymachus, whom Socrates was actually quite afraid of. So [blows raspberry] here comes the *Republic!* Nearly 500 pages of conversation that Socrates didn’t want to have!

But people wanted to talk to him and he hated the sophists, so he talked to people for free in the streets. He despised the class of “intellectuals” who charged money in exchange for ideas. Now here I am, a long time later, and guess what? My job is basically selling ideas. Here’s where I want to make the connection to what we’ve been discussing. Why don’t I just go out in the streets and do philosophy in the streets like Socrates did? Well, what if I do philosophy in the streets and nobody shows up to speak with me? What if they’re not interested in what I have to say? Unlike Socrates, nobody will hold me hostage for my thoughts. It’s a free thing I could offer, and yet nobody would show up, nobody wants it. And there’s another problem: how will I feed my family?

This is a critical point. We need people to come, and money governs the organization of life. So you need to have professional philosophers, professional artists, professional politicians, etc. I have a perfectly good explanation as to why I sell ideas for a living, for why I’m a kind of neo-sophist. The problem is that in our existing society, I simply can’t do it the other way. I can’t do it for free, because my family have and I have needs that cost money, and even if I tried, nobody would come.

What happens is that we have a cultural situation, a “cultural apparatus” as C. Wright Mills called it, and we have an economic reality.<sup>14</sup> This makes it virtually impossible for us to open everything up in the ways we ought to do it, which I think is ultimately not a critique of the arts; it’s not so much about the position of the gallery owners versus a better philosophical or political perspective. That’s the wrong question, I think. The question is ultimately how can we transform the conditions surrounding these institutions so that the institutions we need can actually function without so much precarity and difficulty.

But the fact is that we can’t just create the organizations and institutions we want in the existing society. Franco “Bifo” Berardi, during the Occupy Wall Street period, took his students into bank lobbies for his class sessions. They’d meet in a bank lobby and have their class there until the police came to break it up. I had a student the other day say to me, because of the

defunding of higher education, that we should hold classes in bank lobbies like Berardi. “Great idea,” I said, “except that of the 30 students in this class you would be one of three or four who would actually come to class in a bank lobby.”

An obvious lesson: we can't always do what we want to do. But this is why I go to the revolt. The revolt is the only activity today that wants, and actually tries in practice, to break limitations and rethink reality. Everything else is creativity within the boundaries of unacceptable limits. We've got to go out of bounds.

But if we just open the doors and say anyone can do anything here, here won't be here for long. That's the defense, but it's also the problem. The problem is that everything belongs to somebody. You're not allowed to go there. When I worked in New York City, you couldn't go on the grass in the public park at Union Square. “Keep off the grass.” I wanted to have lunch on the grass, but the police said I couldn't have a sandwich there in the public park. Do you know what I mean? What do you think about this?

SS: Yes and no. What I was referring to was the idea that people actively want to prevent some things from happening in the spaces. I am suggesting that it's more complicated than that; it's a different dynamic. And that's important because if you want to move to expand the possibilities of what can happen in a space, the problems you're going to face more than likely will not be the demands of some administrator determined to stop them, but rather concerns raised by someone who has a shared desire to keep a space of possibility open.

That's a different kind of terrain. What I am saying is that moving or breaking those constraints requires us to actually consider what is the motivating factor, what led to them existing. And there's two ways of moving them. The one is trying to expand spaces gradually, and then there's another approach that wants it done right now. Both are ways to move things. But if you're trying to negotiate and expand spaces to interact in, again, it can be more possible by identifying what are the common grounds you share with those who also have a stake in these spaces – and then push them. The people who run cultural institutions aren't cartoon baddies, usually. How far can you go? How far can you push it? What is possible? Knowing what is possible is a start for understanding what it actually is that is constraining the situation, or you have some conception of it. Otherwise, you'll try to

change it in ways that won't actually affect the constraint because you'll be doing something else. I definitely appreciate and value larger structural analyses, like the way that capitalism constrains cultural institutions. But I was making a point more about the micropolitics of negotiating and expanding how spaces are used. It's negotiating the constraints in the best way possible, because it's not like you can just magically imagine that they're going to disappear.



RGO: Yes, they won't disappear. I see your point and I also don't think they're bad people. I think they're good people, but they're good people who have to defend their spaces of life and work. It's not that you're a bad person if you defend that space because you live in a world in which you're not guaranteed anything without your position. But I do think that inasmuch as we are negotiating things there's a basic commitment to imagining a totally different organization. Maybe that's putting too much on art. Maybe I shouldn't urge that kind of a directive for art. But I tend to think that really powerful art that can move things, which possesses what I have been calling imaginary power, is precisely the art that goes beyond the negotiable boundaries of the existing situation. How so? It shows us real possibilities that break boundaries.



I've had dreams with colleagues, "let's create our own university." I've talked to some of my colleagues, especially those who cannot get good jobs but who are really good academics. I say, "I wish we could just form our own university somewhere." But how do you do that? I haven't the faintest idea. Doing philosophy or art, the question is always where: for whom and for what purpose do you do it? It's not about popularity, but it is about communication, about moving things.

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**SEMINAR PARTICIPANT:** There probably are a lot of silent voices. Sometimes the artistic establishments try to reach out. They had this thing called "outsider art" where they recognize that there have been people who have been on the outside and so they try to embrace them and put them on the inside.

**RGO:** You then convert the outside into the inside. Years ago, the New York City subway had a whole cavalcade of people who'd go down into the subway stations and play music, turn over a hat, and get donations from commuters. But they formalized that. So now, if you're the outsider artist in the subway, what if you don't have that banner saying you're a part of the "Music Under New York" series? They've converted the outside into the inside. So you say, "I want to play my saxophone in the subway to get some money for food." That is the real political economy of outsider art.

You've got somebody who takes their saxophone down into the bottom of the F train and maybe gets 40 or 50 dollars, maybe 150 or 200. Who knows? That is the outside venue. A makeshift venue. Just a space, *not* an institution. The outsider saxophonist says, "I'm just going to make a venue wherever I can stand."

This reminds me of something the great saxophonist Albert Ayler once said: "I remember one night in Stockholm, I tried to play what was in my soul. The promoter pulled me off the stage. So I went to play for little Swedish kids in the subway. They heard my cry."<sup>15</sup>

But once the outsiders are converted into official insiders, the outside is outlawed. If you go down into the subway station and take out a saxophone, the transit authority may ask you where your badge and banner are. "License and registration?" If they seize the inside and the outside, then

what is left? That's the basement. Is the person playing a saxophone? Yes, they're playing a saxophone. But they get no bread from it and nobody hears their cry.

SS: One person I quite like in how he approaches this is Theaster Gates.<sup>16</sup> He's this guy from Chicago. He creates these collective community art projects, made with community effort. And then he brings them, sells them, to the high art world and gets money. And with the funds from that sale he buys more spaces, more infrastructure, precisely to create collective spaces where people can then make more stuff. There's this whole process of using collective projects to get resources which he reinvests back into projects and spaces. And I like that because it's neither inside nor outside but it's negotiating back and forth between the different worlds. It's not using collective resources to make money for himself and then to say, "I'm rich, I'm so great." But rather, it's to create more business capacity for people to relate and create together.

RGO: Yes, I mean, that's a really great example and it's very creative.

SEMINAR PARTICIPANT: Yes, I think there are different models that need to be thought through. The gallery space has become almost redundant on some levels. That's OK. New things can be thought of, we don't have to cling to these old forms. But we also need to survive. Theaster Gates is a really good example of someone who's done really interesting work. But I think that there are possibilities for more of that and then there are possibilities to integrate more of this into counter-models so we can invest and invest in a way that doesn't break us.

SEMINAR PARTICIPANT: You definitely did the right thing by holding this seminar... What you're doing is putting into action what you're saying should happen in a small way.

RGO: Thanks. We experiment with the space and maybe nobody notices our experiment but then we go away and we can think and talk about it with some other people...

I like what you said about Theaster Gates. And part of what I've tried to resist is the idea that the intellectual class has to answer these questions.

Part of “riotous epistemology” is that, for example, when people after 1991 thought that the entirety of revolutionary hope and history was a closed chapter of the 20<sup>th</sup> century, the re-emergence of new revolutionary activity challenged and changed that conclusion. When the Zapatistas rose up in Mexico, we had to think again. But then the intellectual class started thinking about what *The New York Times* called the postmodern revolution, new forms of post-Soviet revolutionary politics.<sup>17</sup> But actually, it was because of the Zapatistas that the intellectual class realized there’s still a possibility and a hope there. The Arab Spring is now responsible for what will surely be generations of intellectual consideration of Middle Eastern and North African democratic movements and revolutionary possibilities. It would be really refreshing if intellectuals could admit that their own creativity in thinking about new models actually comes straight out of these movements.

So, you’ve mentioned Theaster Gates, and how a different model comes out of his practice. The most imaginative stuff comes from elsewhere. And that’s the rub, isn’t it? We have these institutions where people are supposed to gather to get their imaginations going, but that’s rarely where we find it happening. Outside is where it’s happening. We have to wait and see. When you go back to any revolt, we just have to wait and see what comes from it. This means *not* saying it’s already succeeded and *not* saying it’s already failed. We must not say that it’s over when it appears to have ended. Wait a minute! It may be taken up again in new and different ways. With art, too, it has the power to teach us what we wouldn’t have thought of without it.

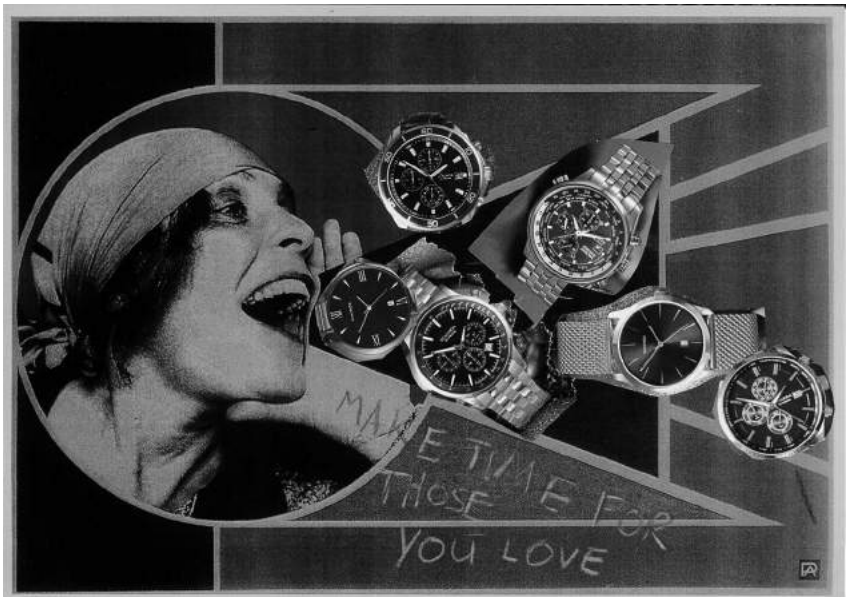
SS: Basically, your revolt is kind of like Spinoza’s notion of eternal life. Spinoza says that insofar as something a person did in the world continues to have an effect and have ripple effects, death is not the end. It’s just a marking point.

RGO: Yes, I completely agree with Spinoza! Only, I would rather not speak about posthumous effects or life after death. One of the things I try to do in the book with regard to the recent Black revolt in the US is to look at the upheaval as a coordinate in a long history going back to the 17<sup>th</sup> and 18<sup>th</sup> centuries. You could say that slavery is over but that there has been a ripple effect of racism in the US ever since. But I’d resist the idea that slavery has really been abolished. In the United States today, the racialization and

demography of poverty, police brutality, and incarceration, substantiate the claim that slavery never fully ended, but instead, took on different forms.<sup>18</sup>

SS: Or if you look at, – was it two years ago? – the BBC did this really interesting program on the abolition of slavery in the UK? How that happened here was much different than in the US, most obviously in that there wasn't a war over it. When slavery was abolished in 1833 the government made a massive pay out to slave owners to compensate them for their "loss." The BBC show was about research done by people at UCL<sup>19</sup> who, using archival records, traced where the money went, how it was invested, which railroads were founded with those funds, which estates were founded, and so on. And there you have an economic legacy of how all the money paid out to people for their "loss of property" created other forms of trusts, foundations, companies, family inheritances, and wealth – all of which, needless to say, became important parts of capitalism. It keeps going.

What we're calling riotous epistemology shows us another continuity, another way of keeping things going. But it's not one of property, ownership, and control. It's comprised instead of all the micropolitical activities that link and bring together moments of revolt. Or practices that draw up and reactivate those histories and memories into tools for the present.



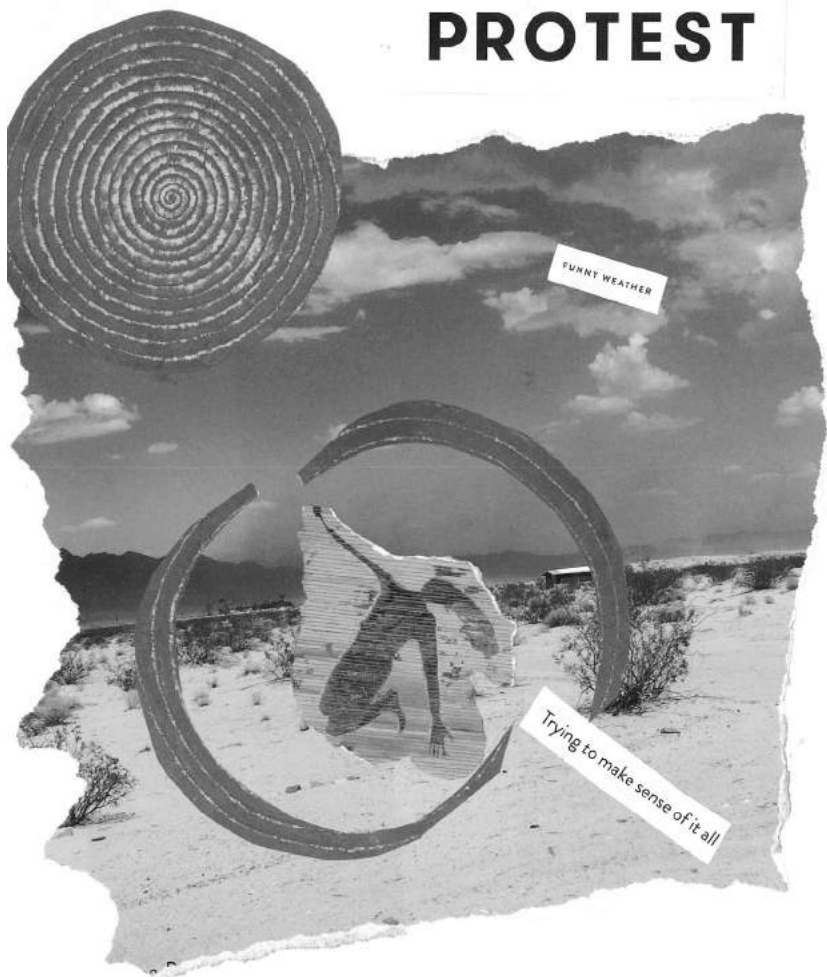
## Endnotes

- 1 Stefano Harney and Fred Moten, *The Undercommons. Fugitive Planning & Black Study* (Brooklyn: Autonomedia, 2013).
- 2 For more information on Firstsite, see <https://firstsite.uk>. For more information on the Gee Vaucher exhibition see <https://www.firstsite.uk/whats-on/gee-vaucher-introspective> or Stephen Shukaitis, Ed., *Gee Vaucher. Introspective* (Colchester: Firstsite, 2016).
- 3 Richard Gilman-Opalsky, *Specters of Revolt: On the Intellect of Insurrection and Philosophy from Below* (London: Repeater Books, 2016).
- 4 See Rosa Luxemburg's "The Mass Strike, the Political Party, and the Trade Unions," *Socialism or Barbarism: The Selected Writings of Rosa Luxemburg* (London: Pluto Press, 2010).
- 5 Brian Holmes, *Unleashing the Collective Phantoms: Essays in Reverse Imagineering* (Brooklyn: Autonomedia, 2008).
- 6 Bill Weinberg, *Homage to Chiapas: The New Indigenous Struggles in Mexico* (New York: Verso, 2000, 189).
- 7 Rita Kálmán and Katarina Šević, *We Are Not Ducks on a Pond But Ships at Sea: Independent Art Initiatives in Budapest 1989–2009* (Budapest: Impex, 2010).
- 8 Alain Badiou, *The Communist Hypothesis* (London: Verso, 2010)
- 9 Hakim Bey, *TAZ* (Brooklyn: Autonomedia, 2003)
- 10 It is important to note here that for many people the home is just another space of abuse – it is not a safe space, or a place of refuge. This has been written about by many feminist writers, such as bell hooks (2000) and Susan Moller Okin (1989).
- 11 Saskia Sassen, "Culture Beyond Gender," *Is Multiculturalism Bad for Women?* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 1999)
- 12 Susie Hodge, *Why Your Five Year Old Could Not Have Done That: Modern Art Explained* (London: Thames and Hudson, 2012)
- 13 *The Republic of Plato: Second Edition* (1991), translated by Allan Bloom (New York: Basic Books, 3, 327)
- 14 C. Wright Mills, *Power, Politics and People: The Collected Essays of C. Wright Mills* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1963)
- 15 See Nat Hentoff, *Downbeat Magazine* (17 November, 1966), "Albert Ayler – The Truth Is Marching In" available at <http://www.ayler.co.uk/html/interview1.html#hentoff>.
- 16 *Theaster Gates: 12 Ballads for Huguenot House* (Cologne: Verlag der Buchhandlung Walther König, 2012)
- 17 See <http://www.nytimes.com/books/01/04/08/reviews/010408.08goldent.html>

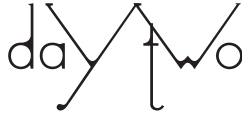
## DAY ONE

- 18 In this regard, I agree with both Angela Y. Davis (2005) and Michelle Alexander (2012).
- 19 For information on the Centre for the Study of the Legacies of British Slave-ownership:  
<https://www.ucl.ac.uk/lbs/>

# PROTEST



Protect the EARTH



## Spectral Compositions

RGO: My book, *Specters of Revolt*,<sup>1</sup> is about revolt and philosophy, thinking about global uprisings since roughly 2008. It's mainly focused on how the uprisings themselves are a part of thinking, or what we may call "the general intellect" of societies and people in different positions of desperation. Stephen wrote a book called *The Composition of Movements to Come*, also published in 2016.<sup>2</sup> And his book is not about revolt, at least not defined in the same way. What he looks at in *The Composition of Movements to Come* are radical art projects in politics and creative practice. But one of the things I find in his work is that his interest in radical art and creative practice is similar to my interest in insurrectionary disruptions, social upheavals, and events like that.

We're both looking for new ways of thinking and being, new forms of life, new ways of dealing with old impasses in radical and revolutionary politics or projects. I think it's fair to say that Stephen and I both begin where a lot of previous generations ended, with a kind of disaffected radical hope. A term I use in one of my earlier books, *Spectacular Capitalism*,<sup>3</sup> appears as a section entitled "Revolutionary Alternatives to Revolution." There, I think about what it means to give up on the grand nineteenth-century idea of totally changing the world, of having a major transformation through revolutionary movements. Would that mean having to give up on every concept of revolution? We don't think so. Both Stephen and I are interested in such revolutionary alternatives to revolution.

To this end, in *The Composition of Movements to Come* Stephen talks about different avant-garde practices in art activism and creative cultural production. You talk about the "art of the undercommons." And I don't think we ought to take for granted that it is obvious what that means. So maybe you could, first of all, define what you mean when you talk about art activism against art? That's one of your phrases, when you talk about the



“art of the undercommons.” Could you give some examples of what you mean by this?

SS: I’m interested in forms of cultural and artistic production that don’t necessarily appear as fine art or aren’t classified as art, or which aren’t thought of in the realm of “proper” art, to the degree such persists conceptually. For instance: in this room here, we’ve asked people to respond to the exhibition by making flyers about how they would change the world. I want to look at the practice of making flyers, of making zines, or making your own music as being just as important as David Mabb’s wonderfully painted Morris and Malevich mash-ups, or, in a different manner, the photography of Egyptian photojournalist Mosa’ab Elshamy. They might not have the same formal quality or craft to them, but they can express something that is deeply important to their creators. And they can have quite an impact in the world as they circulate. I’m interested in forms of cultural production that we can think of as art, but which we don’t necessarily have to think of as art – or which often don’t fit neatly into a category. And you can find this as a way into the history of the avant-garde, which is quite skeptical of the notion of art itself. So, we could go back to ready-mades, to Duchamp taking a urinal and writing “R. Mutt” on it.<sup>4</sup> What happens when you do that? I’m interested in those kinds of gestures that radically reshape the collective practices of all kinds, from looking to making, and then often the art world itself.

SEMINAR PARTICIPANT: What you’re saying about Duchamp – I listen over and over again to Grayson Perry’s Reith Lectures from 2013.<sup>5</sup> He makes lots of very valuable points about what art is, how anything is art. We’ve reached the end-stage in art, but that doesn’t mean to say that is the end of art’s outreach. And that’s essentially as you said: you can have something beautiful to look at, but that isn’t necessarily an end-in-itself; it sparks things. I’m fascinated by the idea that anything is art. Is it? Yes, it can be.

SS: I totally agree, and there is a sense in which over the past one hundred years in art history and thinking that this is often the case. So anything is art if you call it art. And that’s the case whether you put it in conceptual terms – perhaps by calling it pictorial nominalism – or not.<sup>6</sup> Art has no essence in itself but only the condition of being socially constructed as art. That’s basically what Roger Taylor argues as well in his book *Art, an Enemy*

*of the People*,<sup>7</sup> though for him that's much more of a problem than creating possibilities.

Now, you could say that gets you to a place where art has no meaning – but I would disagree. The question for me is instead in asking what happens, what is possible, by and through calling something art. What kind of social spaces does that create? Or, as you said, what does it spark? That's what my interest is: the sparking that is possible through doing things together in an artistic frame. In his writing, Richard explores moments of political revolt as doing the work of philosophy, as being a philosophical analysis in and of itself. I take a similar approach, but in a different direction. Instead, I'm exploring moments of revolt through particular forms of artistic and cultural production, and working to tease out their meaning, their sparking.

**RGO:** There's a way in which you can hear in the examples you gave an effort to try to think about art beyond its conceptualization as the private property of a professional class of artists. In our societies – in capitalist societies – the concept of production is always connected with power. And so, if you say that anyone can participate in creative production, that's a form of power. There's a certain sense in which, for Stephen, the de-professionalization of art production, the art of the undercommons, is a kind of open invitation to everyday people who wouldn't otherwise think of themselves as artists, as having the power to create something, to spark something, and maybe to change things.

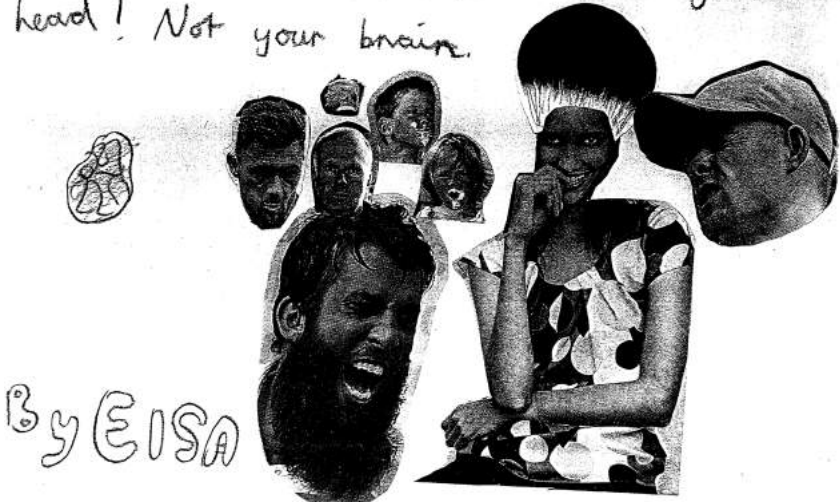
But it is important to notice something about these recent uprisings we've seen – and they've been in and around London, too – the reaction against them. The reaction against them is usually comprised of the same tri-part opposition: (1) they're irrational, (2) ineffective, and (3) violent. But as a philosopher, I think there's something strange about that because philosophy is supposed to like the opposite things. Philosophy proclaims rationality, objectivity – you know, calm, cool analysis. Philosophy prefers logic and order and places hope in argumentation as the effective path to change. So basically, the revolt is always condemned as the opposite of philosophy. It's a violent, irrational, ineffective, and dangerous emotional outburst.

I want to de-professionalize politics almost as much as Stephen wants to de-professionalize art. And I don't know if that's the right way to say it. It's not that we want to de-professionalize art, politics, or philosophy in an

institutional sense, but that we don't want to allow a class of professional thinkers, politicians, and artists to tell us what we can do creatively, politically, or intellectually.

When the Egyptian revolution happened in 2011, the people knew that they didn't like Mubarak, but it raised questions throughout the whole region. One of the most popular demands that emerged in that wave of uprisings was "down with the regime." So, that demand was in Tunisia, it was in Egypt, it was in Bahrain: "down with the regime." There were particular problems in each place, but also a sort of general and common expression of "we want something else." And that activity raises questions about the society; it raises questions about the power of everyday people, and not that of the professional class of politicians.

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head! Not your brain.



## How Much Art Can You Take

**SEMINAR PARTICIPANT:** Philosophers like to resolve things, don't they, to explain? And as you said, the revolution is. . . What they're doing is a human reaction to oppression, and there's so many forms of oppression. I wonder what art will come out of the USA in the current moment.

**SS:** This is probably a pithy thing to say, but I think there's more than a few of us who looked at the election of Donald Trump and said, "this is horrible, but music is going to get really good again."

**RGO:** Yes, music and art. It's also good news for comedy. People always sharpen the knives when something really objectionable happens. I don't want to say the situation with Trump is good or dialectically productive, because for real people it actually matters what he's doing with these immigration bans – and also in terms of foreign policy, health policy, and education policy. These things do really matter, although there is another side to it, for sure. Hopefully, the music takes up the problems, the art takes them up, the intellectuals take them up, everyday people take them

up, and with any fortune, the revolt takes them up too; we've already seen the occupations of airports take up Trump's anti-immigrant position. And really, I think of all of this activity, which is ultimately social activity, as the activity of real power.

Previously, we discussed the nature of imaginary power as opposed to real power. And sometimes we say that imaginary power isn't what we want. We want real power! But I would put a slight twist on that, because real power is worth nothing if you cannot imagine something radically different. What good is real power without the imaginary power to think of something much better, much different? So here, art can help with power. But if you only value power by measuring how it changes policy, then our power doesn't look like real power.

**SEMINAR PARTICIPANT:** It's a force, though, isn't it?

**RGO:** Yes, and I don't think we should judge power in terms of how it changes policy. I work in a department of political science. What many political scientists think is that nothing is political until it is articulated at the level of public policy. And I reject that. There are events that transform relationships between people. When we look at the 1969 Stonewall Uprising in New York, in the gay club down in Greenwich Village, we see power in the revolt. And that power changes things, it even changes law and policy much later on, as it participates in reshaping our thinking about sexuality, and eventually, issues like same-gender marriage. But the law only comes to reflect what's already been changed prior to the law, what's been happening outside of and against the law.

**SEMINAR PARTICIPANT:** Power isn't necessarily words, and that is important, too...

**RGO:** Yes, I think this is really the point: to think beyond words and text. And this is what puts Stephen and me in such close proximity, because a lot of the specific examples he's interested in – in art – are non-textual productions. They're performative. Stephen is interested in a lot of performative work. And one of the things I find in Stephen's writing that helps me to think is a wide array of examples of non-textual thinking: thinking that's outside of the narrowly textual type of communication.

SS: It also applies to a difficulty I've had. There's this sociologist I quite like, John Clammer, who wrote a book called *Vision and Society*.<sup>8</sup> In it, he says that he wants to create not a sociology of art, but a sociology *from* art. He wants to work from the direct thought process of art itself. I find this to be very interesting and very appealing. It reminds me, again, of how we talk about revolt as philosophy, revolt as thinking. But the difficulty is in how you write about it, explain it, mediate it, in a way that doesn't fall back onto the traditional or institutional role of the intellectual who tries to explain everything in a nice pattern and a clever, tidy explanation. How do you take direct practices, whether they're artistic or political practices, and try to tease them out and explain and expand them without forcing them back into the box or format of pre-fabricated explanations?

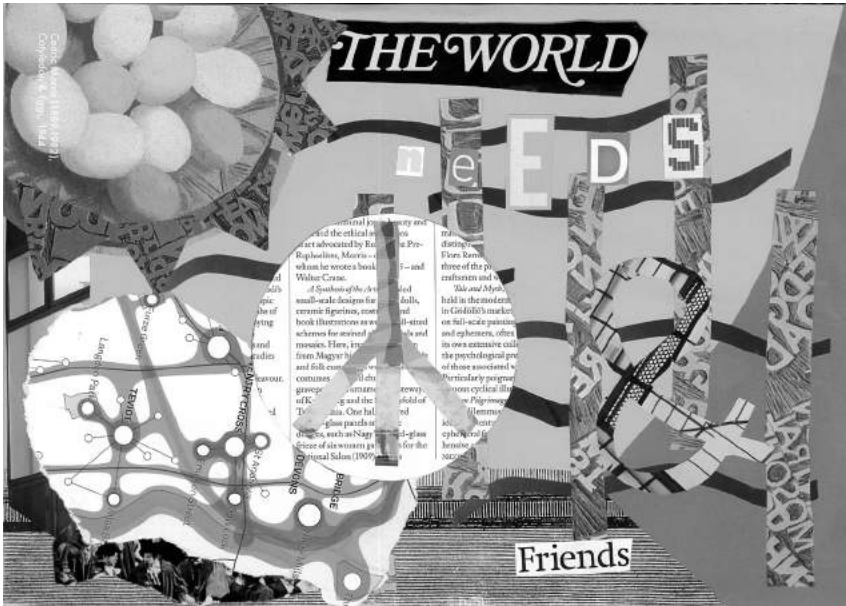
RGO: You were asking how you can take something that is non-textual, like a revolt, and say what it means through text without somehow disfiguring or distorting its meaning. And I think this is precisely what has to be done, but it's very difficult to think about how to do it. The starting point for me would be at the level of definitions. There's a reason why I don't talk about ideology from below or the ideological content of revolt. Instead, I talk about philosophy from below and the philosophical content of revolt.

There's an important distinction between ideology and philosophy, and unfortunately, it's one that was lost on Marx. When Marx wrote *The German Ideology*, he was criticizing German philosophy. And it was true that in the middle of the 19th century his generation was hobbled by a culture of sitting around in bars and cafés and talking about Hegel and having unending conversations about philosophy. And Marx was making a declaration against all of that, saying that the world is burning outside, that you're all too damn philosophical. He, of course, famously wrote in his "Theses on Feuerbach" that "the philosophers have only interpreted the world, in various ways; the point is to change it."<sup>9</sup> But what he missed is that there's actually a critical difference between philosophy and ideology. Ideology is what you get when you already have a finished worldview through which you interpret and understand the world. In German, there's a nice word for it: *Weltanschauung*. And if you look at the world through this particular worldview, you look at it through ideological lenses that make the world support your worldview.

One way I saw this was in the *International Socialist Review*, a pretty popular Left-wing magazine. When the so-called Arab Spring started, they had many articles about how the people in Tahrir Square were anti-capitalists, how they were socialists, and how when they said, “down with the regime,” they meant “down with capitalism.” But that was not true. This was an ideological translation of a very complicated and heterogeneous social reality that was really much messier. And one of the things that I would recommend is to look at the really good 2013 documentary entitled *The Square*, by Jehane Noujaim. The cameras go into Tahrir Square and one of the things you see is the deep disagreement there. Friends and family members fighting in their apartments, really not sure at all about what should come next. You see so many people who don’t want the Muslim Brotherhood, but who think that it might be the best available option. There were other people who were categorically against it, and others who wanted total revolution. And actually, there were a lot of people who were just talking about opportunity, and not talking about abolishing capitalism. They’re talking about reforms; they’re talking about democracy.

For me, this open questioning is philosophical. Ideology is the end of open questioning.

With ideology, you already know how things ought to be: you’re a conservative, you’re a liberal, you’re a radical, you’re a communist, or you’re an anarchist. And then you put on your ideological glasses and, through that *Weltanschauung*, you look at the world and everything you see is confirmation bias. Instead, I think we should look at the revolt as a philosophical rather than an ideological activity. And when we look at these revolts, we ought to resist saying that they are communist, or Marxist, or anarchist, or liberal, or conservative. That’s what I try to do – to resist giving them, in a translation, some particular ideological perspective, which I think that in fact they don’t have. They’re much more philosophical, and it’s precisely that fact that makes it so hard to translate such non-textual events. But this doesn’t mean that open questioning in the philosophical activity of revolt is not saying anything at all. It’s just not an expression of some cohesive ideology.



## Stories from Below

SS: Our discussion reminds me of approaches that have been developed by people working in social history, where the idea is to record a variety of experiences and perspectives – in particular, voices and stories that are usually not recorded as part of the historical record – without necessarily trying to impose a coherent or unified narrative on them. Social history, in this sense, is a process of registering the messiness of such accounting as much as the readable and communicative contents themselves.

RGO: Yes, and not to give the account a meaning that is external to it. It is a complex social history. The only thing I don't like about the word "history" is its implication that certain events, or a series of events, are finished and done and part of the past. Sometimes something happens, and while it seems to be over, it is in fact far from finished.

SS: Does history have to imply that?



RGO: It doesn't. I like the notion that history is happening. But I also think that what is happening are so many things that have already been declared finished and done. But they're *not* finished. A lot of these revolts – for example, Black revolt in the US – involve taking up unfinished business. They're taking up very old problems in new contexts. You see this with racism, you see it with inequality. Inequality is very old. When politicians call it austerity, you have anti-austerity protests. When you see the Indignados in Spain rise up, they're not addressing a new problem; it's a very old problem. Yet the problem of dignity isn't only a historical problem. Nor is an uprising ever the last act in the history of confronting that problem.

SS: In some ways, you can say that history, as a concept, implies closure. And that's the same problem you identify in ideology: closure. It entails wanting to see an end and to say, "okay, here it is, it's over with, it's done."

RGO: I like the way you put it: that with both ideology and history the problem is that of closure. When you meet somebody who's very ideological, they're finished thinking about the questions that have been answered by their ideology. And that's the antithesis of philosophy.

By contrast, when young people, who are not following any example, try something new and courageous and scary and they're not sure what's going to happen: that's a philosophical moment. They are afraid, but they nonetheless feel that they must open a rupture for questioning.

A lot of the students I've had who were part of Occupy Wall Street have told me that they miss that period of questioning the existing reality. A real period of questioning, deep down into the bone marrow of society: should it be this way? Should we have this? And I think such questioning is one of the things that goes away for a time when the revolt settles down. It doesn't go away permanently, just for a time. And I would say the same thing about art and the way in which you used the term "spark" to mean the way it poses new questions and ways of thinking. That is the philosophical moment. Now, I wouldn't want to make art into philosophy, but it is at least philosophical. And I think that art actually does philosophy better than professional philosophers in many cases. If you go to an exhibit or watch a great documentary film and it is jarring and hurts and puts you in a place where you just...

SEMINAR PARTICIPANT: . . . where you didn't want to be.

RGO: Right. It's an affective experience. The power can be overwhelming. You leave the exhibit, or the theatre, or the music venue, and you say, "I don't think I'll ever be the same" or "I'll never think about this in the same way that I did." And this is precisely what good philosophers ought to aspire to do, but rarely do they do it. I would almost rather see the extinction of the class of professional philosophers who like to think, as Bertrand Russell argued, that everything comes from philosophy. Russell said that every open set of questions first belonged to philosophy, and once it collected enough certainty, it then broke off to become its own science.<sup>10</sup> But that's the ideology of philosophy. And it is possible for philosophers to become very ideological about their own practice.



## All isms are wasms

SS: One of the things that really impressed me about working on the *Introspective* exhibition with Gee Vaucher:<sup>11</sup> when you look at the body of her work from over fifty years, she draws on and engages with a wide range of radical politics. But despite that, she's very resistant to being labeled or pigeonholed as an anarchist artist, or as a feminist artist, or with any "-ism" for that matter. Does that mean that there are no connections between her work and those different strains of politics? Of course not. But she doesn't want to be trapped within a label or space where things are closed. And you can see how that plays out not just in the content of the work she produces, but also in the way she goes about it, the organization of life, for instance at Dial House, which is both very individual and collective at the same time. People talk a lot about the concept of prefigurative politics. With Gee's work you could arguably see something like a prefigurative aesthetics, where the method of producing art together is political in its content, but also necessarily and maybe more importantly in how it's produced. It's particularly interesting that Gee has suggested that if she has a relationship

to anarchism, it's in always throwing her methods and assumptions into question. She never wants to be stuck in something; she always wants to rethink how she can do things differently. How can she organize, how can she think differently? I find that really compelling. And it becomes increasingly difficult to challenge yourself over time because it's really easy to fall into a comfortable thought pattern or routine. It takes a great effort not to do that.

**SEMINAR PARTICIPANT:** Comfort is dangerous. Many just want to resolve, nurture, and come to a calm resolution of all conflict in life and society.

**RGO:** Exactly. I'm glad you raised this because we haven't talked about it yet. There's a whole chapter in *Specters of Revolt* dedicated to this, which is called "Beyond the Old Virtue of Struggle." In politics, there's a long tradition, going back not only to Marx but also to Frederick Douglass and others, that thinks the way to change the world is through struggle and agitation. Douglass famously said that there can be no progress without struggle.<sup>12</sup> But life is full of pain and people struggle even when they're not doing anything political at all. They struggle to make ends meet, to make their families happy, to make themselves happy. People struggle with anxiety, with the uncertainty of their job and their future. People struggle financially, psychologically, emotionally. People struggle with physical afflictions, surprise illnesses, and death, all kinds of things from abuse to hunger to homelessness. So, for somebody to say today that in order to change the world the very first thing we need to do is struggle, you want to shout back: "No, I always struggle!" What I'm trying to do in that particular chapter is to consider ways of challenging the existing reality that are not so damn miserable! Something like joyful agitation.

But isn't it natural to want to be comfortable? Humans aren't looking for more stress, anxiety, agitation, and struggle. And there's been quite a bit of psychological research to show that it's damaging even physiologically to be overburdened with different forms of stress and anxiety. Alain Ehrenberg wrote a book, *The Weariness of the Self*, in which he talks about how all of these everyday things can destroy you.<sup>13</sup>

What's great about art, which you can also see in the recent revolts, is the way in which it's disruptive yet joyful. And the people gathering, they're not so unhappy in the gathering. They often are experiencing community for

the first time, and that is disruptive to their everyday alienation. The struggle, properly speaking, is in everyday life outside of the revolt. The revolt, in this sense, is what interrupts the struggle.



**SEMINAR PARTICIPANT:** It is the community element, the getting together, the common body of community. It's so important.

**RGO:** Yes, and sometimes we underestimate this, this little bit of human solidarity. That's often hard to come by in everyday life. But the feeling of connection to others who share some of your disaffection is extremely important. The surrogates we create for friendship don't actually serve the functions of friendship. When I see these photographs here in the gallery, and particularly that one there with all of the bodies together, you see the people, and it's an experience that is really outside of the norm. And that picture of all the masses of bodies there in the street is a picture of a singular and extraordinary experience. I think everybody in that picture, despite the diversity of their ideological positions, must have left that scene knowing that the experience was an extraordinary thing. In the Arab Spring, despite the diversity of views and the low confidence about how to really solve the problems, they all quite liked the aspect of coming together. They wanted to go back to the square, and I think they couldn't wait to go back, and it

didn't take them long. When Morsi came in and changed the constitution they said, "Let's go back to the square!"

SS: If you look at the photographs here from Egypt, some of them were chosen because of the way that they juxtapose a really unusual break in everyday life with something that seems quite common. Like here – a woman who looks like she's walking to work, but with her gasmask on. Or maybe she's going to do the shopping. There's one picture from Tahrir Square with people playing ping-pong. It's both something very ordinary, but a bit strange because of being placed in an extraordinary time and place.

They're in what the Free Association calls "moments of excess."<sup>14</sup> You get the outpouring of energies, of excitement, of enthusiasm, but that cannot stay that way. Then sort of what would happen, how does it come back to everyday life, where does it go afterward? Or there's another image, which strikes me as quite surreal, where there are burning cars and there's a guy doing a handstand.

SEMINAR PARTICIPANT: How do we view them, having looked at these pictures of distress or antithesis or irony, the traditional, beautiful things against the pictures? For example, the old masters and their set, positioned family scenes. We can look at anything that's put before us, what do we see in those now?

RGO: This kind of returns us to the question of the past, doesn't it?

SS: Yes and no. For instance, in this one image here, it's striking because it immediately makes you wonder why is this person holding a frame? Why do you take an empty frame to a political protest? He is relying upon the idea of sort of the formal mechanisms of the frame of art production.

SEMINAR PARTICIPANT: And it's a photograph. I'm speaking of paintings, aren't I? So it's a different element, yes.

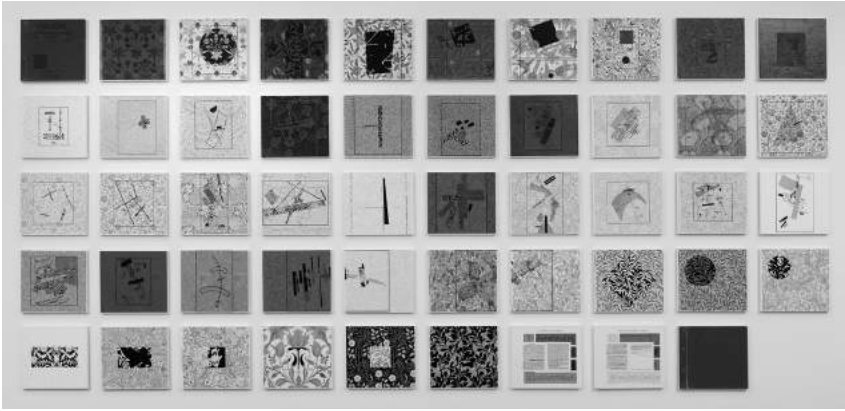
SS: Yes, but not totally. But a lot of formal elements, compositional approaches, come into photography from painting. So perhaps it's not a total distinction between the two. Not to reopen an old debate, but it does raise the question of what is the role and function of painting after the

rise of photography. Why paint? It would seem that the orientation gets displaced from a quest for realism or accuracy into representation, which can be done better by photography, into something else. And that's something that I very much like in the work of someone like David Mabb, in how he brings together the designs of someone like William Morris with the Russian avant-garde art. He's trying to tease out ideas at a formal level, but from quite different places and trajectories. People like Malevich use abstract shapes, very geometric. While someone like Morris is much more sort of an arts and crafts approach, an organic sense of design. They're really different, but they're both examples of trying to reshape society through a form of art production. As a painter, Mabb recognizes common elements in the intents of both, between Malevich's highly abstract forms of political art, and Morris's craft-informed designs that can and did look good as wallpaper in people's homes.

SEMINAR PARTICIPANT: Evolution, is it an evolution through themes?

SS: Yes, but it's also asking what can you get out of those forms of painting?

SEMINAR PARTICIPANT: You cannot do everything. You have to make a choice sometimes.



## Culture Against Itself

**RGO:** A couple of thoughts come to mind about this – one of them prompted by Stephen’s comment about photography. There was a very interesting discussion on photography by the French philosopher Jean-François Lyotard. He wrote about how, in pictorial realism, the reaction against photography came from the fact that painters had long been developing the skills with which to faithfully reproduce the natural world. Then, photography comes along and says that we can do that even better without your artistic skills. It’s de-skilling, in a way, and there was a reaction against the technology.<sup>15</sup> I remember seeing something similar at the 2006 “Dada” exhibition at The Museum of Modern Art in New York City... Reactionary German students went to an exhibition of Kurt Schwitters and shot his pieces with rifles. Conservative students took up arms against it.

Lyotard talks about similar reactions against film from earlier generations of storytellers. The fear was that the film, the camera, would destroy the artist’s craft and our imagination. Because previously, with storytelling, you had to envisage the whole scene, but now the film relieves you of the burden of having to use your imagination in that way. In a sense, there’s a certain conservatism. Lyotard was saying that the reaction against the new form is really just an undue respect for the old form and its masters. It’s not only that the masters defend themselves against the new forms, but also that the older generation made careers, professional careers, on various ways of “knowing the masters.” And then you have somebody else who comes up



and makes splatter paintings and declares that this is the work of the new masters. Those who know the old masters and teach those techniques are thus put in a defensive position.

But it doesn't have to be that way. We can look at those old works and still experience something through them. (And, in many ways, you could say that the music of John Coltrane is still, fifty years later, the music of a distant future.) If it makes you feel, who's to say that you ought not to feel something? I still read Plato, I still read Kant, but I don't say that Plato is the end of thinking and I don't say that Kant is the end of philosophy... I once had a professor who was a Kantian who declared that there is no philosophy after Kant. He felt that Kant had solved all of the basic problems of philosophy. There are people who feel that way about the old masters in art, that this was perfection and everything after is worse.

SS: But you can also use that overwrought sense of reverence for bourgeois culture against itself. I'm thinking of a really funny story during the 1848 revolt in Dresden when Bakunin took the paintings from the museum and put them on the barricades so the soldiers wouldn't attack.

RGO: That's right, yes. That was the story – as told by Guy Debord – that Bakunin said to the soldiers, if you want to kill us, then you'll have to put a bullet through your bourgeois canvas. It's a wonderful story.

SEMINAR PARTICIPANT: We're very forgiving these days... Forgiving in a Catholic sense... Things are different. You absorb everything for what it is. I'm no expert, but...

SS: One doesn't need to be an expert to speak.

RGO: This is the crux of our message. When you look at Stevphen's ideas on art in *The Composition of Movements to Come*, he says that all of these creative practices are things that anyone can do. And I insist in my book too, discussing what I call "the intellect of insurrection," that the intellect is elsewhere and everywhere, and that the experts aren't the only ones thinking. It's a feminist argument. I rely a lot on feminist epistemology. There's a wonderful book edited and introduced by Linda Alcoff and Elizabeth Potter called *Feminist Epistemologies*.<sup>16</sup> The volume documents a long history of

the total disqualification of women's knowledge as knowledge at all. All forms of knowledge rooted in the experience of being women, socially, biologically (i.e., sexual pleasure, pregnancy, birth), were ruled out as being too subjective to count as "real knowledge." That's why the male "experts" came up with terms like "old wives' tale."

There was something else I wanted to come back to now. In *The Composition of Movements to Come*, Stephen, you occasionally talk about the art of the undercommons, art against art, in an oppositional tension with capitalism in the world. But a lot of the things, the specific practices you look at, while they do have a different internal logic than the logic of capital, they don't interact with the larger society. There are probably many more Dial Houses, and houses with unlocked doors, and we'll never see or visit them.

But I wonder how such isolated and disparate practices and projects challenge capitalism. Do you know what I mean? One has to make a little pilgrimage to visit such things, whether they reside in a museum or the countryside. And if you don't go looking for them, you may never find them or even know they exist. The thing that I like about revolt, on the other hand, is the way that the person who doesn't go looking for it is nonetheless seized by it. If you're in a city like Baltimore in 2015, you don't go out of your way to see what's happening. Your life in Baltimore is directly disrupted by the revolt. The questions raised in the revolt become your questions, the city's questions. And actually, people around the country who aren't even in the city are affected by what's happening there. Whereas I wonder and worry about the disruptive power of the art of the undercommons... If it didn't happen at all, things may be much the same as if it did. Is that something worth questioning?

SS: I think it's the wrong question – to think about whether particular artistic or political practices directly challenge capital at every moment. Rather, it's a question of what kind of social composition they animate, which then could spill over into other areas, into other forms of political action. That's one thing I saw feeding into the rise of the global justice movement, coming out of things like Food Not Bombs or Critical Mass, for instance.<sup>17</sup> They create a social logic that at some point develops into another form of interaction. I'm more interested in how they work to organize forms of sociality

than in wanting to judge them if they necessarily develop in certain directions. That seems to me to be just another form of closure.

RGO: I see, so as prefigurative practice?

SS: I wouldn't necessarily use that framing, at least all the time, even though I just did earlier. It can be a loaded concept. But, yes, and I think you see similar things when it comes to moments of upheaval. For instance, let's take *The Mothers of the Plaza de Mayo*. They're standing outside a state building with a picture of a kid pinned to their chests. That isn't directly confronting the power of capital and the state. But what it does do is bring out something, a frustration, and understandable loss that then becomes something else. And that was really valuable, especially in a context where more open forms of dissent and expression were very dangerous. Most forms of cultural production are not going to directly contest the domination of capital, whether they want to or not. There are a million punk songs about smashing the system that will never lead to that because that's not something a song can directly do – but it might contribute to a broader set of connections, social relations, interactions that then goes somewhere.

RGO: Yes, I see what you're saying. It's something like where Félix Guattari wondered whether or not all these little micro-revolutions would ever become *really revolutionary*?<sup>18</sup> You have all these micropolitical things that, in themselves, there's a certain antagonistic logic to them, a rival logic, but the question is: What will become of them?

SS: This connects back to social history. I'm thinking back to revolts a few years ago. They probably just came from people who knew each other through sports clubs, through neighborhood associations, through being friends, through maybe some music. And you cannot say that being in a sports club caused the Baltimore revolt, no; but there is an indirect connection there.

RGO: I see. It sounds a little bit like James C. Scott's *Domination and the Arts of Resistance: Hidden Transcripts*.<sup>19</sup> You're talking about off-stage cultural production. It doesn't have to be on-stage in order to be important. And what you're saying is that it's not on-stage but it's still important.

Scott's not focusing on cultural production, but it's the same idea. It's kind of like "domination and the arts of the undercommons and resistance." Is that fair?

SS: Yes, I'd agree with that. Though I'd want to add that Scott's work does address cultural production, in the broader anthropological sense of culture as everyday practice. And that's something that I try to work toward, much in the same way artistic avant-gardes have often argued for a merging of art and everyday life. But, yes, I've found Scott's writing very useful, along with people working in similar directions and concepts, like Robin D. G. Kelley.

RGO: Okay, that helps me understand. You know how you were asking about translation in the revolt? The subtext was about how to help the revolt speak without determining what it says. I think we can say that revolts are not conservative inasmuch as they're not about the conservation of the present state of affairs. They're always a challenge beyond their own boundaries, which is what I like about revolt. Sometimes, I think, in *The Composition of Movements to Come*, that you are overdetermining the significance of small things. And I like small things. You and I both share a resistance to the notion of big solutions, but don't you run the risk of overdetermining the significance of small things?

SS: I suppose the difficulty is that there are forms of everyday cultural production that of course don't lead to becoming politicized. And so there's a very real risk of wanting to see in artistic or political practices that they will develop in the way we'd like them to. There's the temptation of seeing what we want to see. And it's important to try not to fall for that. But that's also where I started from – with the question of political strategy – and given the bad reputation that discussing strategy has within anarchist and autonomous politics, is it possible to have a different way to strategize together... how to do political strategy in a non-hierarchical fashion. And from there, the question becomes one of how forms of artistic and cultural production create spaces for enabling that. Analytically, I want to be agnostic on what they develop in that space, even if politically I have, of course, my own take on what I'd hope would develop out of them. If you're looking at revolt as philosophy, and looking at what comes before and after the revolt, it's asking how you get there and what you do afterward.

RGO: That's really good. And for me, there is a hidden hope that cultural production may be able to help put people in a position to act when revolt happens – to be able to think with it, appreciate it, and to participate in it depending on the range of relations one may have to the revolt. It's part of what puts people more or less in a position to relate to it one way or another, which is why some people obviously also react against the revolt as something that has to be shut down and opposed, because the cultural apparatus that they're integrated into is dissuasive of every kind of disruption or law-breaking. But then afterward, the art that comes out, it goes on the other side and continues to proliferate.

SS: But one of the classic examples is the relationship between anti-colonial movements and literature. Literature doesn't cause anti-colonial revolt; however, it develops a sense of community and belonging that fed into numerous anti-colonial movements.

RGO: Yes. In Bernard Bailyn's *The Ideological Origins of the American Revolution*,<sup>20</sup> he talked about all of the pamphlets that helped to put people in the position ideologically that made it possible for them become revolutionaries. He was trying to ascribe to the pamphlets and pamphleteering a certain role.

SS: One of the flyers we put up there is from a section of the book *Q*, by Luther Blissett.<sup>21</sup>

RGO: Ah, you put it up. Yes, I haven't read it yet.

SS: In that text, they're talking about flyers. It basically fictionalizes the invention of the flyer, where you have a bunch of people at a print shop and one guy says, "what are these extra pieces of paper" – "oh, they're just extra." Well, we could print something, a nice short message, and distribute thousands of them.

One thing that Stefano Harney asked me a few years ago: he said something like, "in your writing you come close to, but never actually get to a politics." That bothered me at first, the idea of not having a politics. But now I quite like it, the idea of getting close but never actually fixing a politics in the same way you can argue that labor struggles are most effective when you

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almost, but don't quite, have a union. There's that threshold, a moment of change that you're approaching – but you're not quite going there.

## Endnotes

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- 4 See Marcel Duchamp, *Fountain*, 1917, replica 1964, ceramic, glaze, and paint, 15 x 19¼ x 24⅞”, San Francisco Museum of Modern Art, <https://www.sfmoma.org/artwork/98.291>.
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- 9 Karl Marx, “Theses on Feuerbach,” (1845; Marxists Internet Archive, 2005), 3, available at: <https://www.marxists.org/archive/marx/works/1845/theses/theses.pdf>.
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- 15 See Jean-François Lyotard, “Answering the Question: What Is Postmodernism?,” in *The Lyotard Reader and Guide*, ed. Keith Crome and James Williams (New York: Columbia University Press, 2006), 125-26.
- 16 Linda Alcoff and Elizabeth Potter, eds., *Feminist Epistemologies* (London: Routledge, 1993).

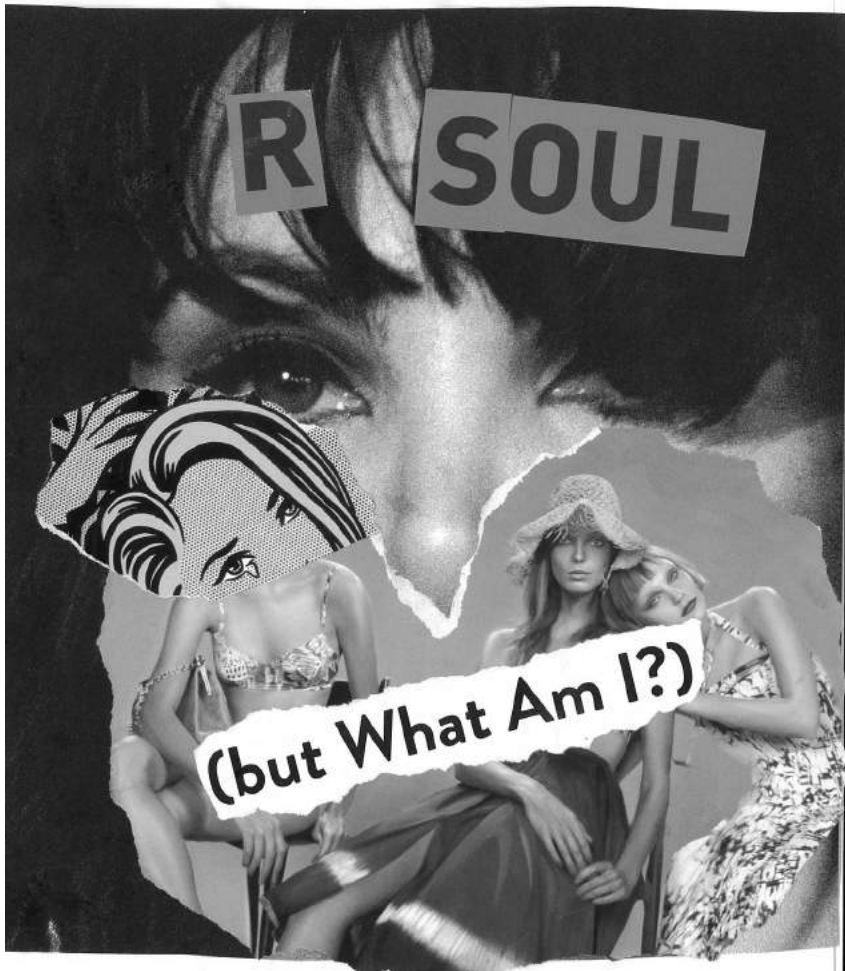
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- 17 Ben Holtzman, Craig Hughes, and Kevin Van Meter, "Do It Yourself . . . and the Movement beyond Capitalism," *Radical Society* 31, no. 1 (2004).
- 18 See Félix Guattari, "The Proliferation of Margins," *Semiotext(e)* 3 (1980): 108-11.
- 19 James C. Scott, *Domination and the Arts of Resistance: Hidden Transcripts* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1990).
- 20 Bernard Bailyn, *The Ideological Origins of the American Revolution* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1967).
- 21 Luther Blissett, *Q* (London: Arrow, 2003).



BE YOUR

R SOUL



(but What Am I?)

TRUE SELF

You cannot buy history

## A Postscript

Stephen Shukaitis

*RIOTOUS EPISTEMOLOGY* IS AN EXPERIMENT. IT IS THE RECORD OF A SERIES OF conversations produced within a conjunction of contingent circumstances that have been inhabited, and through this medium, further shared.

In early 2017 Firstsite had a gap of several weeks in their programming, a time for which there was nothing planned for a section of their gallery space. This was when I was approached about organizing an exhibition to fill that gap, with less than three weeks' notice. Any reasonable person would have responded to such a request, especially having just finished working in a larger and more extensive exhibition, by saying that they needed a break to recover and recuperate. But since I am a persistently unreasonable person, and one who hates to see a good chance pass by, I agreed to organize something for it.

The central idea that developed was to organize a pop up exhibition exploring histories of revolt. That seemed a very timely topic in the wake of the Arab Spring, the various Occupy movements, Black Lives Matter, and other uprisings, as well as the 100<sup>th</sup> anniversary of the Russian Revolution. At the same time, I was planning for Richard to visit Colchester so that we could run a joint PhD seminar around the politics of revolt. Given the coincidence of dates between Richard's visit and the exhibition, it only seemed natural to take all those familiar critiques of academic institutions (that they are elitist, do not share what is produced, etc.) and turn them

into a practical change of plans. Instead of a closed seminar intended for PhD students, why not organize an open event? And thus, we decided to move the seminar and make it part of the exhibition.

And that's what we did. We spent two days in – and as part of – the exhibition, engaging in themes related to these often-hidden histories of revolt, and shared ideas from our research and writing. People wandered in and out of conversations. We didn't keep track of names. Sometimes there were larger groups, and sometimes it was just the two of us. There was no set statement or goal, rather just seeing what could be made of the situation and how that might resonate with people, including us. If it did resonate, success. This was the same outlook that guided the exhibition and the event series organized around it as well.

During the entire duration of the exhibition there were two moments that really stuck with me. The first was when a young girl, maybe around four or five years old, had finished making a flyer as part of the section inviting people to do that. When she realized that she could post up what she had made you could see her face light up with the feeling of validation and accomplishment. Similarly, one event as part of the Clip, the weekly experimental music and sound meet-up held at Colchester, we had decided to improvise a live re-soundtracking of Dziga Vertov's 1929 classic *Man with a Movie Camera*. A local carer came to the session with a developmentally challenged teenager who was interested in music. During the session, at first he was quite hesitant in his playing... but after a few minutes he definitely went for it, with a greater sense of joy than I've almost ever seen.

Is it important whether the flyer produced by the young girl or the sounds made by the young man are 'good' or quality work? To some people, perhaps yes. In this context – not at all. In everyday life we're constantly confronted by alienating conditions, restrictions separating us from the time and resources we need in order to to experience these joys. Richard reminds us that the ghosts of past revolts haunt the systems of governance: the moments of joy and uprising. This means that even when it seems like nothing is happening, like life has become too controlled, it's often not really the case.

This thought consoles me as I sit here writing this postscript from Singapore, a country that from the outside often appears as overly sanitized, orderly, and run in an authoritarian manner. But there are other sides that are not as apparent or visible at first. And that's what my thoughts return to

## YOU CANNOT BUY HISTORY

as I sit here in the food court of Sim Lim Square, across from the Geylang International Football clubhouse. From here, I can see a pennant bearing the slogan “History Can’t Be Bought.” Indeed, it cannot. Singapore, too, is haunted by the ghosts of its anticolonial revolts and history. Perhaps the over-the-top attempts at control today are just failed efforts to scare away and quash these memories. But even with that you cannot buy history. What you can do, however, is to explore these histories, and perhaps find ways in which they resonate with the present, and so continue to live on. We hope that our conversations say something to your present, wherever and whenever, that may be.

