

Art Schools Burning
and Other Songs of Love and War:

Anti-Capitalist Vectors and Rhizomes

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Ku'e! out to the comrades on the occupied island of O'ahu.

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Preface: Is Another Art World Possible?

It is June 2006: nine months into the fifth year of the dirty little "war on terror." The crisis of neo-liberal globalization that this war was meant to dissemble and bring under control appears to be deepening and drifting toward a global crisis of liberal governance. In the nation-state of exception, corruption and abuse of power scandals have engulfed the Bush administration, and public support for the occupation of Iraq has crumbled. For its part, the Democratic pseudo-opposition remains helplessly in thrall to the conventions of corporate politics and habitual, mimicking triangulation to the right. South of the Plantation House of Freedom, however, Latin America continues its rebellious reach for autonomy and social justice, serving up belated blowback for a century of

miseries and repressions imposed by counter-revolutionary US interference. In France, labor market "reforms" conceived as a response to weeks of rioting in the suburbs have in turn provoked massive protests and civil disobedience by French students and young people in the largest campus eruptions since May 1968. On May Day, immigrants and Latinos protesting enforced precarity, restricted mobility and the militarization of the US-Mexican border poured into the streets in cities across America, in some of the largest linked demonstrations, strikes and boycotts in US history.

The agony of the Middle East and the malign neglect of Africa continue, as does our collective failure to search honestly and imaginatively for the conditions of real mutual security. The intensified militarization of police functions worldwide since September 11, 2001, has resulted in a spectacular increase in the imagery of repressive intimidation: digital video streams from urban centers all over the planet have made familiar the new phalanxes of "robocops" in riot gear deployed to discipline unruly citizens. But far from enforcing official fictions of social harmony, these deployments now seem to be necessitated, as if in perverse self-fulfillment, by increasingly open manifestations of popular unrest and

impatience. And the criminalization of dissent – including the legal reduction of all forms of politically motivated militancy and direct action to the category of “terrorism” – seems to be reaching its current limit, as the contradictions of “national security” collide too openly against the liberal rhetoric of civil and human rights. In sum, it goes not well for Empire. If it is still too early to say that things are heating up, it is undeniable that the situation has warmed considerably: the global warming of second nature is now a verifiable social fact.

The anti-capitalist rhizomes – the global movement of movements that dares to insist “another world is possible” – has refused to be cowed, blocked or managed by the politics of fear. The moment is over, in which capitalism in combination with the conventions of liberal governance could claim to be uncontested historical destiny. This world system is again in question, the problems of systemic transformation have again become urgent. Astonishingly enough, we once again belong to a world of active struggles in which revolution is thinkable.

It is to this event of reopening that these essays and texts attempt to respond. They try to rethink the heritage of the artistic avant-gardes in light of contemporary struggles and the current critical revival of the

revolutionary tradition. Heritage, tradition: we reenact our own beginnings, in reaching to make our own history, but we don't do so out of nothing. We are the heirs of a twentieth-century inheritance that is not of our own choosing. To think revolution, again, today, would be to receive this inheritance, not in order to repeat it, but in order to process and surpass it: to mourn it as past disaster and defeat even while gathering and resolving its unrealized promise for new performances and enunciations of collective autonomy and systemic reorganization. The autonomous impulses of "art" may be one form of the refusal of power. But if so, it is one that leaves the given power in place – where it does not affirm and reinforce it. Revolution – the generalization of autonomy – would need to be the destruction of power: an unpowering powerful enough to neutralize established power and to set up in its place only a permanent refusal and evacuation of power. This "event" of rupture and the paradoxical process of perpetual un-founding – or confounding – that it promises would not be able to avoid the violence that repels violence: the force required to defend the generalization of autonomy from the war machines of a given that refuses to change. The reach for an open history of qualitative moments always risks the worse: the leap beyond the given disaster is an opening to

autonomy but also to more disaster, and it is impossible to know ahead of time which kind of arrival is arriving. The ordeals of ethics belong necessarily, yet irreducibly, to revolution and the radical reinvention of politics – and to the practices of an “art” that would leverage its restricted autonomy to the struggle for autonomy’s generalization.

Loosely orienting these chapters is the assumption that we lack the radical culture (or more precisely, cultures, in the plural) needed to push the crisis of neo-liberal hegemony into a revolutionary crisis of capitalism as a world system. The radical culture that had painstakingly been invented and built up at different times in the past, most recently in the 1960s and 70s, has mostly been smashed or absorbed by the recuperative and neo-colonial processes of capital. The catastrophic loss of this culture in much of the world, outside remnants and resistant pockets of reproduction and transmission, belongs to the history we inherit. We will need to rebuild it, this profusion of contestational collectives and cooperatives, counter-institutions and oppositional “public spheres,” networks of radical bookstores and presses, coffee houses and alternative cinemas, anti-capitalist bars, workshops and youth centers, reading and working

groups, squats and pirate radio stations, communes and open universities. To be sure, some of this culture persists, here and there, as practices of solidarity: temporary autonomous zones under the names Reclaim the Streets, Food Not Bombs, Critical Mass, Kein Mensch Ist Illegal, hack labs and social forums, Peoples' Global Action and Indymedia. But mostly it is missing, as the durable site of de-reified everyday life and as robust community bases for the sustained and face-to-face recovery and extension of revolutionary desire. It is up to us to rediscover the histories and forms of past radical culture, and together invent new ones. In this, the experimental uses of networked digital communications and virtual technologies will play a crucial role but can be no substitute for the real community of bodies.

Such a culture would not be the appearance and accomplishment of revolution itself. Rather, it would be a multiform anticipation that may be a condition of the latter's appearance and survival. It is in this kind radical culture that experiences of the political take place beyond and in opposition to the nation-state and the exhausted and depressing rituals of electoral-corporate party politics. It is there that anti-capitalist subjectivity emerges and claims its multitudinous voices

and faces. There, that the inherited blockages of revolutionary theory and practice can be collectively processed and the ground prepared for the qualitative leaps and mutations that will leave them behind. And it is there that affective alternatives and effective resistance to the new forms of fascism and racism that are also on the horizon can be imagined and developed. In this, radical culture would continue and translate into daily practices the theoretical researches into the defense of singularities that have radically rewritten the tradition of ethics since 1945. Such a culture cannot be blind practice or the accumulated traces and artifacts of an unreflected process: revolution needs theory as a form of (self-)questioning, thinking, learning. This doesn't mean theory dictates to practice, for doing in struggle is also those things. A product of the given division of labor, theory is unable to prefigure the overcoming of hierarchy, privilege and power; but it can at least keep an awareness of this distortion at work in its own operations. Theory, then, is a (self-)critical form, and not the leader or head, of practice – a form that means nothing except in its reciprocal, dialogical connections to revolutionary practice as such, as a continuous process of enunciating and performing the desire for collective autonomy.

What is called "art" can contribute to the recovery and reinvention of radical culture. But it is far from clear that it can do so from within the institutions of the capitalist art system. In 2004, the journal *Third Text* published an essay of mine titled "Another (Art) World Is Possible." Today I am more doubtful of that formulation. The critical reflections on the histories of the artistic avant-gardes and the theoretical propositions offered in this book suggest that more decisive and ambitious breaks with the paradigm of bourgeois art are necessary, before the impulses of "art" can be displaced and effectively relocated in a reconstituted anti-capitalist culture. There are tensions among the positions taken in the chapters that follow, however: they are not uniformly pessimistic in this regard. Different constellations are derivable, and it is up to the reader to choose between them – or to push things further by developing better ones.

There is more, so much more, to think and share. Just as much, truly, as there is to do. These words – provisional, tonally dissonant, facing the future – are neither first nor last words. They are some more words already in the middle of it, contingent and situated – but pointing beyond with all the desiring insistence they can summon.

Part I

The One into Two

*We are all strangers to your State, to your society, to
your shady deals.*

Marguerite Duras

Chapter One
Art Schools Burning
and Other Songs of Love and War

Like enfants perdus, we live our uncompleted adventures.

Guy Debord

It is certainly true that if the problem of the group's functioning is not posed to begin with, it will be too late afterward.

Gilles Deleuze

One day long ago – back in 1960s, or was it the 1950s? – the radical avant-gardes became a formal object of institutionalized art history. Sometime in the wake of dada's belated post-1945 "reception," the histories of militant art groups from the early

twentieth century were absorbed by the academy, and the precedents were established by which every groupuscule working in the shadows and border zones of culture – if it ever once emerges into visibility, if it fails to utterly cover its tracks – is fated to eventually have its history written. Before that, the cultural establishment had simply ignored them. These histories existed only as living memory, in the heads and papers of surviving protagonists, or as fugitive trace and rumor in the cities where these groups had been active. If an artist or student wanted to find out more about Club Dada and the Malik-Verlag, she or he had to be ready to go to East Berlin and track down Heartfield and Herzfelde, or look up Grosz and Huelsenbeck in New York. Interested in the surrealists in their militant phase? Better see Breton in Paris, and scour the bookstalls and flea markets for back issues of *La Révolution surréaliste* and *Clarté*. This is the way members of new post-1945 groups like Cobra or the Letterist International would have had to gather and appropriate the radical fragments of their heritage. It required a lot of desire and persistence to get very far, but it was a strong form of transmission that had all the urgency of a real chase.

Today we're glugged with archives. The histories multiply: colonized as an academic commodity, each group spawns an industry. For the moment, some of Guy Debord's films are still

difficult to see and accessible only through pirated copies. But the estate is in the process of re-releasing the complete cinematic works, and Debord's letters have been published – so far, four volumes of them, with another two projected. It's all there, or will be shortly, and more and more close to hand. But so far the result betrays the promise. In the academy itself, students seem to be learning less and less about these groups that killed the paradigm that still reigns today in the art schools and galleries. But the reason is not that the indictments and death sentences brought by the avant-gardes against bourgeois art and the society that sponsors it have been convincingly answered or escaped. Nor has the archive machine demystified these groups, in any enlightening way, so much as facilitated the management of their threat through the banishment of a different forgetting. As degraded as the term "avant-garde" is today, anyone tempted to hack the archives – to recover the force-field of these histories through a rescuing critique – should be prepared to do some work. Unlike many people, I'm sure such work is worth it.

I. In Search of the Avant-Gardes

The first thing one would need to recover and grasp, is just how

deeply avant-garde artists were involved in radical politics. No historical image of them that suppresses or dismisses this political dimension will be true or can have anything urgent to tell us today. At stake here, immediately, are issues of definition and the power to classify. Which groups are avant-garde? How do you tell? That the methodology here can only be circular is not the problem. It is rather that defining them in one way has certain very political effects, while doing it in another way either blocks those effects or produces opposing ones. The real question is: to which political effects is the analyst committed? I won't fail, in the course of this essay, to register my own commitments. And they are duly reflected in how I delimit the category. For me the exemplary artistic avant-gardes are: the groups of the international dada network, and above all Berlin dada, in the four years from 1917 through 1920; the various groupings of the surrealists, from the Barrès trial in 1921 to the publication of the second and final issue of *Clé* in 1939; and the Situationist International, in the twenty years spanning its letterist proto-formation of 1952 to its self-dissolution in 1972. There are many others, of course, but these groups are the source of the definition implicit in all that follows. Anyone is invited to dispute my choices. But let's not imagine empiricism can settle what's at stake here. This is critical theory, not art history.

From their beginnings in the nineteenth century, the artistic avant-gardes oriented themselves in relation to the political vanguards of their own time. For most of the twentieth century this has meant: finding or developing new ways to put art at the service of revolution. Typically artist groups challenged themselves to work in the revolutionary movements of their day, with or alongside established Marxist-oriented vanguard parties or anarcho-syndicalist networks. Sometimes such collaborations worked well for both parties, sometimes it led to splits and realignments. But remaining in play through such shifts, irreducibly bound up with how avant-garde artists understood themselves, were their radical political commitments. These were intensities that, in the beautiful phrase of Lyotard, took "the form of a resolution."

How can we approach these commitments? To begin with, through their shared refusal. A society that condemns most (or any) of its members to wage slavery and blocked autonomy is a barbarous and criminal society: this proposition would have appeared painfully, or laughably, obvious to all of the avant-garde artists and groups I care about or would want to recognize. But more than that, their commitments were the kind that compelled continuous translation into action. If a society, such as ours, is barbarous and criminal, then we need to get rid of it and bring in something better. Everything

begins there, and artists of this kind soon apprised themselves of the stakes and forces in struggle.

So it won't be enough to note, as if in passing, avant-garde scorn for bourgeois manners and conventions. Artists of the historical avant-gardes were two things, at the same time that they were artists: they were anti-capitalists, and they were activists – or, in their own twentieth-century idiom, "militants."¹ They may have disagreed sharply on the role of the state and on the projected forms of post-revolutionary society. But they shared a damning critique of capitalism and a radical rejection of partial or reformist solutions that would leave the structures of exploitation and domination in place. For all of them, only a revolution would be enough to bring down a violent order and establish a new one on a foundation of non-exploitative social relations. This might be some stateless federation of autonomous, democratic councils, in the anarchist vision, or, after the Bolshevik model, centralized state socialism. But the revolution they hoped and worked for was one that would liberate and empower shared human capacities for free creation and unforced cooperation. It would generalize the prefiguration of unalienated labor, playful improvisation, and a healed division of labor experienced by all the artists among them. To be sure, the groups and individuals of the artistic avant-gardes gave different interpretive accents to the elements

of this project, and as a result developed divergent practices. But they all understood themselves as anti-capitalist cultural radicals working actively to destroy the structural barbarism of an intolerable status quo.

This is how we should understand, for example, the activities of the Berlin dada groups in the months following the so-called November Revolution of 1918. Germany's defeat in World War I was by this time certain. Faced with open mutiny by sailors in Kiel and Wilhelmshaven and a general strike by workers in Berlin, the Kaiser fled the country and Ludendorff and the generals made their deal with the Social Democrats: you'll get your parliamentary republic, but no revolution. Club Dada had been launched in April, in a special issue of Franz Jung's anarchist journal *Die freie Strasse* (The Free Street). In the year before, Grosz, Herzfelde and Heartfield had established Malik-Verlag, the publishing apparatus for their antiwar journals and portfolios of Grosz's corrosively satirical drawings.² The counter-revolutionary character of Ebert's new Social-Democratic regime was revealed even before the Weimar Republic was officially constituted in February 1919. As strikes and demonstrations by workers, soldiers and sailors continued to grow in Berlin in the early days of January, the future Social-Democratic War Minister Noske unleashed the proto-fascist Freikorps against the Spartakusbund and other groups on

the revolutionary left. A massive demonstration on 5 January grew into a spontaneous armed rising that quickly surpassed the level of Spartacist preparations and opened a week of street fighting. On 15 January 1919, Spartakus leaders Luxemburg and Liebknecht were captured, interrogated at a Freikorps division headquarters at the Eden Hotel, and brutally murdered. Three days later, Herzfelde could already report to Kessler that the group around Malik-Verlag supported the Spartacists, and that he, Grosz, Heartfield and Jung had joined the new, yet-to-be bolshevized German Communist Party (KPD).

Exactly one month after the murder of Liebknecht and Luxemburg, and just nine days after the founding of the Republic, the Malik group brought out the first issue of their new journal, *Jedermann sein eigener Fussball* (Everyone His Own Football). A photomontage on the cover had the faces of Ebert, Noske, Ludendorff and other figures in or behind the new government spread out across a fan. "Who's the Fairest of Them All??" mocks the caption. The journal was immediately banned, and Herzfelde was arrested and held for 13 days. During that time he saw for himself the boot and rifle-butt of Social-Democratic justice. Released after Kessler's intervention, he and the Malik group defiantly published a new journal, *Die Pleite* (Bankruptcy). Its second issue, published in late March, contained Herzfelde's account of his arrest, under the title

"Schutzhaft" (Protective Custody) and accompanied by Grosz's drawings of his friend. In the graphic work he produced for Malik journals and publications over the course of this tumultuous year, Grosz depicted both the crimes of the state and its capitalist backers and the revolutionary justice waiting to be realized. On the cover of issue three of *Der blutige Ernst* (Deadly Earnest or Bloody Serious), a satirical weekly Grosz edited with the critic Carl Einstein, Grosz makes the generals stand before a Spartacist tribunal, a portrait of the murdered Liebknecht on the wall behind the proletarian judges.³ On the cover of the sixth issue of *Die Pleite*, out in January 1920, Grosz carried out the sentence in a biting image of a capitalist and a general hanging from two gallows.⁴

Shortly after, the most radically programmatic and humorous of all dada manifestoes appeared. It demanded "the international revolutionary union of all creative and intellectual persons in the whole world on the basis of radical communism," "progressive unemployment by means of comprehensive mechanization" of production, and "the immediate expropriation of property and communist provision for all." It went on to call for, among other things, the "requisition of churches for the recital of bruitist, simultaneist, and dadaist poems" and "a great dadaist propaganda campaign with 150 circuses." As a self-destructing parody of the manifesto form shaped around a

hard core of rage and radical affinity, the text explodes the distinction between play and political seriousness. It was signed, with a characteristic combination of bluff and bluster, by Huelsenbeck, Hausmann and Jefim Golyscheff, here incarnated as the "German section" of "the Dadaist Revolutionary Central Council."⁵

It was well understood by artists and militants that unfolding events in Germany were closely linked to the Bolshevik Revolution in Russia, then defending itself against the counter-revolutionary White armies and invasion by a coalition of capitalist nations. It was generally taken for granted that the fate of both the Russian Revolution and of international revolutionary anti-capitalism depended to a large degree on the success of revolution in Germany. There, from late spring through the summer of 1920, Jung was busy helping to establish a dissident communist splinter party. In mid-March, a clique of rightwing military officers and bankers had attempted to seize power. Although the Weimar government was forced to flee Berlin to Stuttgart, the putsch collapsed in the face of a general strike by workers in Berlin and other cities and by the mobilization of the so-called Ruhr Red Army. The German Communist Workers' Party (KAPD) was founded in April by those within the KPD who opposed the party leadership's approval of a call for the Ruhr Red Army to disarm following the failed Kapp

putsch. The KPD Central Committee had concluded by this time that conditions in Germany still lacked an "objective basis" for a successful proletarian revolution. To strengthen its position in the near term, it decided on a tactical reconciliation with the Social Democrats and for participation in electoral politics with the aim of becoming a parliamentary opposition. From Moscow, Lenin endorsed this analysis in his pamphlet *"Left-Wing" Communism: An Infantile Disorder*. To carry out this shift in tactics, the KPD leadership now imposed a severe top-down party discipline on its membership.

The KAPD condemned these reformist-parliamentary and centralizing tendencies; assimilating elements of council communism and anarcho-syndicalism, the new splinter party called for the immediate resumption of armed revolutionary struggle. While Jung and most of the Berlin membership of the KPD went over to the new KAPD, the other members of the Malik group, which was having its own problems with party discipline, did not. The new party sent Jung and another member, Jan Appel, to take its case to the executive of the new Third International in Moscow. Deciding that an overland entry into Russia was impossible, they made contact with the crew of a steam trawler in Cuxhaven, who took them aboard as stowaways. When the vessel was at sea, Jung and the comrades took it over, locking the captain and officers in a forecabin, and steamed to Murmansk.

Arriving in Moscow, they were received coldly at the Comintern, which only in November temporarily granted the KAPD conditional rights as a "sympathizing member." Their short audience with Lenin was even colder; the Bolshevik leader paternally read them passages from *Left-Wing Communism*. Back in Germany, Jung was thrown in jail for piracy. As soon as he got out in March of 1921, he joined Béla Kun and Max Hölz for another armed rising.⁶

Whatever the differences and disputes between them – and these were many and intense: I don't want to deny the complex rivalries and conflicts at work in the group form – the members of the artistic avant-gardes shared, and knew how to recognize and acknowledge, a radical refusal to be reconciled with the dominant social given. The commitments that animated this refusal were clearly more than a simple allegiance. What does that mean? Here is Lyotard again, in his most beautiful text, an honest and moving homage to Pierre Souyri, with whom he spent 12 years in the militant revolutionary group Socialisme ou Barbarie. Lyotard published this text in 1982, the year after his comrade's death. What was Souyri's investment in Marxism like? It was, Lyotard writes, "the form of a sensibility, the schema of imagination, the rhetoric of affections, the analytic and dialectic of concepts, the law of the will."⁷ So we need to think a refusal as emphatic and far-reaching as that.

And there is nothing, looking back today, that leads us to

doubt that for all these artist-militants the shared adventure of this refusal was the central, animating experience of their artistic and political lives, which indeed appear to have been lived as they claimed, not as separate spheres that never connect, but as a single synthetic field of creative experimentation and open possibility at the core of what it meant to them to be human. I'm speaking here, so there is no confusion, of militants at their peaks, however long those peaks were sustained, and whatever the individuals concerned may have become afterward, as a result of whatever wound, lapse, crash, or swerve of desire. (It's not for who Grosz was or became in New York after 1933 that I love him, but rather for who he was in Berlin in 1918, when he invented guerrilla theater by donning a death's head and black overcoat and, as "Dada Death," drifted with the posers and shoppers along the Ku'damm in Berlin. Ditto for all these men and women.) Commitments shared this deeply, formed in the nerves of the vulnerable body and held there, as a secret strength, for the body's performance in risk; a desiring refusal that could only be lived as active creation in struggle, with a chosen idiom and weapons, on a chosen field: these could only be pursued with others, within the forms of an association.

And this collective dimension is the second aspect that one would need to recover. In practice it meant forming or joining an affinity group, with its special challenges, generosities and

bonds. This is why it's wrong to imagine the avant-gardes as some loose Bohemian network of mavericks, supermen, or lone "forerunners." These freaks lack the openness to pluralities of others – call it solidarity – that constitutes the political in the strong sense. For this the group form is a necessary condition. And to put it precisely, there are and can be no avant-garde artists outside of their groups; for me there are, and can only be, avant-garde groups. And just here, in the form and shared experience of the freely chosen affinity group, the artists and "politicals" never cease to meet. Any of them, whatever their differences, would have been capable of meeting anywhere beyond "the given," within the shared horizon of anti-capitalist refusal and utopian hope. There, they would have been able to address one another by the freighted name of "comrade." We for whom, for reasons of trauma and loss, this word has become unpronounceable, without the poor protection of irony or embarrassment, we should not allow ourselves to dirty what was, for militants, a chosen word of hope and love.

II. Art Schools and the Embattled Academy

Given the rich and differentiated histories of the avant-garde adventure, it may seem surprising that artists and students

today seem not to be very urgently involved with these histories, that they apparently don't recognize this adventure as their own. There are many reasons for this, but two stand out: structural pressures to conform and accommodate, and real despair and confusion about a revolutionary tradition marred by defeat. Accommodationism is no mystery. As everyone knows, membership in a radical direct action group doesn't usually advance a career. The pressure to sell out is such a common and transparent reflection of market discipline, so nearly a capitalist invariable, that it is far more interesting and important to ask how and under what conditions people are inspired to resist it.

Certainly many artists, still hoping to be able to eke out a living by their creative work, have resigned themselves to accommodating the market and therefore know, without ever needing to make a conscious choice about it, that intensely-held radical commitments can only threaten their ability to pay the rent. But it is doubtful whether the proportion of artists in this category today – presumably the vast majority – is much different than it ever was. The current situation is unique in some respects. There must be many more artists today than there ever were in the past, given the increase in the number of art schools. But teachers of art and art history – the professional academics responsible for training and accrediting those who

would be artists – are not sheltered from the "structural adjustments" that, for decades now, have been brought to bear on all the institutions of so-called higher learning.

A brief digression will sketch the context. Since the 1970s, the managers of the dominant capitalist national economies have pursued a model of globalization based on pulverizing all barriers to trade and capital in the global South, and on "outsourcing" and the steady privatization of public services across the US, Europe, and Japan. Through the 1980s and into the 1990s, these neo-liberal structural adjustments were carried out under the Thatcherist mantra – TINA: "There is no alternative" – and, after 1994, through the new apparatus and regime of the WTO. Since then, as we know, neo-liberal globalization has provoked global resistance, gone into crisis, and had to resort to the dubious enforcement of the permanent war machine. But it is in this context of privatization and slashed public spending that "higher" education has become another target of market discipline. Throughout this phase of globalization, public funding of universities has been cut back, year after year, resulting in the rise of a new bureaucratic class-sector within the academy.

The fundraising apparatchiks have long been familiar on US campuses, from those elves in charge of corporate and alumni "development," to the layer of deans schooled in hard lessons of

the bottom line, to that anti-scholarly emblem of market-capture, the university president-as-CEO. The transformations in the character, functions and self-understanding of the academy that follow inexorably from these alterations have been steadily coming to light. Once claiming to be a preserve for free thought and unfettered critique and exchange, the university now resigns itself to vocational training and officially directed research. What research would that be? Broadly of two kinds: what the corporate sector thinks will promise profit – think: biotechnology and pharmaceuticals – and what the war machine requires to improve the performance of weapons systems. As an indication of what that means today, consider the example of the University of Hawai'i, where I recently spent some time teaching. Whereas reductions in state funding have just forced students at UH to swallow tuition increases of 140% over the next six years, Department of Defense support for military research at the same institution has increased 500% in the last five years, not even counting plans for the establishment of a new Navy-directed classified research center there.⁸

To terrify the professors into marching in lockstep, the tenure system has been brought under attack. The relative job security offered by this remnant of the early liberal era admittedly encourages careerism, among other abuses. But it

nevertheless was instituted to give a modicum of concrete reality to the high-liberal rhetoric of free thought. And in theory, if not in practice, a functional principle behind faculty peer review is solidarity. But for several decades now, the profs have been softened up by the instructive example of a growing academic underclass made up of graduate student "teaching assistants" and exploited "adjunct" lecturers deprived of health care and pension benefits and blocked from entering the tenure system.

And that system itself is now criticized openly in the pages of the *Wall Street Journal* and in the Internet blogs of repugnant right-wing hacks like David Horowitz. The latter flies from campus to campus, mobilizing a national network of right-wing students to draw up blacklists of faculty troublemakers and organizing character assassinations of Ward Churchill and other dissident academics judged to be vulnerable under the new rules of the "war on terror." (Churchill, a prolific scholar of indigenous rights struggles, has been the target of a viciously personal smear campaign by rightwing pundits, who were enraged by a text in which he argued bluntly that the September 11 attacks were only to be expected, given the devastating effects of US foreign policy on millions of people worldwide; so far, Churchill's persecutors – who include Bill O'Reilly of Fox Television and a bevy of Republican

politicians – have not succeeded in their goal of seeing him dismissed from his tenured position at the University of Colorado.)⁹

It doesn't take a rocket scientist, excuse the pun, to figure out what's coming. Is there any organized force capable of stopping it? Not at the moment. Faculty strikes are so rare as to be effectively nonexistent. And with a few exceptions the campuses are quiet. Not old enough to remember anything different, freshmen now entering universities assume the academy has always been what it has only recently become; the loss of a critical education is not registered as such. The result is unsurprising. The humanities and social sciences departments that have been and still are the last institutional safe houses of radical, critical and nonconformist thought are being starved into submission: dollars don't come from the dean until we all understand each other.

So in this context art and art history teachers, like most of their colleagues in other disciplines, tend to be in the habit of teaching the accommodation and resignation they themselves have had to internalize and of downplaying or excluding the motivations and collective practices of artists of the recent past who made other, more resolute, choices. Short of a revolution in the academies, then, we shouldn't expect art schools to be open or honest with students about either the

histories of the avant-gardes or the negation and death of the bourgeois paradigm of art. By and large, students study art because, compared to their other options, it offers them an opportunity to learn a playful and relatively unalienated form of work. The alienation soon comes, like a splitting skull on the morning after, however, when they must confront the realities of a globalized art market and the war of all against all that structures it. What they are seldom told, but will sooner than later find out for themselves, is that damn few of them – a miniscule fraction – will be able to survive on their art, and those who do will only manage it by surrendering to the market police all their hopes for a life of real and searching autonomy. The market says: one may question the bourgeois paradigm, only not in any way that is *effective* or has *results*; one may play with the symbols of radical politics, but one must not *act* on them; anyone can say the emperor has no clothes or even scream it within the closed walls of a gallery, but no one may *cut off his head*. Art schools are to transmit these rules, but not *consciously*.

And so to insure that students are not exposed *en masse* to possibly inspiring and life-diverting doses of the anti-capitalist adventure, and be tempted thereby to become autonomous and ungovernable, various strategies for neutralizing and assimilating the histories of the artistic avant-gardes have

tended to install themselves as standard procedure. In so far as art history is concerned, one can first of all liquidate the life, aims and risks of avant-garde groups by suppressing the collective dimension and focusing on (the same few) select individuals. Once one has atomized collective histories into isolated narratives of individual productive output, one reduces these to a sequence of points plotted on a grand linear chronology of merely formal or technical innovations. One can then either ignore a militant commitment and its causes and consequences, or methodologically reduce these to a marginal and discardable political supplement to a "real" artistic oeuvre.

Or one can dilute, obscure and trivialize such commitments by expanding the category "avant-garde" to admit every would-be *enfant terrible* ever deemed by the market to be on the "modernist" or "postmodernist" cutting edge – abstract expressionists to Pop to the latest top-selling installation fad or gallery interventionism, no matter how accommodating or cynical, how resigned or indeed reactionary. In studios and "crit sessions," teachers have a thousand other ways, subtle and unsubtle – and including the whole repertoire of winks, nods, and scornful silences – to signal disapproval and try to render ridiculous the radical practices and projects of past anti-capitalist adventurers, finally in order to say that all is well in the art world, or else to call for a return to the good old

standards of the good old days. The infiltration of this kind of habitual and semi-conscious accommodationism into the classroom is reinforced and redoubled by the fully conscious administrative injunctions from above: submit quantitative justifications of your department's existence; maximize, in crude competition with other departments, the numbers of student-customers "served;" maximize turnover by demonstrating "successful completions" of degree programs; and so on.

Of course, it would be dishonest to pretend that teachers who resist this trend – for example by actively trying to inspire interest in the avant-gardes and what they stood for – are not also using their position as a political platform. But there are two important differences. First, because such radical pitches run counter to the institutional unconscious, they can only be effectively advocated through a discourse that is open and transparent. Advocates for the avant-gardes cannot pretend, in the way teachers who reinforce the status quo can, that they do not have political investments. But declaring these investments openly gives students the opportunity to deal with them as what they are. Second, radical pitches that reject market rules do not enjoy institutional approval and protection. On the contrary, they call down disciplinary measures, when those can safely be applied through apparently apolitical administrative procedures. But bringing such risks and

institutional logics into the conversation is in itself an enlightening exercise.

Regrettably, not every art school can count gadflies among its faculty. (Though, as we know, it sometimes happens.) But what is really elided and kept from the students when art schools do no more than fulfill their social functions? No more or less than what, for at least a half-century now, anyone who bothered to could have noticed or learned: the market, and the market alone, can keep the corpse of bourgeois art dancing, through cyclical returns to "painting," or by perennial resuscitations of whichever medium or new medium of opus-based, made-for-exhibition fodder for the gallery-commodity-magazine-museum system. No doubt, bourgeois art will continue to exist and be dominant as long as capitalism is the dominant world system. But what is dead here remains a corpse, and it still stinks.

III. Processing the Legacies of Defeat

On to the second kind of reason artists and students seem to have become indifferent to the historical avant-gardes: real despair and confusion. On first look, the histories of the revolutionary movements that oriented and inspired the old

artistic avant-gardes may appear to be little more than a grim meta-story of crushing defeat. The bourgeois revolutions indisputably succeeded in breaking the power of feudalism and installing social relations conducive to competitive capitalism. But the results of the revolutionary movement organized around the subject of history that Marx named the proletariat present a more ambiguous legacy, to put it mildly. While proletarian revolutions have been vehicles of modernization and have made real accomplishments in areas such as access to literacy and health care, they have seldom been able to defend their gains from the forces of reaction and counter-revolution. Nor has this been merely a consequence of unfavorable "historical conjunctures." All too often if not in every case, revolutionary parties, once in power, have quickly replaced capitalist relations with new structures of bureaucratic exploitation and domination. Far more often than not, the colossal sacrifices of the proletariat have been betrayed by those who claimed to represent it. This disastrous and traumatic history of defeat must be confronted honestly.

A very cursory review, then. The Bolshevik Revolution of 1917, in which so much radical hope was invested for so long, was within a few years hijacked by counter-revolution: the repression of the Kronstadt councils and all forms of emergent direct democracy in the name of "defending the revolution"; the

establishment of the one-party police state, with its bureaucratic class; coerced labor and centralized, hierarchical management; Stalinism and the corruption of the Third International in the name of "socialism in one state"; the repression of the artistic avant-gardes and the enforced institutionalization of "official" socialist realism; purges, Gulags, entropy and finally implosion. The German Revolution of 1918-23, more classically proletarian than the Russian example: violently repressed by the Social-Democratic state and its paramilitary proxies wherever not co-opted by Social Democratic reformism; within a decade the Nazis, levered into power by international capital, were rounding up the remnants of the revolutionary and radical left. The anarcho-syndicalist Spanish Revolution of 1936, fighting back a right-wing coup and establishing democratic councils and the self-management of factories and public services in Barcelona and elsewhere, was an inspiring but short-lived experiment; its hopeful flash was stomped out between the fascist war machine, Stalinist betrayal and capitalist hostility.

The record of the post-1945 struggles of national liberation is similarly dubious. China, Cuba, Congo, Algeria, Vietnam: oppressed people breaking their colonial chains and trying to carry through social revolutions most often found themselves citizens of a neo-Stalinist police state or else re-

colonized in the grinding debtor's prisons of the capitalist world system. East Berlin, 1953; Poland and Hungary, 1956; Prague, 1968: wherever people rose up from within the East Bloc, they were swiftly and brutally repressed. The global insurrections of 1968, above all the Parisian May: betrayed by Communist parties and unions, run out of steam, or broken up by the state – in any case, defeated, with few substantive systemic reforms to speak of being gained anywhere. The desperate turn to armed struggle in the wake, the attempt to "bring the war home" to the metropolises? Urban guerillas, Red Brigades, Panthers and Weathermen: all isolated without popular support, infiltrated, and systematically crushed by the expanded repressive powers of liberal states.

Finally, the collapse and disappearance of the Soviet Union: is this not the judgment of history, as many were quick to proclaim, a final and unanswerable "practical critique" of Marxist-Leninist revolution? Were they not right, the cold warriors and neo-conservative ideologues who crowed the victory of capitalism and trumpeted in the "end of history"? Who, in the face of all this, could want to carry on with a dismally failed project? Who, now, could fail to be embarrassed by the words "revolution" and "comrade"? And who would want to expose themselves to ridicule by talking garbage about the "death" of bourgeois art, when it's so clear that the only corpse to be

seen is that of the very idea of revolution.

Such triumphalism has turned out to be premature, of course. From the fact that revolution has not yet succeeded in banishing oppression, it doesn't follow that anyone is justified in declaring it dead. Revolution is an urgency that will never die, so long as oppression persists as a product of systemic relations. We need to think this legacy as a still unrealized promise and as a standing claim that, bearing on us as pressure and unpaid debt of history, continues to orient collective desire. The events of rupture, mutation and radical social opening that mark the beginnings of revolution were moments of intense collective learning. Blasting open the reified social given and its dominant common sense, these events opened spaces in which every question that concerns us all could be posed and enunciated by anyone and collective answers put directly into play, as generalized autonomy. That these moments did not last, that they were, so far, brought to an end by counter-revolutionary force, says not that the desires they formed were impossible or that their intensities are necessarily unsustainable. It says only that there are blockages of the revolutionary process that we still need to learn how to solve. The learning of revolution is not History as Progress: while we can hope that learning is a progressive process, in that what has been learned is not lost, nothing about revolution is

automatic, certain, or final, neither as aim and end of history nor as knowledge assured in advance. Revolution is questioning as such, a thinking and doing that becomes collective in the movements of generalizable desire. We inherit revolution as this form of desire, as the possibility and promise of collective autonomy – and as, so far, the historical defeat of this desire. But also as a set of practical problems – of organizational form, of agency and power, and of time and duration – remaining to be solved. “Radical culture” is the name of what keeps all of this alive and moving, as living memory, and transmits it to others.

Revolution, then, is a potentiality that continues to haunt the social given. It can be repressed, for a time, but never eliminated once and for all. Despite the wishes and fantasies of those at the peaks of capitalist power, it would be foolish to think revolutionary situations will not emerge again from the conflicts of a world system that functions by violence and exploitation. No hegemonic stabilization of planetary control can attain the finality of omnipotence to which its totalizing tendencies aim and aspire. As already noted, capitalism in its post-cold war form – neo-liberal globalization – has run up against its contradictions, which have exploded spectacularly. In the eyes of much of humanity, and within a mere handful of years, capitalism is again ceasing to be the golden stairway to

the mansion on the hill and has begun to appear as the thing it is: a system that in the all-consumingness of its logic is out to ruin us all – and will do so if we fail to stop it. In the bleak, ever more familiar desolations of sprawling shantytowns and guarded sweatshops, of glowing toxic dumps and runaway security obstacles, more and more people are beginning to recognize the real future capitalism has in store for us. The glossy shell of globalized reification, then, is fracturing before our eyes. History has quite evidently returned – as if it ever left – and in the decentralized and differentiated global rhizomes of anti-capitalist refusal, we can recognize survivals and mutations of the old revolutionary project. In short the struggle continues. Carrying on with it remains the only way out of a world system as barbarous and intolerable as ever.

So despair and confusion won't do. Such responses do have an understandable source, however. They are responses of people who have heard, and perhaps seen, the ghosts of defeated revolutions, tens of millions of them over a century, and have been spooked. As well they should be, and as well we all should be. The terrible human costs of defeated revolutions must be faced. Whoever refuses to acknowledge and mourn these ghosts ceases to be credible. In this context, to mourn means to be committed to the critical processing of these histories, to a

working-through of inherited theory and practice that not only questions the tenets of tactics and strategy, but also opens the problems of ethics and all that exceeds the crude calculation of forces.¹⁰ To repeat: to say this – to insist on the necessity of remembering those who are in some sense victims of missed, aborted, hijacked, or otherwise defeated revolutions – is not to concede anything at all to capitalism, which remains the prior and ongoing disaster. Reflected in every single one of our pseudo-prosperities under capitalism is the globalized and ever-present misery of a humanity that, so far, has failed to make its qualitative leap. The project of revolution – in a more contemporary and sober idiom: the active, consciously radical processes of systemic intervention and transformation – cannot wait for this collective work of mourning to be *completed*: mourning, we know, is interminable. But denial is no option.

Anyone active in the anti-capitalist rhizomes knows that there are, still, today, groups of militants running around, often in old-style Leninist, Trotskyist, or Maoist formations, who are very much in denial. As far as I have seen, these are a minority in the global movement now emerging. But the refusal to question and learn, the persistence of old party-forms and demands for “discipline,” the need for leaders and dogmas: all these remain problems that are still all too often on view. This movement will grow and become robust and effective only to

the degree that it succeeds in shedding such habits and illusions. It can only do so by subjecting itself, continuously, to the rigors of self-critique – not as a substitute for militant struggle, but as a form of its consciousness.

By now, the (old/new) left has had plenty of time to draw some conclusions about itself. Arguably, the two most disastrous mistakes, not to be repeated, are (1) the suppression of ethics in revolutionary practice; and (2) undemocratic, centralized, hierarchical organizational forms that lead necessarily to bureaucratic domination. A third, entangled with the first two, is resistance to dealing with the persistent problems of race and gender privilege, behind which are the knots of subjectivity and the forms of its production. A fourth, probably, is the strategic obsession with the seizure of power and the appropriation of the state apparatus. (The important and finally unavoidable question of whether state power and national sovereignty can be durably dispersed into decentralized networks of autonomies would seem to contain within it all of the above points of critique and may well be the last and greatest riddle of politics. In any case it is a problem that will only be decided by the hard test of practice.) Needless to say, this list is only partial. The lessons of the first three blunders can be read in abstract form in a

Situationist *détournement* of Hegel-Marx-Lukács: "The revolutionary organization must learn that it can no longer *combat alienation by means of alienated forms of struggle.*"¹¹

IV. The Case of Critical Art Ensemble

A different confusion, one actually entangled with a great deal of clarity, is sometimes seen among committed artists who can be recognized as the heirs of the twentieth-century avant-gardes. This one is born, not so much of despair, as of excesses and wrong-turns of self-critique. Those indulging in this confusion take the death of the revolutionary project as their starting point – thereby accepting capital's triumphalist fantasies as the accomplished completion of history. To show what they think they've learned, they badmouth not any particular historical revolution or vanguard leadership, or even any particular model of revolution, but the very idea of it, *in toto*. For them, Marx died with all the other master-narratives, and capitalism, which presumably doesn't need one, would merely be what we're left with. There are many variations on the theme, but typically power and desire are made into inseparable invariables, at work always and everywhere. "The Struggle" against domination has therefore splintered into micro-struggles extending on so many

different planes that there is no need, and in any case no way, to link them all up on a macro-systemic level. So one cultivates "radical" subjectivity through practices that methodologically refuse the big picture ("bad" totality). With audible relief, one relinquishes, as naïveté or will-to-power, the ambition to destroy the *structures* of exploitation.

Having been a student in the mid-1990s, I can vividly recall how attractive and obvious these ideas seemed. For me and for the artists I knew and worked with then, they appeared more radical and empowering than anything else on offer. It would take some more years of critical work and experience to emerge on the other side of them. Some never did. Since much of what follows below also applies to the student I was then, it should also be read as self-criticism. The fact is, this reductionist soup is a vulgarization of Foucault-Deleuze-Guattari-Lyotard-Derrida-Baudrillard that represses, precisely, the *commitments* of these critical theorists. About the real histories and contexts in which they struggled and the fact that their radical textual experiments were attempts to theorize specific political experiences and practices that were in many cases openly militant, one remains sublimely uninformed. Taken out of context and run together into a concoction sloppily called "postmodernism," these distinct bodies of theory and practice are cooked down to some purported basis of post-

political ironic relativism. It follows that, obviously, the old avant-gardes are laughable relics, utterly and irredeemably passé and uncool. Predictably, this kind of thing is often transmitted, in the form of (an) attitude, to students who haven't yet learned or read enough to make minimally critical choices about it and who, as result, will never immerse themselves in avant-garde histories. (Why bother?) Again, I'm not suggesting that students and artists should slavishly be repeating these histories. The point is that in order to receive and repurpose or surpass them, it is necessary to first go through the trouble of learning them.

Critical Art Ensemble (CAE) does not go all the way down that path, but they reflect it, as a kind of postmodern common sense. CAE is a respected and influential group, for the good reason that its politicized artistic and theoretical production is sharp, inventive and courageous. Given its long – since 1986 – and richly prolific trajectory, it seems probable that CAE will in time be lifted into the canon of major avant-garde exemplars. (And, given the ongoing legal harassment of the group by the US state, it goes without saying, and not at all in the margins: Solidarity with CAE! Hands off Steve Kurtz!¹²) The following reflections, far from a repudiation or dismissal of CAE, are a friendly contribution to the critical reception due to a collective so named.

As every avant-garde group of the past has done, CAE tries to rethink the avant-garde legacies and re-function the models. But the group seems strangely unable to acknowledge its status as heir without a certain embarrassment. The fidelity CAE keeps with its tradition is not so much one tempered by critical immersion, as one that is obliged to recognize, always ironically, the magnetic pull of a new common sense:

CAE fears that some of our readers might be getting a bit squeamish about the use of the term "avant-garde" in the above essay. After all, an avalanche of literature from very fine postmodern critics has for the past two decades consistently told us that the avant-garde is dead and has been placed in a suitable resting plot in the Modernist cemetery alongside its siblings, originality and the author. In the case of the avant-garde, however, perhaps a magic elixir exists that can reanimate this corpse.¹³

In the same 1994 text, the group offers important innovations of organizational form, arguing compellingly for fast and flexible cultural cells of four to ten people, with diverse skill bases and floating or rotating hierarchies. These direct action avant-garde groupuscules – at one point CAE calls them "anarchist cells" – are to pursue an improvisational and

inversional practice that cultivates ephemerality, amateur versatility, and a degree of invisibility. Contributing to the stream of practices developed by and shared among an international network of media activists and experimenters at the "Next 5 Minutes" (N5M) festivals, the group will go on to align its cellular model with the notion of "tactical media": Working in all available media, the tactical approach aims to produce self-terminating "molecular interventions and semiotic shocks that will contribute to the negation of the rising intensity of authoritarian culture."¹⁴

There is a certain slippage between the discursive levels of tactics and strategy that make CAE's texts sometimes difficult to confront.¹⁵ But the emphasis is on "molecular" interventions because, CAE tells us, "revolution is not a viable option."¹⁶ Surveying the history of defeat, they conclude that radical revisions of strategy are necessary:

After two centuries of revolution and near-revolution, one historical lesson continually appears – authoritarian structure cannot be smashed; it can only be resisted. Every time we have opened our eyes after wandering the shining path of a glorious revolution, we find that the bureaucracy is still standing. We find Coca-Cola gone and Pepsi-Cola in its place – looks different, tastes the

same.¹⁷

In place of another repetition of failure, CAE envisions a decentralized resistance of autonomous confrontational cells that would take the battle to cyberspace, where the structures of power are actually vulnerable. CAE, at least in this text, would leave behind for good the old streets, barricades and Winter Palace scenarios. "CAE has said it before, and we will say it again: as far as power is concerned, the streets are dead capital!"¹⁸

Such formulations, by no means rare in CAE texts, have generally been read as a call to vacate the streets.¹⁹ I will take up this problem shortly. Before that, I need to address some of the confusions packed into the "po-mo" common sense that looms behind CAE's strategic and tactical revisions. CAE is not guilty of all the moves I will criticize. As I've already pointed out, the group tries to save and reinvigorate some notion of the avant-garde, rather than dance on its grave. But in doing so, it has had to acknowledge widely held prejudices against the avant-gardes that many others in and around the tactical media networks express with far less restraint.

What the artistic avant-gardes and political vanguards are usually charged with is their alleged elitism. Back in the day when Saint-Simon and Laverdant introduced this military metaphor

into cultural and political discourse, revolutionary groups saw themselves as scouting parties – *enfants perdus* (“lost children”), in French slang – in search of “northwest passages” to the promised land. The main army – read: the masses – would then follow and force the opening. Implicit here is the idea that advanced artists (and Lenins and Maos) see things ordinary people cannot, and therefore have a right to lead – or at least to special autonomy. So: “Avant-gardism is grounded in the dangerous notion that there exists an elite class possessing enlightened consciousness.”²⁰ Or: “That dreaded question of ‘who speaks for whom?’ looms large whenever the idea of avant-gardism is shuffled about.”²¹ On this point, CAE’s rejection of vanguardism as ideology is unassailable: there is no place, today, for this kind of arrogant and paternal elitism, or for the kind of hierarchical organizations it spawns. This is blunder number two, and it leads to the hoarding, rather than sharing, of information; to obfuscation and dissimulation, rather than openness and transparency; and to the deliberate blockage of autonomy and mutual self-empowerment.

Having said this, the ways in which such criticisms are registered are usually so global and indiscriminate as to be unhistorical. It's not the case that all avant-garde groups uncritically accepted the elitist origins of a metaphor that had gone into common usage by 1917, nor did they all organize

themselves rigidly along the centralized, top-down lines set down by Lenin in 1902, as the model for a clandestine revolutionary party. It wouldn't be wrong to see a mimesis of this model in certain aspects of some avant-garde groups, for example in the way Breton provoked splits and exclusions within the surrealists. But that would no longer be true, in any simplistic way, for the situationists, whose splits and exclusions are legendary.

The Leninist model was criticized almost as soon as *What Is To Be Done?* began to circulate – by anarcho-councilists like Anton Pannekoek, as well as, among the Marxists, Rosa Luxemburg; and the Bolsheviks were excoriated, beginning soon after 1917, by Alexander Berkman, Emma Goldman, and Voline, among many others. But as far as I can tell, the issues of representation and elitism pointed to by CAE and others did not become fully conscious within the artistic avant-gardes before the 1958 debates on organizational forms between Cornelius Castoriadis and Claude Lefort within the group *Socialisme ou Barbarie*.²² Both sides in that debate shared the premise that the role of a revolutionary group cannot be to "lead" the working class from above or the outside. The disputes were over how this kind of elitism, as the germ of a bureaucratic class, could be avoided in practice, how direct democracy and non-hierarchical principles could be realized in the organizational forms of a

militant group, and how small qualitative groups could grow or work with other groups in the context of a large or expanding social movement.

Debord and the situationists followed these debates closely, and Debord even became active in *Socialisme ou Barbarie* from 1959 to 1961.²³ The many collective texts on organizational problems and issues published in *Internationale situationniste* reflect and endorse the older group's "critique of bureaucracy" and work on "autonomy" and "generalized self-management." And these were already a recovery and reinvigoration, by the group of ex-Trotskyists who in 1949 left the Fourth International to found *Socialisme ou Barbarie*, of older anarchist and council communist traditions. So even this brief snapshot of the French postwar context should be enough to show the injustice of a globalizing dismissal.

Nor can the problem be displaced to the idea of revolution, which remains true and necessary as long as structural barbarism persists as the factual given. In the situationist idiom, the urgent task of "revolutionary theory" is to rescue the truth of this idea from the untruth of "revolutionary ideology," and to carry that truth into new forms of revolutionary practice. The important organizational innovations developed and advocated by CAE itself, in their fast cultural cell, are improvements – or mutations, if you like – of models previously generated from

within the political and artistic avant-gardes. We would only need to add, to the record left by the situationists, the famous rhizome text from Gilles Deleuze and Félix Guattari's *A Thousand Plateaus* and Deleuze's wonderful 1972 homage to Guattari, "Three Group-Related Problems,"²⁴ and we have the main elements of the contemporary model and, within and as a variation of it, CAE's excellent "line of flight."

But above all it is the dismissive tone with which the historical avant-gardes are condemned and maligned that is unjust and counterproductive – confused and confusing. Again, CAE does not so much reproduce this tone as hedgingly reflect it, even as the group tries to defend the idea of the avant-garde from it. It is entirely appropriate and necessary to look back and recognize where people went wrong. That's part of the work of critique and, when we share commitments with these people, self-critique. But it's unjust and fallacious to retrospectively project the fruits of hard experience to a point before those experiences were lived. We can't blame people for not understanding what they couldn't have understood, for the reason that they didn't yet have this history to process – or because they didn't yet have time and leisure, being actively engaged in urgent struggles, to carry out that processing. It's especially unjust when these people put themselves in serious risk or were even killed trying to destroy a system of

domination. This is not to let party leaders and high-level decision-makers off the hook. Not at all. But for the artists who became militants in the revolutionary project – because for them to be alive was unthinkable and unlivable as anything other than an active follow-through on a set of commitments – we need to have more understanding.

When the members of the Malik group joined the KPD during or immediately after the party's founding congress in the last days of December 1918, they could not have known that the Bolsheviks would soon become the carriers of counter-revolution in Russia. The surrealists could not claim the same innocence eight years later, when the group around Breton joined the French Communist Party (PCF). But their brief and unhappy flirtation with "revolutionary ideology" was a sincere mistake. They tried to follow the truth and urgent necessity of revolution where it led them, and it's unfair to reduce their motivations to the cynical realism of bureaucratic power. From the debates with Naville to the collaboration with Trotsky, the surrealist core group searched for the collective passage of a generalizable autonomy. To recover the dignity of that search, one would only need to cite the name of Benjamin Péret, who went to Spain as a volunteer in early August of 1936 and fought on the Aragon front, first for the POUM, then with Durruti. Scrutinizing these histories in the late 1950s and early 1960s,

the situationists would condemn the mistake of accepting party-based representational politics. Blasting the "condensed spectacle" of Stalinism and the more fashionable cult of Mao, they would critique every form of will-to-leadership and incipient bureaucracy. This, while insisting on the validity of a "revolutionary theory" that maintains its continuous, critical dialectic with revolutionary practice. Even before 1968, then, this artistic avant-garde had become fully conscious of blunder number two: "Revolutionary theory is now the sworn enemy of all revolutionary ideology – *and it knows it.*"²⁵ Comrades, let's be generous with each other: we're not the enemy.

Moreover, when purveyors of the new common sense badmouth the old avant-gardes in this global and dismissive way, it signals – to students who may not yet know all of these histories, for example – that the project is worthless and has neither anything important to tell us nor resources with which to inspire us, which emphatically is not the case. Sure, rhetorical slams are great fun and make for good reading. The surrealists were virtuosi of the insult, and even now one would have to be a sourpuss, to be able to read their diatribes without laughing. Debord, too, is exemplary for famously overindulging himself in abusive slamming of comrade-rivals. But in this, he's a bad example. In comparison, CAE is very restrained and doesn't get personal. My point is that it should

be part of the tact of political commitment, that one respects those who share one's basic commitments – to anti-capitalism and the refusal of racism and nationalism, for example – regardless of whether one endorses or disputes this or that particular position, in this or that debate or conflict. Screw bourgeois civility, but one can reserve one's abuse and dismissive scorn for enemies, of which there are many. (Yes, even after all the deconstructive equivocations have been registered, there are still friends and enemies; and, apropos Osama bin Laden and al-Qaeda, the enemy of an enemy does not a friend make.²⁶) This is all the more important given the realities of the ongoing culture wars, in which our words and signals can and do make a difference for students on the point of choosing a radical adventure.

And what are we to make of CAE's call to desert the streets for cyberspace, if in fact that is what it was.²⁷ To be sure, there is merit in the tactics of avoiding direct attacks on the most fortified bunkers of power and of refusing to become entrenched – thus pinned down and all too visible to power's targeting systems – in bunkers of one's own making. Mobility is ever a virtue. And by all means, take contestation to cyberspace. Beyond the usual tools and networks for organizing and counter-publicity (Indymedia, Peoples' Global Action, wikis, etc.), it is certainly worth experimenting with edgier means of

data collection and surveillance – the passive sniffing and parsing of data packet protocol layers, wardriving and other esoteric researches beloved of geekdom. It's probably an excellent thing if some groups are engaged in the kinds of clandestine information blockages that CAE advocates, as well as in organized virtual sit-ins and the whole range of denial-of-service (DoS) attacks – to the extent that such actions do not result in counterproductive collateral damage to servers and untargeted Internet users.²⁸ And should we find ourselves in “the real state of emergency” (Benjamin), who could afford to renounce more decisive forms of intrusion and attack against the ethereal forces of repression, assuming some group had the competence and strategic sense to deploy them effectively? The problem comes only when jamming and hacking are conceptualized as *substitutes*, sufficient unto themselves, for the politics of the streets, in which one commits one's body, either in direct action with one's cell or affinity group, or in the larger movements of popular actions.²⁹

In this CAE would seem to reflect the conclusion, still widely-held in some quarters today, that street protests have become a predictable and futile ritual. Rubbish. There are numerous reasons why it is always worthwhile, on appropriately political occasions, to abandon a position of passivity and paralyzed isolation by joining others in the streets. Among the

most important are, first, that it is in the face-to-face school of the streets that we learn to overcome enforced separation and passivity and recover our capacity for collective thinking, action and utterance. Second, no one can predict what may happen when people reassert their desire to make their own history. It is a species of arrogance – and one typical of the worst avant-garde elitism of the past – to think that one does not need to participate in such efforts, or that one knows better. The large counter-globalization and anti-capitalist demonstrations, from Seattle in 1999 to Genoa in 2001, have shown that the old form of street protest can still be powerful. The even more impressive anti-war demonstrations of February 2003 – the largest linked protests in world history, bringing out some 17 million people in cities across the globe – also showed the limitations of this form, when everyone goes home and returns to work on the next day, and when governments know that and can count on it. (But although it did not prevent the invasion of Iraq, this collective rejection of the war's legitimacy did constrain the US, with respect to how it could conduct the war; it is certain that many more Iraqi civilians would have been killed and maimed by the shock and awe machine had these global demonstrations not taken place.)

Street demonstrations remain a valid tactic wherever and whenever states or corporations have symbolic capital at stake.

As CAE well knows, symbolic actions can have material effects. In some situations, some bunkers may not be vulnerable, but symbols always are.³⁰ The dialectic between matter and idea cuts both ways. The ideology that would reduce symbols and images to some inferior reality status merely reflects that conception of the aesthetico-imaginary as a sphere cut off, as if behind some *cordon sanitaire*, from the real world. States and corporations are obliged to protect the symbols of their power, above all when these are embedded in bunkers and monuments. And when they cannot – or visibly have trouble doing so, as they did in Seattle – they suffer real losses of prestige. These translate in turn, via the unforgiving logic of the spectacle itself, into losses of *real power*. (And Debord's "society of the spectacle" is first of all an insistence on the inseparability of the image world and the violent material relations of commodity capitalism.) This means that the virtual or digital realm of cyberspace is clearly a valid field of struggle. But it also means that at the end of the day the streets cannot be renounced or vacated. In fact, street demos are unavoidable tests of strength, and no group whose members think they are too good or too radical to give their support to allies engaged in such tests can claim to have overcome elitism.

The challenges remain: how to be effective and win such tests? Here we can take a lesson from old Sun-Tzu.

Unconventional forces in combat against a much stronger conventional force are obliged to produce a continuous stream of tactical innovations. In practice, CAE has been doing exactly that. And they continue to question and evolve. To be fair, the texts I've cited and criticized here are mostly pre-Seattle and pre-September 11. Although CAE has not, as far as I'm aware, revisited these issues explicitly, I'm encouraged to see that several strands of the group's recent research – those of "recombinant theater" and "contestational robotics" – seem to signal a return to the streets and other remnants of public space, as sites of situational resistance.³¹

Tactical media is a rich and important stream of critical cultural practice. But for all its disruptive promise and all the considerable advantages it offers to its practitioners – in terms of autonomy, flexibility, and dealing with the realities of boredom and burnout – tactical media cannot renounce or avoid issues of strategy or the problems of developing forms of collective agency capable of realizing transformation at the systemic level.³² In this regard, CAE's pronouncements to the effect that the very idea of public space was always already "dead on arrival" are not helpful. We still don't know what further mutations the idea of revolution would have to go through in order to get us beyond capitalism as a world system. But so far, the implosion model of transformation that brought

down the Soviet empire – and since then has toppled neo-liberal regimes in Argentina and other places – has not been able to do without, as its necessary climax and final act, the return of the repressed of real bodies filling the streets and squares. I reserve some skepticism for any proposed collective passage beyond “pancapitalism,” as CAE likes to call it, that prefers to avoid such episodes.

V. One More Time: the Dialectic of Art and Life

But I haven't spoken at all about the relation between art and "everyday life" – that great theoretical obsession of the old avant-gardes. Briefly, then, very briefly. Adorno, in his 1962 polemic against Sartre and Brecht, argued that art cannot instrumentalize itself on the basis of political commitments without undermining the autonomy on which it depends and without, finally, undoing itself as art.³³ As he would later put it in the *Aesthetic Theory*, art cannot escape its double-character, as both autonomous "promise of happiness" and "social fact." This would seem to be a valid critique, but only if we restrict ourselves to the opus-based bourgeois paradigm of art. What Adorno meant was: art cannot commit and re-function itself without undoing its status as *bourgeois art*. But what can this

mean today, to those of us couldn't care less about this paradigm and its pseudo-autonomies and so choose not to invest two cents, let alone anything important, in the market's pathetic attempts to keep it flapping and churning?

The answer to Adorno was already collectively worked out by artists who never read him: Debord, Gil Wolman, Michèle Bernstein, Asger Jorn, Constant, Raoul Vaneigem, J.V. Martin and the other situationists. "Dadaism sought to *abolish art without realizing it*; and surrealism sought to *realize art without abolishing it*."³⁴ Behind this cursory formulation is a formal dialectic. To transform art into a revolutionary weapon, it would first be necessary to "abolish" – that is, negate, decompose, dissolve, liquidate – the bourgeois paradigm of art. This negative movement would disentangle the true impulses of art – its promise of happiness and utopian force – from the untruth of the commodity form. Set free, this truth would then be carried on in a positive and creative movement that goes beyond – transforms or "realizes" – the bourgeois paradigm in the construction of new practices. Hegel's term *Aufhebung* ("sublation" or "supersession") is meant to capture both of these movements or dialectical moments.

So the argument is that dada, and especially Berlin dada, successfully realized the negative moment, by negating and decomposing bourgeois art as a naturalized institution. Dada

transformed art into a weapon for exposing the obscenity of art's function as affirmative decoration for a murderous order. Visitors to the "Early Dada Spring" exhibition, mounted by the Cologne dada group in April 1920, were made to trace a variation on a Duchampian demolition. In submitting *Fountain* to the first exhibition of the Society of Independent Artists in New York in 1917, Duchamp threatened to bring a urinal into the art cube, in order to test and expose the unacknowledged conventions and standards at work there. In reply, the Cologne dadaists brought art to the urinal, so to speak, by making visitors enter their exhibition through a public pissoir. There, Max Ernst had installed "a wooden sculpture with an axe attached, inviting the public to destroy it."³⁵

But these loaded jokes and pranks paled before the fully-conscious and consciously political demolitions of Berlin Club Dada's "First International Dada Fair," which opened at the end of June in the same year. Among the minefield of anti-art collages and sculptural assemblages installed in two "galleries" were a series of "corrected masterpieces" – altered reproductions of classical sculpture and Renaissance, Baroque, and even Cubist paintings. Three months after Duchamp's sly debunking of the *Mona Lisa* was published in Picabia's *391*, the Berlin dadaists used photocollage and collectivized production to attack those foundations of the bourgeois paradigm, the cult

of beauty and the fetishization of the masterpiece.³⁶ Grosz went even further, literalizing the violence by slashing a reproduction of Botticelli's *Primavera*.³⁷ And these *détournements* were shown side-by-side with a barrage of bluntly anti-capitalist placards and posters that "captioned" the exhibition and clarified the political intention; one, bearing a photo-portrait of Grosz, read: "Dada is the Deliberate Decomposition of the Bourgeois Conception of the World/ Dada Stands on the Side of the Revolutionary Proletariat." To the painted surface of Dix's *45% Able Bodies (War Cripples)*, the dadaists attached Grosz and Heartfield's photomontage ("Who's the Fairest of Them All?") from the cover of the banned *Jedermann sein eigener Fussball*. And suspended from the ceiling was Heartfield and Rudolf Schlichter's notorious *Prussian Archangel* – a pig in an officer's uniform, to which was pinned a sign: "Hanged by the Revolution." All this was installed, three months after striking workers foiled the Kapp putsch, in Otto Burchard's space on the Lützow-Ufer in Tiergarten, just across the Landwehr canal from Noske's War Ministry and a short walk from the Lichtenstein bridge, from which Luxemburg's murderers dumped her body.

No merely aesthetic mirroring of life, then, this was conscious, critical reflection, packed into galleries with the open aim of making the whole gallery system explode. Dada

"abolished" art by directly attacking it, as a system of pretensions and claims to authority, and by forcibly pushing beyond its institutionally enforced limits, within which separation can be mis-recognized as autonomy, privilege justified as talent, and passive isolation confused with contemplation. Thus they could claim, as they did on the poster for the International Dada Fair: "The dada movement leads to the dissolution and supersession [*Aufhebung*] of the art trade."³⁸

But, and this is the situationist charge against dada, these artists failed to realize the positive, constructive moment of the dialectic. They failed to see clearly the need to go beyond negation and invent new forms and practices for "revolutionizing everyday life." Ultimately, they failed to site themselves beyond the stabilizing and recuperative conventions of passive spectatorship that structure gallery and theater. (In fact, this harsh verdict is unjust, since the members of Berlin dada did make strong collective moves in this direction). The surrealists, for their part, went directly to the positive "realization" of art, by developing new techniques for living their revolt. Here Debord is thinking not so much of the fierce provocations and public interventions as of the ways Breton, Péret, Éluard, Aragon and the others turned the city of Paris into a site for their games and for the free flow of their desire, anticipating the *dérive* and situationist critical

urbanism. But at the same time – the blade now swings from the other side – the surrealists still wanted to hang on to their identities and prestige as (bourgeois) artists and poets. (This characterization, reflecting Breton and the elder surrealists as the situationists would have known them in Paris in the 1950s and 60s, is also somewhat distorted and would not apply so easily to the group in its more militant prewar phases.)³⁹

It's also significant that the operative terms in the situationist formula are "*dadaism*" and "*surrealism*." For them, this "ism" always marks the presence of an ideology. It means something created from living ideas and relationships has hardened into the *rigor mortis* of an orthodoxy no longer open to question through a dynamic dialectic with history. And those who "subscribe" to such orthodoxies or adopt them as a style have in effect refused critical dialogue and reduced themselves to passive followers. It was on the basis of their own attempt to process the revolutionary tradition, and to fully appropriate what they learned from the Socialisme ou Barbarie group's debates on organization, that the situationists insisted on active and creative participation from their own members. They didn't want groupies, and when, after 1968, they seemed no longer to be attracting anything but groupies, they concluded that they were becoming an "ism" and pulled the plug. Before then, they insisted that it was possible and necessary to speak

of situationists, but not of "situationism," which became a kind of anti-shibboleth by which outsiders and those who hadn't done their homework revealed themselves. The fact that they speak here, in their critique of the avant-garde tradition, of dadaism and surrealism indicates that they think these groups also succumbed to ideology, in this sense. The objection bites, but, like the too rigid chiastic formulas the critique is packed into, is not quite just. A more historical and differentiating view would see the problem of ideology as one that began to haunt these groups in their late phases, just as it did for the situationists.

They in any case drew the conclusions. To realize its full potential as a revolutionary practice, art would need to *both abolish and realize* the bourgeois paradigm. It would need, in a simultaneous double-movement, to negate and dissolve itself as a separate and separating sphere of activity and, linking up to a systemic critique of the social given, apply itself directly to the experimental decolonization of everyday life and the destruction of domination. To the positive moment of this dialectic belong the situationist innovations: the *dérive*, psychogeography and unitary urbanism, *détournement* and the construction of situations, eventually direct participation in insurrectionary and revolutionary "events."

To the extent that art realizes both of these moments, it

will supersede itself, qua art, and disappear into the conflicts of politicized life, becoming in the process a real weapon of hope. As this can't be accomplished in the absence of the radical, systemic transformation of society as a whole (or "totality"), the necessary trajectory of a revolutionary group of artists is to merge with a revolutionary political movement. On the other side, a revolutionary political movement that excludes play, free creativity, spontaneity and the other "true" values and experiences of art, will never be able to launch a better society. For this reason, the trajectory of a revolutionary political movement *should be* to welcome groups of radical artists and open itself to what the artists can bring to it. In practice, we know, the issue of creative autonomy remained the object of negotiations that were at best difficult and at worst terminal; but at this point of blockage pressure builds for a qualitative leap or rupture yet to come. Guiding the movement, again, is the ongoing self-critique that rescues "revolutionary theory" from reified "revolutionary ideology." As statement of the necessary relation between life and a revolutionary artistic practice and as signpost to the way beyond a dead paradigm, I doubt these formulas can be improved on.

VI. Going Out to the Rhizomes

I'll end with a summary redaction that tries to convey the excitement that the "old" avant-garde project still inspires in me. At the same time, I'll try to confirm and tweak the fine organizational model of CAE. From the Marxist critiques of cultural autonomy – take your pick: Marcuse, Benjamin, Adorno, or Althusser will do here – we know that culture is not really autonomous, or at best is only relatively so. Concealed behind the cover of autonomy are culture's social functions, which are affirmative, compensatory and stabilizing. But bourgeois art also has an important and under-remarked *defensive* function.

We could put it like this: From the point of view of domination, artists are pesky, troublesome people. They tend to be creative, independent and stubborn, and some of them can even think. So it's necessary to manage them and keep them busy, but without being heavy-handed or pissing them off too much. Out of this systemic need emerged the institutions of bourgeois art. In more detail: as a social stratum of cultural production, artists bring together a dangerous set of capacities. (They're actually human capacities that for most people are structurally blocked.) Artists have learned manual skills that make them sensitive and capable fabricators. They've developed and command generalized creativity that could easily be applied

outside the studio. They have also developed conceptual skills, which means the ability to think critically is never far away. And as a result of spending so much time in the virtual world of the imagination, they represent a worrisome reserve of utopian hope. The risks abound. How to deal with them?

The market is the answer. The gallery-commodity system, with art schools, museums and the rest of its apparatuses, functions as a big machine for capturing all that capacity – all those competencies, all that potentially radical creativity, criticality and utopian desire. It then steers and channels this capacity into the safe, policed forms of the opus-commodity. Thereby, of course, it is neutralized and prevented from developing into pressure for systemic transformation or even direct support for an existing revolutionary force. The ideology that supports this castration-hysterectomy machine is crude, but has been fairly dependable: flatter the artist's ego, tell them they're geniuses, special, unique, authentic, etcetera, blah, blah.

Thinking about it this way, in terms of how bourgeois art functions to block a sector of latent antagonism to capitalism from fully and consciously emerging, clarifies what the avant-garde project actually was: an organized attempt by artists to recover their powers, by liberating them from the dead-end of the bourgeois paradigm and its commodity form, in order to

redirect them *offensively and proactively* against the systemic enemy in the sphere of everyday life. In short, to make boom-boom. It also clarifies something further: the hostility – so impressive to Peter Bürger – of the early avant-gardes to the institutions of bourgeois art and high culture were merely first attempts to take the measure of the real enemy.⁴⁰ As time went on, and the image of that enemy was resolved and refined through contact with anarchist and Marxist theory, the avant-gardes became consciously anti-capitalist.

From this we should conclude that it's unnecessary to wage war on bourgeois art as such, which was in any case quite sufficiently exposed and negated by dada. At this point it's much more efficient and effective to simply desert and bypass the necrophiliac institutions of bourgeois art, aiming one's liberated capacity directly at the vulnerable nerve centers and pressure points of the capitalist world system: the regime of property ownership, corporate power, the state, the military, the nation and its borders. (I'm prepared to call the deterritorialized sum of all these points and centers, à la Hardt and Negri, "Empire"; and, yes, it is against them, precisely, that the global rhizomes – "Multitude" – are pressing.)

In what form can artists enter and support this global anti-capitalist "thing," this multitudinous desertion, this

(il)legal above-underground of networks and layered coalitions of autonomous cells, collectives and affinity groups? I think CAE nearly has it right: a fast cultural cell of three to ten people, maximally flexible through a membership that diversifies the skill and knowledge base, and capable and willing to improvise interventions and ruptures in any available medium. This is formidable, but it can still be improved. CAE gives us a model for an artist group. In some texts, CAE seems to want to point beyond this, but mostly, and in practice, it has been an artist group that works, mostly or at least most visibly, within the academy and art institutions. That's understandable, but limiting.

What is needed is a generalized *détournement* of the art schools. In the absence of another student revolt, the subordination of the academy to market discipline will continue in the short term. But teachers and students can still reclaim and re-function their campuses by opening up links and lines of flight to the rhizomes. They can also carry out their own curricular "reforms." Whatever their subject, studio art and art history courses can include serious exposure to the real functions of bourgeois art and its institutions, as well as to the histories of revolutionary avant-garde struggles against them. And these can be made urgently relevant by demonstrating their secret links to contemporary struggles over globalization.

Contrary to what is often assumed, capitalism can be named and called to account, even in the United States. Given tools and sites for critical self-enlightenment, students can at least make more sovereign choices about the best ways to "invest" in their future. Some of them, desiring to empower their high-octane creativity with a practical adventure, will desert to the rhizomes.

Cells of artists willing to work in coalitions of activists: this is good. But artists distributing their capacities more widely and deeply, by joining activist cells already on the ground: this is even better. The gift that only artists can give is to transversally disperse their desires and capacities – which the consolidated and specialized identity of "artist" wants to contain and professionalize – and to playfully recombine them with new elements, in new ensembles and models of militant practice. The rhizomes are there, in which to spread oneself out among several groups at once, as Guattari-style free radical and "agent of enunciation." In theory, this wouldn't preclude, as part of a pragmatic survival strategy, artists working simultaneously as artists, in or out of artist cells, and even maintaining positions in the academy or institutions. But in practice one would need to remain vigilant and realistic about the processes of recuperation and to remember that no one can do all things well, and especially not at the same time.

This would be Guattari *with Debord*: a form-process – unforced, qualitative and impossible to decapitate – that keeps generalizing the will to autonomy, by continuous translations into inventive *and militant* collective practices. It is a fitting form in which to hear and answer the unsilenced call for “another try.”

(2005)

Chapter Two

Tactical Media and the End of the End of History

Tactical media is one of the most inventive and productive streams of critical cultural practice to have emerged over the last decade and a half – and one that is now beginning to enjoy the approval and support of the institutionalized art world. Things have changed in important ways since tactical media emerged in the early to mid-1990s, however. Assumptions shared then by many tactical media practitioners are now in doubt or have been refuted by recent events. Some practitioners have understood this and are now attempting to revisit and rethink some of their basic positions. So it is a timely moment for critical reflections. In fact the paradox at the heart of tactical media, around which it coalesced and which now determines the limitations of the tactical approach, is historically

precise and with the benefit of hindsight can be formulated concisely.

I. Critique of a Tendency

Tactical media names a stream of diverse critical cultural practices and theoretical perspectives that, while not monolithic, nevertheless share some general tendencies and assumptions. These include a refusal of the ideology of affirmative art and culture, as well as skepticism with regard to the art world. Tactical media practitioners show an inclination to work collectively and to value ephemeral events and appearances over permanent works and monuments, and amateur versatility and experimentation over specialized professionalism. In these ways, tactical media tends to push beyond the traditional paradigm of bourgeois art – or to simply sidestep it through Aikido-like gestures. The inventive, do-it-yourself practices of tactical media tend to be aimed at localized, nomadic or portable interventions, to exhibit a special fondness for technical *détournement* and inversion, and sometimes to deploy anonymity, camouflage and even clandestinity to cover their tracks. Tactical media practitioners are self-

consciously oppositional. Opposed to what? Generally, to authoritarian power structures and to hierarchical control of technologies and resources.

The collective Critical Art Ensemble, or CAE, is emblematic of this stream and especially important as an example of a group that theorizes its own practice – in, to date, six books of influential essays. CAE does not pretend to speak for other tactical media groups or for the stream as a whole, and it would be unjust to assign such a role to the group's self-theorizations. If certain of CAE's arguments and propositions are emphasized here, it is because they concisely express a tendency and because the group's influence is by now generally acknowledged. CAE's short definition of tactical media usefully summarizes the description offered above:

Tactical media is situational, ephemeral, and self-terminating. It encourages the use of any media that will engage a particular socio-political context in order to create molecular interventions and semiotic shocks that will contribute to the negation of the rising intensity of authoritarian culture.¹

So the “tactical” in tactical media is meant to imply a flexible willingness to use “any media necessary” – as CAE, “détourning” Malcom X, puts it elsewhere – to resist the structures of authoritarian culture and perform local liberations of new media and technologies.²

Tactical media coalesced as a distinct stream or direction of cultural practice around the Next Five Minutes (N5M) gatherings in Amsterdam beginning in 1993. Since then a number of groups have become well-known exemplars. Besides CAE, we could point to Electronic Disturbance Theater, 0100101110101101.org, @TMark, the Yes Men, Institute for Applied Autonomy, Bureau of Inverse Technologies, subRosa, Raqs Media Collective, Adbusters, and the so-called collective name of Luther Blissett. There are literally dozens of other groups, with more appearing every year. Among the writers and theorists associated with tactical media are, again besides CAE, David Garcia, Brian Holmes, Kalle Lasn, Geert Lovink, Joanne Richardson, McKenzie Wark, and Peter Lamborn Wilson, aka Hakim Bey.

As this list-making exercise makes clear, gathering together such a diversity of practices and perspectives under a single name is bound to be problematic. The above characterization of tactical media emphasizes those groups

and tendencies that have origins in the art world, in part because they now seem to be returning and coming to rest there. Placing the accents in this way results in some distortion and probably does not do justice to those groupings and tendencies that came, not from the art world, but directly from experiences of activism and autonomist counter-culture. A different account, for example, might include Indymedia and Peoples' Global Action (PGA) in the tactical media stream or even give these networks a central and exemplary role. The critique offered here addresses what is, strictly conceived, a "tendency" – a tendency that characterized the foundational moment of tactical media as a named and theorized cluster of practices. Not every tactical practitioner and theorist belonged to this tendency at that moment of the mid-1990s. Some no longer do, and some never did. The tendency does still exist, however, and exerts its pull. As far as I know, it has not been analyzed and critically addressed as such.

Tactical media is an admirable contemporary mutation of the contestational cultural project of the historical avant-gardes. In some of its foundational assumptions and practices, however, it is clearly and crucially marked by the neo-liberal hegemony that characterized its moment of emergence. Its oppositional political motivation has

already been noted: tactical media was developed to be the kind of anti-authoritarian culture its practitioners believed to still be possible under conditions of "pancapitalism." Emerging and developing around a series of gatherings and workshops held between 1993 and 1999, tactical media is exactly contemporaneous with the heyday of post-Cold War neo-liberal triumphalism, a gloating ideology the tonalities of which are still well evoked in the phrase of the right-liberal neo-Hegelian Francis Fukuyama: with the "Fall of the Wall" and the implosion of capitalism's dialectical other, we are told, we have finally entered the "end of history."³ No more major political conflicts or struggles, no more radical critique or revolution: history has ended, by popular consensus, in the formula "capitalism plus liberal democracy."

And indeed, this ideology held sway through the 1990s. It's only in retrospect, after Seattle at the end of 1999 and the whole cycle of protests through Genoa in 2001, that we can recognize continuous systemic challenges even in this decade: in the 1994 Zapatista uprising in Chiapas, for example, in the general strike launched by South Korean workers in December 1996, or in the Do It Yourself (DIY) anti-capitalism behind the fierce anti-road campaigns in England. As that decade began, however, the contestation

and systemic critique of capitalism seemed to have collapsed in confusion and despair. Basically unopposed in the early 1990s, neo-liberals in power were able to organize, through the new institutions of the World Trade Organization and the World Economic Forum, a major intensification of global exploitation along North-South lines. "Privatization," "structural adjustment" and the "Washington consensus" were the euphemisms for the coordinated coercions of the global debtors' prison, for the pulverization of local labor and environmental protections, and for the breaking open of all markets to the uncontrolled operations of finance capital.

Against this grim backdrop, tactical media emerges as a refusal of political despair and cultural paralysis in the face of the evident defeat, everywhere, of radical aspirations. The diverse practices of tactical media were animated by a resolve to remain critical of post-Cold War realities and to survive without surrendering the possibility of inventive and playful practices of contestation. In retrospect, however, we can see that in certain of its assumptions, tactical media ceded too much to the neo-liberal triumphalists. In the absence of a visible anti-systemic movement, tactical media practitioners tended to accept that radical systemic change

– revolution – was no longer a real or desirable possibility. In doing so, they mistook neo-liberal wish projections for actual historical reality. One can read this quite legibly in the texts of CAE from this period. They advocate “molecular” interventions because, as the group put it in 1994, “revolution is no longer a viable option.”⁴ This text continues: “After two centuries of revolution and near-revolution, one historical lesson continually appears – authoritarian structure cannot be smashed; it can only be resisted.”⁵ Giving up the project of radical systemic critique and transformation, of destroying capitalism as a global system of exploitation and control, obviously has enormous consequences for tactical media practices.

Looking at the situation today and at the current acceptance and even enthusiastic approval of tactical media by the institutionalized art world, some problems and paradoxes become inescapable. In the first place, it is obvious that triumphalist announcements of the end of history were premature, to put it mildly. Neo-liberal hegemony provoked serious opposition and rebellions that have coalesced into new and global forms – the so-called anti-capitalist rhizomes. And as we know, certain clustered contradictions of neo-liberal globalization

exploded spectacularly on September 11, 2001, goading capitalism's world-enforcer-of-last-resort to declare a planetary state of emergency and have resort to the dubious enforcements of a perpetual, preemptive, dirty little "war on terror." This is not to equate global anti-capitalism with al-Qaeda-style jihadism, of course: the performance of this reduction belongs to the strategy of Empire itself.⁶ It is undeniable, however, that both contemporary phenomena are responses to a neo-liberal globalism worked out in the 1970s and 80s and recklessly implemented in the 90s.

The relevant fact is this: radical systemic critique has returned with a vengeance. The question of capitalism is back on the table, and with it comes, again, the question of revolution. The revolutionary tradition, critically appropriated, and revolutionary theory, critically rethought, are now enjoying a revival and expansion in much of the world that was unthinkable ten years ago, and we have only begun to glimpse the implications.

The implications for tactical media are profound. The shared assumption that revolution was a dead letter clearly informed and determined the move away from structure and system to the "molecules" of micro-politics. In military discourse, the tactical is the local implementation of a

general strategy. But in the case of tactical media – and the quoted example from CAE makes this perfectly clear – there is no strategy behind the tactics, other than the refusal of the strategic as such: “Authoritarian structure can’t be smashed; it can only be resisted.” So now that we have witnessed the astonishing return of systemic contestation and strategic thinking, where does that leave tactical media? The short answer is: in crisis. In so far as the tendency described above is central and constitutive of tactical media as a discrete stream, it marks a limitation that subsequent history has thrown into view. If this is right, the historical over-determinations of its foundational moment now appear as a limit in need of an overcoming leap or mutation. Some tactical media practitioners are legibly struggling with this question, even if there is not yet anything close to a consensual response or emerging position. And given the diverse character of this stream from the beginning, one wonders whether a consensus or common position that jettisons a foundational assumption is at all likely – or is even possible without dissolving the impetus from which tactical media issued in the first place.

Secondly, we can note that this foundational crisis of tactical media triggered by a real return of the repressed

is exactly contemporaneous with tactical media's new institutional success – an indication of which would be the 2004 exhibition "The Interventionists," curated by Nato Thompson at Mass MoCA. Without exaggerating or oversimplifying the situation, it seems clear that some kind of corner was turned with this exhibition.

Indisputably, tactical media now enjoys a place and a certain official approval within the art world. That the institutionalized art system is still far from being crudely identical with the Empire it serves can be seen clearly in the fact that the Bush government is persisting in its legal harassment of CAE member Steve Kurtz against the opposition of the official and academic art world, which has been unusually united in its response and show of solidarity and support in the face of his indictment.⁷

Still, the problem of cooptation has raised its ugly head and has now become an object of discussion among tactical media practitioners and theorists, including most recently David Garcia and Brian Holmes.⁸ One doesn't need conspiracy theories to note that, from the perspective of the systemic given and its logic, it is now, just as it always was, in the interest of capital and power to block art practices from attaining strategic consciousness and developing capacities for anti-capitalist agency. There are good

reasons, in other words, for institutions to reach for tactical media with their smiling and neutralizing embrace.

To sum up: tactical media now finds itself in a world that it did not foresee and that directly undoes some of its founding assumptions. Mutations of thought, beyond anything so far produced, are needed to adjust theory and practice to the new realities of global anti-capitalism and permanent war – and to avoid the neutralizations of official approval. This should not be taken as a condemnation of tactical media: to repeat, it was a hopeful gesture in a basically hopeless historical moment. Moreover I and many others made the same mistake of accepting too quickly the idea that revolution had become unthinkable. The point is that today, given renewed anti-capitalist struggles and the revival of radical systemic critique, this “unthinkability” is itself “no longer viable.” Hindsight sees better, and if in 1994 CAE declared the streets “dead capital” and called for an exodus to cyberspace, well few people were in the streets at that time anyway. However, the current “success” of tactical media carries the risk of a wave of new imitators wishing to replicate that success without asking any critical questions about what this kind of success can possibly mean. Those who are now taking up tactical media

as a practice should be aware of this tendency and be able to think it, critically and historically, as a limitation. To formulate it most provocatively, either tactical media now works out its relations to global anti-capitalist strategy and the inherited problems of revolutionary agency, or it ends here, returns to the art system, and goes into the museum-mausoleum. It would be ironic, not to say uninformative, if tactical media were "killed by success" (converted to cultural capital) at the very moment popular, global resistance has put history back into motion.

II. An Intervention

An example will make the critique more concrete. In the summer of 2004, the colorful silhouettes of Apple computer's poster campaign for its popular iPod digital music players were subjected to some provocative alterations. These poster ads show cleanly rendered silhouettes of hip and sleek iPod-plugged young people bumping, grinding, leaning, swaying, hip-hopping and raving their way through the urban landscape in perfectly solipsistic bubbles of bliss. The striking black

silhouettes against bold monochromatic backgrounds were deployed in grids or linear series on the walls of major US cities and quickly became a ubiquitous urban presence.

They were also made to order for tactical media hijacking.

Simultaneously, posters produced in perfect mimicry of the iPod poster-style began appearing in Los Angeles and New York. In LA, an anonymous pair of artists going by the name of Forkscrew Graphics produced a set of four posters and infiltrated them seamlessly into the iPod grids on walls and billboards around the city.⁹ In three of the spoof posters, the iPods have been replaced by weapons, the silhouettes of which have become all-too familiar in recent years. One figure, leaning back against a magenta background with all the cool of the hipsters in the iPod ads, carries a rocket propelled grenade, or RPG, on one shoulder. Another on a field of blue hefts an AK-47 assault rifle over his head with both arms in a triumphant gesture. A third figure on a green ground has thrown his weight back onto one foot in preparation for throwing what, if it is not an iPod, by implication is an IED or improvised explosive devise. The silhouette of this figure, which otherwise is not particularly militarized, evokes timeless images of popular protest. The figure forms the very template of the protester hurling a paving

stone or Molotov cocktail and precisely echoes that humorous stencil painting by British graffiti artist Banksy, in which the flaming Molotov has been replaced by a bouquet of flowers. The fourth parodic poster floats on an orange ground the well-known and now iconic hooded and blanketed figure from Abu Ghraib prison. In all four posters, the white iPod wires are wittily re-functioned as shoulder straps, fuse, or conduits of simulated electrocution. The iPod logo has been redone as a grenade icon, followed by the word "iRaQ." A line of text across the bottom of each gives the death counts for Iraqis (in fact massively underestimated) and US soldiers (at that time roughly a third of what it is at this writing).

Meanwhile in New York, posters were appearing showing the Abu Ghraib silhouette on magenta and green grounds, with a text slug reading "10,000 volts in your pocket, guilty or innocent."¹⁰ These were reportedly the work of a media activist going by the pseudonym "Copper Greene." Two months earlier, in the May 24, 2004, issue of the *New Yorker*, Seymour Hersh had published an exposé entitled "The Gray Zone." In it, he exposed a secret US Pentagon interrogation program authorized by Secretary of Defense Donald Rumsfeld and overseen by Deputy Undersecretary Stephen Cambone. A so-called SAP (Special Access Program),

the project assembled a mobile unit of soldiers drawn from elite military forces for the secret abduction and interrogation of suspects in the "war on terror." In the words of one of Hersh's sources, an anonymous "former intelligence official": "The rules are 'Grab whom you must. Do what you want.'"¹¹ As Hersh reported, one of the code names for this "black ops" program was "Copper Green." (Different spelling: the poster spoofer has added an "e.")

News of the visual parodies spread quickly through the antiwar networks and the images popped up all over the Internet. Printable image files of Forkscrew's four posters were soon (and are still) available for download from <bloodforoil.org> and other activist websites. The spoofed images made it into mainstream media reports all over the world, were widely praised by commentators opposed to the war and occupation of Iraq, and were cited approvingly by Milton Glaser and Mirko Ilic in their 2005 book *Design of Dissent*. In the more rarified art world, the parodies were discussed in *Art in America* and *Art Journal*, and possibly other art magazines as well.¹²

By the criteria of tactical media, then, this was an elegant, effective and emblematic intervention: images of dissent had been introduced into the spectacle machine and had multiplied like a virus. Many of the hallmarks of the

tactical media approach are on display. Using technology across media to multiply the reach and effectiveness of the dependable avant-garde technique of situationist *détournement* – or “culture jamming,” as Kalle Lasn dubs it – the practitioners fashioned an irresistible “counter-meme” that could be quickly appropriated by do-it-yourselfers anywhere and that inspires similar gestures of dissent and defacement. And signaling that their motivations are not careerist, the practitioners remain invisible behind their pseudonyms.

This is perhaps as successful as this kind of tactical media intervention can be. But as admirable as it is, it also reveals the basic limitation of the tactical approach. Appearing in a US election year, a month or so before the Republican National Convention in New York, against which American antiwar networks chose to focus their energy, the force of these images was sucked into the maw of US electoral politics and its exclusively liberal discourse. For structural reasons that are well understood and can be summarized in a dollar sign, US representative “democracy” is incapable of generating or acknowledging a systemic critique of neo-liberal globalization and its necessary wars of enforcement. It can only deal with such things through a liberal and legalistic frame that excludes the

problem of underlying social structures and relations and forces all issues into the reduction of a lobodomized and consumerist either/or: Bush or Kerry, asses or elephants. So instead of actually disrupting, blocking and shutting down the war machine, we'll cast our vote for the party of pseudo-opposition or at most blow a gasket begging those in power for reforms and accountability. In the event, Bush "won" anyway, and iPod went on to become an incredibly popular product, much beloved by consumers.

This is not to suggest that tactical media can be held responsible for that, of course. But the example shows all too clearly what the suppression of radical critique means in an American context. The US public is apparently the only one, even among the rich Western capitalist core countries, that is not overwhelmingly opposed to the occupation of Iraq. Even at this late date, after the exposure of blatant official lies, of programmatic torture, and of a chilling expansion of state surveillance, there is nothing like the widespread rage and active disobedience that would signal that a majority of Americans has understood what was done to them and in their name. What opposition there is to the "war on terror" in the US public media-sphere tends to blame everything on Bush, the Republicans, the Neo-cons, and the oil barons, with the

implication that if the others were running the state, things would be acceptably different. Radical, systemic critique that uncovers and renders understandable the functions of this war as an enforcement of a capitalist world system is effectively absent from the mainstream media and public debate.

In this context, interventions aimed at the US public need to burst the frame of liberal discourse and find a way to integrate and activate in its very forms and practices a more radical and ambitious critique. They need to go beyond merely feeding feelings of dissatisfaction and anxiety, to locate those systemic vulnerabilities in which the whole capitalist machine of global control comes into view as the transformable social construction it is. If renewed struggles have once again made revolution the object of serious and urgent theoretical work, the American public has not heard about it. From deep in the shimmering digital fogs of neo-liberal ideology, revolution still appears as an absolute impossibility. This being the case, interventions aimed at creating "cognitive dissonance" within and around the official rhetoric of war need at the same time to de-reify the dogmatic systemic mantra of "There is no alternative."

A comparison will clarify the point. In 1966, in the midst of the scandal at Strasbourg University surrounding the use of student union funds to print and distribute 10,000 copies of the situationist pamphlet *On the Poverty of Student Life*, André Bertrand created the now-famous poster *The Return of the Durutti Column*. Wheat pasted on the walls of the campus but also formatted as a four-page newspaper insert, translated and disseminated in Europe and North America, this poster constructed of "détourned" cartoons and photographs issued from a refusal of the systemic given that went so deep it gave voice to demands and desires that were simply unanswerable within the discourse of liberal capitalism. The most famous panel depicts a bit of conversation between two "cowboys." The dialogue comes from situationist Michèle Bernstein's 1960 "détourned" novel, *Tous les chevaux du roi*. Here's the exchange, as translated by Donald Nicholson-Smith and T.J. Clark for the English-language pamphlet *Ten Days that Shook the University*:

First cowboy: "What's your scene, man?"

Second cowboy: "Reification."

First: "I guess that means pretty hard work with big books and. . ."

Second: "Nope. I drift. Mostly, I just drift."¹³

So here is a radical assertion of autonomy and a categorical refusal to be plugged into the capitalist economy. The exchange links up to the old dada and surrealist slogan "Never Work," elaborated by the situationists into a critique of the structuring division of everyday life into work-time and so-called leisure, or programmed consumption. Neither the whole nor the parts of this critique are reconcilable with the liberal given. This is an example of what a tactical media intervention with living links to radical critique and revolutionary strategy might look like. And its effectiveness is a matter of record. This Strasbourg episode was an important prelude to the campus eruptions of May, two years later.

By contrast, the iPod poster parodies were easily accommodated and absorbed by liberal, legalist and electoral discursive frames that have always already excluded any possibility of systemic change. It would be ridiculous to single out this intervention and make it stand for everything tactical media is or does. But it does exemplify the weakness of the tactical approach when it lacks adequate strategic aim. To fail to activate a radical and systemic critique in the forms of intervention

is to settle for a truly ephemeral frisson that will quickly be overwhelmed by the liberal given; to attempt such activations would already move us beyond the assumptions of tactical media, as it emerged in the mid-1990s.

III. Articulations of Theory

Tactical media now needs to make a qualitative leap if it is to maintain living and effective relations to theory, practice and history. This qualitative leap or mutation could result from the pressure of a return to the problems of revolutionary form, agency and temporality: how does systemic transformation happen? What kind of events could produce radical change today? What organizational forms, what cultural and political strategies, what kind of actions and interventions are needed? The pressure building around these problems could lead tactical media to rethink and adjust its assumptions and to discover or invent practices that take more ambitious aim at capitalism as a global and totalizing system of exploitation and control.

There is no question that already by the end of the 1960s traditional revolutionary theory was in crisis.

Leninist vanguard partyism, geared for struggle with the capitalist state and aiming for seizure of state power as the condition for reorganizing social relations, has proved to be the vehicle for new forms of bureaucratic exploitation and control. The defeats and disappointments of attempts at Leninist-style revolutions over the course of the twentieth century led to aporia and paralysis. The risks of violence appear too great and too clear, and the prospects too unclear and wishful: better not to take such a chance, better to play it safe. But under the neo-liberal war of all against all, even playing it safe is becoming untenable. Globally, people have rejected the Leninist model. Without yet knowing what can replace it, but fighting for their identity and their very existence, they have begun once more to revolt and rebel. Nobody, then, is calling for a repetition of disastrous defeat. The open question is: what might revolution now become, in order to get us beyond the ruinous cycles of capitalism? In this regard it is a great liberation and no disaster at all finally to be free of the Soviet empire and its "really existing socialism." Good riddance to this counter-revolutionary machine that for seven decades violently monopolized anti-capitalist language and thought while doing its best to freeze and kill revolutionary theory and

practice. As we put this destructive ruse of history behind us, we can see more clearly than ever what still blocks our way: capitalism as world system (aka "society of the spectacle," "biopower," "Empire"), today trying in the most panicked way to hide behind the pulp fiction of a "war on terror."

Michael Hardt and Antonio Negri's two books *Empire* and *Multitude* amount to an ambitious reworking of revolutionary theory.¹⁴ They directly address the crisis of traditional theory and, in light of the history of struggles and the evolution of organizational forms over the course of the twentieth century, show why anti-capitalist resistance to Empire now tends to self-organize into rhizomes, or open, fully-distributed networks. While they don't pretend to solve all the problems of form, agency and temporality that we have inherited, Hardt and Negri demonstrate that in fact these are the problems we need to be working on. They have done us the theoretical service of giving us a powerful text to work from, to criticize and supersede, to put to the test of practice. And they are not the authors of a revival so much as the hopeful observers and reflectors of actual struggle: as they acknowledge, they are merely trying to keep pace with the new cycle of struggles that has already broken out.

With respect to tactical media, another text we would need to bring into this critical constellation is Guy Debord's 1967 *The Society of the Spectacle*, and indeed the whole body of situationist theory.¹⁵ Debord and the situationists did not lack a radical systemic critique or cultural strategies and practices developed from it. They worked intensely on the problems of organizational form and the structures of hierarchical control and enforced passivity. Rejecting capitalism in its liberal forms (what they called "diffuse spectacle") and bureaucratic socialism with its police states and ridiculous leader cults ("concentrated spectacle"), they pointed to the need for a revolution without centralized, top-down parties and "leaders." And this analysis, shared by *Socialisme ou Barbarie* and the March 22nd Movement, was confirmed in May and June of 1968. In an astonishing sequence of events that led rapidly from campus disturbances to the brink of social revolution, the French Communist Party and its trade union, the CGT (Confédération générale du travail), acted as perfect agents of counter-revolution, accomplishing what de Gaulle could not: the breaking of the factory occupation movement by gradually coaxing, deceiving, coercing and demoralizing ten million workers on general strike back to wage-slavery.

The situationists must be read critically as well, of course. They tended, in advancing workers' councils and the occupation movement as the magic bullets of revolutionary strategy, to underestimate the practical problems of survival and durability in fully democratic and participatory revolutionary organizational forms. As the experience of Argentina following the December 2001 insurrection has confirmed, even when state power and existing social relations have been smashed through massive direct intervention, the challenges involved in producing basic needs without hierarchical divisions of labor are not going to be solved automatically – at least not if we want revolutionary processes to be durable and not condemned in advance to be merely short-lived assertions of collective autonomy or fleeting moments of festive potlatch. And the problems of defending a revolutionary process in its vulnerable early period requires a commitment to real democracy and a rigorous ethics of struggle that cannot be reduced to a mere calculus of force. But these blockages remain points for qualitative leaps to come, and it is the actualization of situational events that reactivates them as urgent problems.

This is not to say that the project of “constructing situations” can be unproblematically appropriated today,

let alone simply repeated. The moment of the Situationist International was one of (Fordist-Keynesian) economic expansion, rising standards of living, low unemployment, and functioning structures of social security in the capitalist core. In the wake of the uprisings of 1968, the systemic managers concluded that increased consumption and leisure time did not make the under-classes more docile and pliable, but rather encouraged rising demands. In the infamous words of Samuel Huntington in a 1975 report commissioned by the Trilateral Commission, the problem is an "excess of democracy." And so today we have to think and act in a context shaped by three decades of neo-liberal structural adjustment and class war. The revival of an ugly politics of hate and openly fascist tendencies of governance is in large part attributable, directly or indirectly, to a generalized existential insecurity in the wake of neo-liberal policies, now exacerbated by a war on terror that displaces global class conflicts onto a dubious "clash of civilizations" and which functions as a machine of racism, fear and hysteria. So while capitalism remains the global systemic given, the problems have shifted and are in some respects more challenging.

Compared to what the situationists have left us, however, tactical media's avoidance or refusal of systemic

critique and the problems of revolutionary theory is striking. Ultimately, such avoidances and absences merely determined the eventual limits of tactical media, and I've tried to suggest how and why those limits have now been reached.

In *A Hacker Manifesto*, media theorist McKenzie Wark offers a stimulating attempt to constellate Marx, Debord and Deleuze-Guattari.¹⁶ In Wark's re-periodization of the history of commodification and exploitation, the capitalist class is now challenged by the emergence of what he calls the "vectoralists." Whereas the capitalists exploited the laboring and producing classes by imposing the property relation on all fields of scarcity, the vectoralists are cutting-edge capitalists who use the concept of "intellectual property" to capture and structure the field of immaterial labor – a field that actually is not characterized by scarcity. In other words, they exploit the hackers, who have yet to become conscious of themselves as a new class in the history of class struggle. With class consciousness comes the possibility of making common cause with other exploited classes, liberating information from imposed scarcity, overthrowing the politics of representation and initiating the gift economies of the hacker ethic. Wark is fuzziest the nearer he approaches

the problems of agency, of how this could be accomplished, with what forms of struggle and organization. But he at least performs a bold return to systemic critique and revolutionary theory and to that extent is contributing to debates that prepare the ground for the needed qualitative leaps.

I am not arguing that we await some master theory that will finally and with no remainder solve all the inherited aporias of practice. But if such a totalizing theoretical system is impossible, it doesn't follow that we should abandon all attempts to understand the systemic enemy as a "totality." The "movement of movements" is undoubtedly right: we will need a multiplicity of theories and approaches to reach and transform the layered structures and operations of systemic power. The point, to repeat, is that we need to accept the pressure of these problems and blockages and work on them. Proclaiming revolution a dead letter got us nowhere, and to continue to do so now is condemn in advance all those who have renewed anti-capitalist struggle. Tactical media theorists have begun to acknowledge these new urgencies. Global anti-capitalism and permanent war loom large in the published papers from the fourth N5M festival of tactical media in September 2003. There, CAE acknowledges the need for strategy,

though the group worryingly continues to insist that tactical media gatherings are not the forum for strategic thinking and debates.¹⁷ So far, the needed leap or mutation has yet to appear. Ultimately, it is not in order to rescue tactical media from success and canonization by the art world that more ambition and resolve are needed. Imagining the events that lead beyond a ruinous capitalism will need all of tactical media's critical cultural energies – and much more.

(2006)

Chapter Three

Avant-Gardes as Anti-Capitalist Vector

1.

There is no one avant-garde. They are plural: historical cells, groupings, networks and movements. From the perspective of the singular, the tradition of the artistic avant-gardes appears as a density of overlapping trajectories, each with its own contexts and genealogies, programs, practices and protagonists. Seen from the place of the collective, this same tradition resolves into a single vector, a directional force that again and again punches a hole in the paradigm of bourgeois art. In diverse events of intransigently transitive invention, this vector gathers and focuses a radical force sufficient to rupture the all-consuming gravity of capitalist imperatives. This vector has not disappeared, is not the

dead relic of a history that has ended. Museums, art schools and magazines cannot entomb it. Even now, obstinate agents reconstitute and reinvent it, giving it new names and new forms. In common with anti-capitalists everywhere today, they look back bitterly and overcome their pessimism by organizing it.

Money is the root form of representation in bourgeois society.

T.J. Clark

2.

Backing up now, to begin again, more carefully. Vector: a directional force, the appearance in time and place of an arrow or one-way street. The direction is: beyond. Starting from, but going beyond, bourgeois art. Meaning: beyond a systematic organization of representation and toward an agency that would be political without for that ceasing to be artistic or aesthetic. If such a movement were possible, would it be sustainable as a model, or fated in advance to defeat and re-absorption by representation, by the paradigm of bourgeois art that was, after all, its point of departure? Can a claim to agency, a demand for a collective autonomy more real than virtual, carry the

impulses and experiences of art beyond art as such? Art beyond art, art against art: dialectics or impossibility? Would the performances and traces of a politicized agency that originated in but renounced bourgeois art not be different, in qualitative ways, from political agency and performance that did not pass through the experience and ordeal of this vector? And if there were such a difference, would it, itself, be capable of generating a politics? Would it speak of human capacities, desires and experiences that should be, could be, generalized, made available for the free development of all, instead of restricted and professionalized, as privilege? Would not such a generalization necessarily imply a radical reorganization of social relations: revolution?

Neutralization is the social price of aesthetic autonomy.

Theodor W. Adorno

3.

Art only decorated the world; the point was to change it. Decorated: compensated and apologized for, affirmed and stabilized. Bourgeois art decorates the capitalist world,

the social given, organized exploitation, structural barbarism, "perennial suffering." The philosophers have described this art: an open and expanding category constituted and reproduced by institutions and conventions, the art world. Where the philosophers of art considered their work done, critical theory begins. It grasps the historical context and digs out the social basis. It diagrams the ideology of bourgeois art. At its center: the artist, then and still the singular, original and authentic genius-creator of work, opus, oeuvre. Signature as auratic seal, proof of presence, which the market converts to cultural capital and exchange value. Artistic autonomy: limited exemption from the law of profit, a suspension of the continuous cost-benefit calculations of instrumental reason, a decreed no-fire zone in the war of all against all. Qualified permission to evoke and explore what lies beyond, the promise of happiness: the joy of solidarity, gift-giving, play, free communication and mimesis of nature, liberated contact and performance. But: only in art, not in "life." This rule is non-negotiable. Only virtual enactments are permitted. These may only enter the interested calculus of everyday life in the same form as everything else there – as commodities, fungible equivalents of exchange. And this contract marks the

structure of the work or opus. So Adorno: art's "double-character," both autonomous and social fact.¹

The art world, then, is a ghetto. Relatively free, compared to the indifferent rigors and enforcements of daily capitalism. But powerless in its confinement. The ghetto has its own distributions of power, internal divisions and hierarchies, stars and slaves, shanty towns and gated communities. But around it all, a categorical wall, patrolled by the institutional police and, if need be, the state. In short a social sub-system of capitalism, of capitalism as world system. Its functions: to soothe the loss of capacities, autonomy and experience; to gather and channel the pressure for change; to neutralize the desire to actualize the promise by actually changing life. Marcuse in 1937: "the affirmative character of culture."² Althusser, 1970: to "interpellate" individuals as obedient subjects of capitalism.³ All this is well mapped. Bourgeois art was, and remains, *exposed*... and yet goes on. As it will do, so long as capitalism calls the shots.

4.

Bourgeois art: does this really capture the current reality? Does this category, with its implication of high

culture, still conform to a contemporary world in which the old classes, the bourgeoisie and proletariat, seem to have mutated beyond recognition before the globalizing advance of spectacular society and its middle classes of enthusiastic consumption? Some argue that the opposition between life and art was always overblown and in any case is not strictly sustainable: at the conceptual edges, at the dividing frames, these categories always blur and merge.⁴ True enough, but this is no refutation; the Derridean objection does not deny that the division is real, that it operates and produces difference as a real effect. Others hold that the relative autonomy of bourgeois art has been overwhelmed and subsumed by what Adorno and Horkheimer in 1947 named the "culture industry."⁵ Whatever limited autonomy art enjoyed in an earlier phase of modernity, we are told, all artistic production is now fully exposed to the law of profit. Market imperatives now thoroughly shape and manage artistic production and even over-determine the production of artistic subjectivity. Whatever space of exception autonomy was once able to wrest from the domain of coerced competition, the categorical difference between art and life has now been saturated and undone. Such diagnoses, giving too much rein to Adornian hyperbole, are overstated. Certainly this is the tendency,

and certainly it is a threat to autonomy. But however weak and shabby that autonomy now appears, it still functions and does service in a relative way: the fact remains that artists can, in the white cube and black box, explore questions that cannot be asked without certain reprisal in the context of everyday life. And the complete and utter reduction of art and culture to its social functions would recoil and subvert those very social functions. Mere entertainment distracts but falls short of the deeply affirmative compensations offered by bourgeois art, even if it does become more difficult to determine where one ends and the other begins. Necessarily, then, even the slimmest relative autonomy counts for something and, in the give and take of liberal politics, is worth defending. The same goes for academic autonomy, which has long been under similar pressures. None of this, however, is the concern of the avant-gardes – or, for that matter, of radical anti-capitalist strategy.

A revolutionary action within culture cannot have as its aim to be the expression or analysis of

life; it must aim at life's expansion. Misery must be pushed back everywhere.

Guy Debord

5.

The historical avant-gardes probed the borders and limits of bourgeois art, bringing into view for the first time its institutions and unwritten conventions, its paradigm and social functions. Repudiating the powerlessness of prison-house autonomy, the avant-gardes began organizing jailbreaks. The practices are diverse, but the vector is clear: breakout, a force of rupture that negates the conventionalized difference, carrying the promise and experiences of art into the conflicting given of the capitalist everyday. Not as *art*: this passage transforms. As interventions, adventures: local liberations and disruptions aiming at generalized, global transformations. Debord: the "critique of separation" (1961), the "decolonization" of everyday life (1966).⁶ Gestures, models, tactics, strategies: what the impulses of art become, leaving bourgeois art behind. What avant-garde practices initiate becomes, in the wake, available to theory. Bürger, 1972: *Theory of the Avant-Garde*.⁷

6.

Focusing "primarily [on] Dadaism and early Surrealism but also and equally [on] the Russian avant-garde after the October revolution," Bürger judges that the avant-gardes failed in their attempt to integrate art into the praxis of life: "It is a historical fact that the avant-garde movements did not put an end to the production of works of art, and that the social institution that is art proved resistant to the avant-gardiste attack."⁸ For Bürger, the avant-gardes did succeed however in initiating the project of art's self-criticism and, as a result, in dissolving the organic work of art and reconstructing it on a different basis. "Neo-avant-garde" attempts to repeat the failure of the historical avant-gardes merely facilitate the re-absorption of these failures *as art*. More than dubious, these conclusions misrecognize the mutable, always renewable force of avant-garde breakouts and their relations to the project of anti-capitalist revolution. Obviously enough, the historical avant-gardes did not bring about a termination of bourgeois art. That bourgeois art continues is a result of the defeat of the revolutionary cycle that began in 1917, a defeat for which the artistic avant-gardes of course cannot be blamed. In this sense, the unqualified success of world revolution and the

destruction of capitalist relations would be the necessary conditions of a successful supersession of bourgeois art. True enough: these are the limits of "pre-history." But in thinking historical success and failure in such a literal, linear and all-or-nothing way, Bürger grants too much to the current given and blocks access to what, still in an Adornian idiom, could be called the "emphatic truth" of the avant-gardes. If we are to recognize these first breakouts as the constitution of a renewable vector, we first need to understand the sense in which the historical exposure of art's roles and functions under capitalism cannot be undone, revoked or proclaimed away. This exposure, and its subsequent elaboration by theory, was the determinate negation of bourgeois art: the critical dissolution, liquidation, demystification, disenchantment of a specific paradigm, with all its frenzied, churning forms, rules and apparatuses. What remains unrealized is the next spring of the dialectic: the positive creation or invention that would take the promise set free through the negation and code it into new forms and practices that would replace the bourgeois work of art altogether. While the positive mutation that would initiate the supersession of art still awaits actualization (revolution), the negation itself has been accomplished. The sheer power of

the given, as brute fact, can *repress* this negation. With the affect machines at its command, spectacular power can even make it seem ridiculous as a kind of retrograde extremism. The market can and does keep bourgeois art churning after its death by exposure. But this effect of reification cannot undo what has been actualized in thought and practice, what has entered history as a social counter-fact. Power would like to utterly eradicate the memory of these breakouts, just as it would like to erase from history every trace of insubordination and insurgency. It will never be able to do so, so long as there remains in the world the slightest shred or shadow of negativity. Nor can it prevent this negative dialectic from being recovered, reconstituted and reactivated, at any moment, as a vector – no more, at any rate, than neo-liberalism has succeeded in erasing for all time the force of the name of Marx.

We are in history, and its time is not over.

Susan Buck-Morss

7.

Bürger's judgment that the avant-garde breakouts amount merely to a "false sublation" (*falschen Aufhebung*) of

autonomous art into life, then, sees defeat and calls it impossibility.⁹ Bürger's misrecognition does not ask what would really be required for the "success" or "realization" of the avant-garde vector in a world that is no longer capitalist: the pressure and focus of continuous attempts, within a context of protracted and determined social struggle. The leap that transforms does not come out of nowhere. It can only issue from the pressure of unsolved problems lived as urgencies, from the inherited blockages of revolutionary theory and practice. Bürger fails to grasp that the breakouts of the artistic avant-gardes are dependent on but also contribute to the emergence of new revolutionary situations. So he takes the defeat of one revolutionary cycle as the termination of revolution as such. In this, he reflects that melancholic current of cultural pessimism that circulates through Frankfurt School critical theory and risks aligning it with the neo-liberal proclamators of the end of history. One finds this cultural pessimism in Habermas and even in Marcuse, but above all in Adorno. Page one of *Aesthetic Theory*: "The sea of the formerly inconceivable, on which around 1910 revolutionary art movements set out, did not bestow the promised happiness of adventure.... Art's autonomy remains irrevocable. All efforts to restore art by giving it a

social function – of which art is itself uncertain and by which it expresses its own uncertainty – are doomed.”¹⁰ In this and other infamous dismissals of committed cultural practices, Adorno proves incapable of thinking beyond the paradigm of bourgeois art. No question: within that paradigm, the double-binds Adorno formulated hold like iron laws. Bourgeois art cannot become something other than bourgeois art without ceasing to be bourgeois art. How little this actually says, and with what resigned pessimism the Frankfurt Master held on to a compromised autonomy even as the tremors of 1968 rumbled through his lecture hall, is clear enough. Adorno was uninterested in where the vector beyond bourgeois art could go because he could no longer imagine anything beyond “late capitalism” that would be worth fighting for. The radical openness of history darkens here, from promise to threat. The anti-dialectical opening of *Negative Dialectics* says it all: revolution missed its moment, period, full stop.¹¹ Therefore back to the feeble autonomies and sublimated compensations of philosophy and bourgeois art, to wait out the dark ages. The paralyzing seductions of this pathos have been well marked. Adorno can only be read against the weight of it.

8.

Adorno, Shapiro, Greenberg, MacDonald: today we can recognize the shared despair and resignation around which these disappointed Marxists orbited after 1945.¹² Out of it came the persistent tendency since then to conflate "the avant-garde" with modernism. According to its advocates, the modernist artwork is a force-field that formally registers the contradictions and anxieties of modernity – of a world continuously razed and remade by capital and technology – and at the same time formally generates resistance to the given. Exactly how it does so differs according to the account, but all accounts agree in locating force and value in the rigorous work or opus. There are multiple, even conflicting, versions of this narrative, but in all of them the avant-gardes emerge as the heroic makers of an exemplary modernism. Here, act and performance of break and rupture are always trumped by the works they leave behind. In these narratives the role of the avant-gardes is to confirm the institution of autonomy and accomplish the rescue of bourgeois art – from kitsch; from an utter collapse into the commodity form; from socialist realism, Stalinist or Trotskyist politics, indeed from any partisan commitment whatever; from the structural and historical aporias that never cease to haunt it.

Modernism as rescue: even the "farewell" of T.J. Clark, whose art history tempers scintillating connoisseurship with radical political intelligence, reproduces this elision of avant-garde breakout.¹³ Today's critical new guard – Bois, Buchloh, Foster, Krauss – struggles with the modernist accounts but resignedly ends by writing new ones of its own; these register modernism in battle with its others ("anti-," "post-"), but finish just the same by confirming the work-based bourgeois paradigm.¹⁴ Mutations of left-wing melancholy?

One response to all of this is – exit.

Brian Holmes

9.

Thinking the avant-gardes as a renewable vector of breakout suggests a different narrative. For it, what is decisive is the break with bourgeois art and its indispensable condition: the work, opus, "piece." The work – as trace and proof of the artist, however far removed, however ephemeral or immaterialized – is the prerequisite of institutional objectification and the final reduction to exchange value. It is, so to speak, commodified in advance. The expandable categories of bourgeois art can

apparently absorb every artistic practice that can be folded back into the form of a work. What eludes the work-form, however, would seem not to be subject to institutional control or market discipline. If such elusions are possible, they could never be absolute or fully self-assured: "iterability" – the structural possibility, beyond the aim of any intention, that any repeatable mark, gesture, utterance or performance can be displaced from its original context and re-grafted onto others – functions here as confirmation of an irreducible institutional power to misrecognize anything as a work, in order to capture it.¹⁵ Escape from the work-form, then, would derive rather from the rigor of a conscious refusal that becomes formally qualitative: if realized strongly enough, the desire that animates such practices makes them repellent or repulsive to the machines of absorption, perhaps because the violence of such operations becomes too naked.¹⁶ If that is the case, then the refusal of the work-form would be a practical opening in or by which the vector can be reconstituted and launched. In the idiom of Deleuze and Guatarri, we might then try to think the avant-gardes as an available (nomadic) "war machine" that produces "lines of flight" leading out of the bourgeois art paradigm.¹⁷ Whatever idioms, metaphors or images we choose,

the vector always generates divisions that in turn generate alternative historical narratives. If the work-form is taken as the indispensable support and condition of bourgeois art and its apparatus of absorption and enforcement, then a first division would distinguish production that attempts no more than to successfully instantiate the work-form from other practices that consciously manifest some critical resistance to that form. But a second and more provocative division would acknowledge the difference between practices that, while critical and resistant, nevertheless result in works from those which succeed in durably refusing the work-form.

Rather than ask, "What is the attitude of a work to the relations of production of its time?" I should like to ask, "What is its position in them?"

Walter Benjamin

10.

Significant realignments would follow from these divisions. The first and for some most upsetting would be a drastic reduction in what could credibly be called "avant-garde." But in the face of the stupefying conceptual degradations

and linguistic inflations generated from the relentless imperatives of selling and hustling, these might be welcome and even merciful cuts. Whatever is produced for the paradigm of bourgeois art, whatever aims at gallery, biennial, museum, art history, indeed whatever finally conforms to the minimal conventions of exhibition and performance and seeks an understanding reception within those conventions: all this certainly will be absorbed and will end by reinforcing the paradigm and the capitalism it serves and subtends. This is so no matter how "critical" in form or content, no matter how transgressive of this or that particular convention. As has been known for a long time, the art world can readily process difficult and critical works, and the stimulant of this manageable resistance arguably strengthens art's affirmative social functions. So let all this be called bourgeois art, and let those working within the paradigm continue to distinguish between what could be called naively affirmative and critically affirmative works. The thesis here is: avant-garde practices only begin where this paradigm ends.

11.

How would art since 1945 appear, if viewed through these divisions and re-categorizations? Much depends, of course, on how generous or uncompromising the viewer decides to be. A few examples, then, without trying or needing to be exhaustive. Naively affirmative bourgeois art: abstract expressionist painting, late surrealism, minimalist sculpture, pop, nouveau réalisme, so-called neo-dada and neo-avant-garde, performance art, neo-expressionism, installation art. Critically affirmative bourgeois art: early Gutai performance, Independent Group, happenings, some nouveau réalisme, NO! Art, Fluxus, Vienna actionists, some conceptualist art (*arte de los medios, nova objectividad*), Hi Red Center, Bikyoto Revolution Committee), Living Theater, Guerrilla Art Action Group, institutional critique. Avant-gardes: ultra-lettrisme and Internationale lettriste, situationists, provos, Subversive Aktion, Kommune I, diggers, yippies, Black Mask, King Mob, theater of the oppressed, Tucumán Arde, Comité d'action étudiants-écrivains, Laboratoire Agit-Art, Radio Alice, Gran Fury and Act-Up, Park Fiction, Reclaim the Streets, Tute Bianchi, Luther Blissett, some tactical media (Yomango, Yes Men, ®TMark, Critical Art Ensemble).

12.

This would be one way of reorganizing pessimism in the face of market-driven contemporary "pluralism." Of course, any such revisions and redistributions are sure to provoke furious reactions from those invested in the standard progressive histories or the dominant critical counter-narratives. Cultural capital, reputations, careers are at stake at every turn. Proprietors will leap to defend what they take to be theirs. But the point is not to outdo the philistines in discounting or even vulgarly dismissing whole categories of practice and production. The task at hand is to try to think the avant-gardes as a radical vector, as a resolute break with business as usual, and then to see where this might take us. Granted, the examples given can be contested. Other lists could be generated based on different, more or less generous, interpretations of the same criteria. Given the cataloguing, archiving and marketing of everything, we could argue interminably about how far or long specific projects, practices and groups really eluded the work-form and institutions of bourgeois art.¹⁸ These arguments would quickly open questions about the very possibility of *désœuvrement* – or of a different *désœuvrement*, of

practices that would durably resist recuperation into the conventionalized work and opus.¹⁹ Is there anything worth doing or saying that would not take the form of a work? Isn't the attempt to elude the work-form itself a project, and therefore a work? Can any conscious, intentional activity at all escape the pull of the economy of labor and work, cost and benefit, exchange and profit? Pure play, Bataille's "non-instrumental expenditure," and Derrida's "aneconomic" gift without return are thinkable, but are they performable? And if they were, would they too, pushed out through the twists and turns of institutional capture and mediation, also be reduced to work? If a war machine is a mode of production, then are not lines of flight also works? What of "biopolitical" and "immaterial" production? Would this be living labor?

So what would these questions mean for the vector and the politics of its refusal, of its drive beyond the given? How certain, really, is the predicament described by this mantra, "There is no outside"? Or rather: what, really, can be meant by it? Are we truly to believe that there could possibly be, and that we might now be living in, conditions of "total administration" or "absolute integration" without remainder? Evidently not, since we can still ask the question. Is there no difference

between, on the one hand, a work that aims from the beginning at the museum and, on the other, a gesture, constructed event or catalyzed process sited beyond the art world and addressed generally, but which much later and against its impulse is "acquired" and displaced into a museum collection? (And this text, for example, is certainly a work; addressed primarily to artists, critics and theorists, how far can it, by speaking of the vector, contribute to its renewal?) Such questions and arguments would be welcome and, well... productive. But the position taken here is: there is an alternative. Openness persists. There is history, even if progress was a fatal illusion. Decisive and effective breaks with the bourgeois paradigm are possible. The practical impossibility of totalized systemic closure and of a permanent, globalized stabilization rescues this thesis from recoil into voluntarism. Anti-capitalist practices for the liberation of everyday life have in the past been invented and pursued by determined collectives of artistic agents, and nothing in the contemporary organization of exploitation and control excludes or forecloses the reconstitution of this vector. Moreover, such practices were and will continue to be qualitatively different from critically affirmative bourgeois art, as well as easily distinguishable from the

exhausted routines of conventional representational politics. The thesis is: this vector can be recovered and reactivated in new ways at any time. To say so does no more than to confirm, with Clark and Nicholson-Smith, "Why Art Can't Kill the Situationist International" (1997).²⁰

It is necessary to see when an encounter in a concrete collective task becomes impossible, but also to see if such an encounter, in changed circumstances, does not once again become possible and desirable between persons who have been able to retain a certain respect for each other.

Michèle Bernstein

Alas, it's hard to please Mr. Debord.

Nato Thompson

Culture abhors stench because it itself stinks; because its palace, as Brecht put it in a magnificent line, is built of dogshit.

Theodor W. Adorno

13.

An objection certain to be raised: this is too extreme, restricted and restricting, zealous, puritanical, aggressively trivializing, violent. Another (its cousin): this is romantic, merely rebellious, maladjusted, resentful, juvenile, infantile, pathological. (Please grow up!) (Or: please find an analyst!) Clearly, this vector is not for everyone. The divisions and choices it brings into view will, understandably, produce discomfort, if not rage. But wouldn't these forms of anxiety always and necessarily be triggered by any real proposal of the "social question?" Wouldn't it be naïve to believe questions of social stakes, conflicts and struggle can be posed without triggering them? Add to this the social fact that the art world has grown to bloated proportions. (How many people, how many of us, earn our bread there in one way or other? Does anyone know? Could anyone guess?) Obviously, this vested interest cannot be expected to welcome the reactivation of this dialectic. That can't be helped. This is how things appear and are bound to appear, if the radical force and aspirations of past avant-gardes would be remembered and renewed. But this at least can be offered: such choices cannot be coerced. The vector is a reasoned conclusion. But also: it is bond, commitment,

affinity born of experience, passion, the deeply embodied roots of resolution. None of this is meant to disqualify anyone's production or to pass moralizing judgment on their means of living, though it will surely be received as these. Others will complain that this refusal of art is a barbarous desertion, an abandonment of a precious sanctuary or safe house, a crude act of terrorism against the fragile shards of utopia embedded in the products of artistic autonomy. No, the days are long gone in which art could be clung to as something whose value is simply given as such, as eternal verity, humanist Spirit, the civilized other of barbarism. Even before Auschwitz and Hiroshima, what Adorno called art's "very right to exist" (*Existenzrecht*) was in question, and the repeated repression of this question prepares the shock of its repeated return.²¹ The only thing more barbarous than what bourgeois art and culture have functionally become is the renunciation of art and culture altogether: so Adorno.²² Exactly on this point, the vector goes a different way. To attempt to supersede art, to negate it and realize its truth and promise as something other, as new forms and practices beyond the paradigm and in support of struggles for systemic transformation: far from barbarous, this would be a very generous reach for "true humanity."²³ As a support

of structural barbarism and organized misery, art in its contemporary form has not ceased to be obscene. To those who cling to it, little more can be said. The division divides, and each will know their own.

14.

A different objection: why "avant-gardes"? Why renovate a term so implicated in the histories of "bad" militancy, of elitism, privilege and power in the revolutionary tradition? Fair question.²⁴ Vanguard partyism has been thoroughly critiqued and repudiated.²⁵ These conclusions are accepted and endorsed here. The artistic avant-gardes were not always innocent of hierarchy and posing. But neither can they be reduced to the names Lenin, Stalin and Mao. While they can and should be criticized, their convictions did not exactly make them monsters of brutality, ready to instrumentalize everyone to the last drop and put to the wall anyone who stands in their way. For the most part, they were satisfied to instrumentalize themselves, as far as they could bear, by turning their own lives into this vector. In so far as the artists of the avant-gardes were militants, they are subject to the critique of militancy that, there too, disentangles truth

and promise from their opposites.²⁶ They are not exempt from that practical ethics that was disastrously missing from the revolutionary tradition. History has brought all of this into view, and any renewal of the vector will have to process and reflect it. Rigorous, interminable self-critique is the necessary condition for new leaps and mutations of revolutionary theory and practice. The use of the term "avant-gardes" here, then, does not mark a return to vanguardism. It is meant to do no more than to invoke a tradition and to give it, without nostalgia or rose-colored glasses, the respect that is its due. It is obvious, and painfully so, how degraded this term has become. Still, there seems not to be another that says as much or says it better. If one were found and were to come into usage, no one should object to letting this one go. Until then, it will have to be used, if only for the simple and compelling reason that the vector it denotes requires a name.

For the moment, only the Surrealists have grasped what the Communist Manifesto demands today. They exchange, to a man, their expressive human faces

*for the face of an alarm clock that in each
minute rings for sixty seconds.*

Walter Benjamin

15.

The repudiation of metaphysical optimism and of History as Automatic Progress was a crucial aspect of the Frankfurt School critical project. But it is still necessary to disentangle the critique of progress from the dead-end of reified cultural pessimism in which Adorno and others came to rest. For this, Benjamin offers the needed theoretical resource. In 1926, ex-surrealist Pierre Naville had provoked a crisis among surrealist poets and artists. His pamphlet "The Revolution and the Intellectuals: What Can the Surrealists Do?" challenged the surrealists to discipline their revolt with a practical politics, in order to seek forms that would go beyond scandal and become effectively anti-capitalist.²⁷ In 1929 implicitly affirming Naville's polemic, Benjamin offers a dialectical critique of the surrealist attempt "to win the energies of intoxication for the revolution": "A very different air is breathed in Naville's writing that makes the 'organization of pessimism' the call of the hour.... And that means pessimism all along the line. Absolutely. Mistrust in the fate of literature, mistrust in the fate of freedom,

mistrust in the fate of European humanity, but three times mistrust in all reconciliation: between classes, between nations, between individuals. And unlimited trust only in I.G. Farben and the peaceful perfection of the air force."²⁸ These are hard lines. They tell us: count only on this, that capitalism will unleash the full force of its war machine – at the time, in the form of an attack dog called fascism – on whoever attempts to displace it. Benjamin goes on: "To organize pessimism means nothing other than to expel moral metaphor from politics and to discover in political action a sphere reserved one hundred percent for images."²⁹ The meaning of "image" here is illuminated retrospectively by the incomparable 1940 essay "On the Concept of History."³⁰ Benjamin means the "dialectical image" that brings into relation, in the flash of a constellation, contemporary struggles and the unpaid debts of history. This weaponized image is the "true image of the past" that flares up in urgency. It is charged with the "Now," the electric awareness that the past is both at stake and a supporting protagonist in every contemporary struggle. Such images, Benjamin insisted, are the mediation by which the rage, bitterness and resentment of the defeated – and of those who inherit their defeats – are converted into the action-oriented "spiritual" resources

needed for struggle: confidence, courage, humor, cunning and resilience.

The concept of history at work here is neither linear nor progressive. Its form is the rupture, the cascading qualitative mutation that follows a radical break with the given and with the temporal continuum in which the given is continuously reproduced. In Benjamin's analysis of the defeat of the German Revolution of 1918-23 and the rise of fascism, his indignant contempt for the blunders of the Left is legible and pronounced. His criticism of vulgar productivism – of that ideology of work shared by capitalists, social democrats, and revolutionary Leninists alike – anticipates the Frankfurt critique of instrumental reason and remains as valid today as when it was written. But even more woefully confirmed is Benjamin's critique of the history-as-progress that underwrites productivism: the myth that the dialectic is unfolding automatically, unstoppably, toward classless society and the infinite moral perfection of humanity. In the myth of progress, technology becomes a good *tout court* – one more unassailable given. If Auschwitz and Hiroshima have killed this myth in the realm of "objective historical truth," it still persists as an ideological reality, as the artificial ground of manufactured optimism. Today, it takes the form

of the Smiling Utopia of Networked Personal Computing. We have had to learn to our disadvantage that this promised tool of liberation has already been deployed against us, as the flexible instrument of an intensified exploitation and control, everywhere we have not claimed and re-functioned it as our own.

The avant-gardes as a vector of breakout: this re-description corresponds to and models the temporality of rupture that now appears as the only viable anti-capitalist concept of history. The organization of pessimism: the refusal to be reconciled to bourgeois art, the commitment to link up with others to actualize this refusal. In the determination to receive, bear and reactivate the inherited blockages of revolutionary theory and practice, the impulses of art crack open the shell of art that contains them. The experiments in practical autonomy thereby set loose would, as they did in the past, nurture and catalyze the rhizomes in struggle, to which they are oriented. The articulation of the two is where a radically cosmopolitical and anti-capitalist culture begins to emerge. Faces that ring like stuck alarm clocks register and testify bodily to the urgency of awakening to the structural horror of the given situation, of responding to the intolerable – and to the scandal of inertia, silence, inaction. Benjamin:

"Only when in technology itself body and image so interpenetrate that all revolutionary tension becomes bodily collective innervation, and all the bodily innervations of the collective become revolutionary discharge, has reality surpassed itself to the extent demanded by the *Communist Manifesto*."³¹

Intellectual integrity demands our political engagement in both a radical criticism of capitalism and radical criticism of historical progress.

Susan Buck-Morss

16.

The price of breakout, of self-subtraction from the dominant consensus, is the return of a certain alienation, a marginalized social position, institutional exile or self-exile. And this alienation can only be bourn together with others who have made similar passages. Anti-capitalist struggle offers its own liberations: the experience of camaraderie in the affinity group, lived solidarity and mutual support, the beginnings of real collective autonomy. These experiences are fragile compensations, however, wherever movements and struggles

are not yet strong enough to support a radical culture that keeps reification at bay. There are, no one can deny it, moments of profound connection, real "communication," the joys and ecstasies of collective becoming. But these do not add up to the social "happiness" of capitalist "success," a spectacular effect that only a revolutionary context can dispel. In imagining, making, writing, doing the needed radical culture and its rhizomatic forms of cooperation, what Guattari called "group subjectivity" is exposed to all the hostility of the given – a pressure that over time has made many groups implode.³² Hence the term "breakout" here, rather than "exit" or "flight": it marks, at least metaphorically, the force and momentum needed to jump a wall or cross a border that is already militarized, that already deploys violence and hostility in its apparatus of enforcement. The vector as anti-capitalist breakout is also this: the decision to risk exposure to the given enforcements. This risk is a condition of beginning again, of reopening all the questions and performing the right to question without condition. Moreover: the risk that begins there, in increased exposure to the legalized violence of the given, will not be the end of risk for those willing to rethink what is or could be "in common." Global justice is no certainty, no

guaranteed result, no final and automatic fulfillment of a dialectic seen and seized in advance. The only certainties it can have anything to do with are negative ones: *this is not it*. Yet to decide and act, to commit to "the forms of a resolution," it is necessary to leave even the certainty of the negative. One carries the conviction, but never the proof, that planetary justice, to the extent that such a thing is possible at all, can be realized beyond the capitalist given. What is thereby mobilized in the vector exceeds the calculus of conventional "politics" and the "promises" of politicians: its ground is the promise as such, as urgency and nothing else. Or, to use Blanchot's idiom, apt in every way here: as "exigency."³³ If, despite everything, we make these choices and take these risks, preferring the uncertainty of these anticipations to the reigning common sense, if we reach beyond all guarantees, beyond that safety and security it is the business of the given state to promise, we do it because we want to: because when all is said and done, it's who we've already become.

In her 2002 essay "Revolutionary Time," Susan Buck-Morss marks the irony of an academic industry founded on the ruins of Walter Benjamin, a scholar whom the academy rejected. Surveying the global scene of capital's

purported end-of-the-century triumph, she marks the unimpeded factual accumulation of misery and atrocity. She goes on to blast an academia that offers little beyond its own accommodation, and that has already resigned itself to further compromises of autonomy under the new rigors of market discipline and neo-liberal structural adjustments. Continuing on from the lines of the epigraph above, she writes: "This can be done from a plurality of social positions – constructions of race, sexuality, ethnicity, postcoloniality and the like – but it cannot be done comfortably. If we are too comfortable, either as established Benjaminian academics, globe-trotting gadflies, or as would-be Benjaminian academics, globe-trotting groupies, we are part of the problem."³⁴ For "Benjaminian academics," substitute "artists, critics, theorists."

*What our generation has learned: that capitalism
will not die a natural death.*

Walter Benjamin

Who will resist? It is necessary to go beyond this partial defeat. Of course. And how to do it?

Guy Debord

17.

Artists and cultural practitioners who have reached the conclusion that capitalism has once again become intolerable and that renewed anti-capitalist struggle is an urgency are apparently faced with a choice between two alternatives. Either remain inside the bourgeois art paradigm and play the double-game Brian Holmes has suggestively called "liar's poker," or else reconstitute the vector and make a resolute break with this paradigm.³⁵ A third possibility would be to shuttle back and forth between inside and outside, as need and opportunity permit. Maybe. But the argument here has been that these choices are illusory. Liar's poker is necessarily a losing proposition. Meaning: not that nothing can happen in or by it, but only that any such happening cannot be called "anti-capitalist." Given the structure and functions of artistic autonomy, double-games that try to overcome art without giving it up must end by affirming the paradigm and can be, at best, only critically affirmative. The real choice, if there is one at all, is to break or not to break

with the capitalist art system. To widen anti-capitalist struggle on the cultural front through new forms, images and practices of a generalizable collective autonomy, or to settle for adding more critically affirmative works to the quantity of bourgeois art. Many of us would like these options not to be mutually exclusive. The conclusion here is that they are, and that hard lines need to be drawn to clarify the choice and the stakes. Those who choose breakout have a tradition to look back to, the histories of the avant-gardes as vector. Seen with open eyes, this tradition comes down as unrealized promise and unsettled debt. But also: as renewable force and effective pressure and process, as collective reach for revolutionary time. The radical openness of history is hiding in every second of every moment. De-reification hovers in the daily images of global governance: robocops with riot sticks and shields, streets filled to bursting, cars in flames. The message circulating, whispering behind the chatter of talking heads: perpetual war and "common ruin" are not immovable fate, *encore un effort*. After the dissolvent of the negative, after the rupture, would begin the time of free creation.

(2006)

Part II

The Two into... X ["V," "R," "M," "C,"...]

They got up when they felt like it; they drank, ate, worked and slept when they so desired. Nobody woke them up, nobody forced them either to drink, to eat, or to do anything else at all.

François Rabelais

"While they were carrying him away on the cart you could still hear him shouting, 'Omnia sunt communia!'"

"And what the fuck does that mean?"

"Everything belongs to everyone."

"Shit. What a man! And you know Latin?"

He sneers. I lower my eyes.

Luther Blissett

Chapter Four

Flag Rage:

Responding to John Sims' *Recoloration Proclamation*

we only live
where the flag
is not
where the air is funky
the music
hot
Inside the hole
in the American soul
that space, that place
empty of democracy
we live
inside the burned boundaries
of a wasted symbol
x humans, x slaves, unknown, incorrect
crossed out, multiplying the wealth of others

Amiri Baraka

"The X Is Black (Spike Lie)"

Dear John,

I'm trying to write about your work. But your work works me up, and your flags keep taking me back to the historical hard core that goes on burning us. I can't duck that and don't want to. So this can't be a calm, polite academic exercise. It's far too late and we're all far too burned up for that. What your flags do, Amiri Baraka has already said, precisely and searingly.¹ (If America must have poets laureate, let them be Amiri Baraka and Leslie Marmon Silko [*Almanac of the Dead*].) Baraka's words are inescapable here. His poem looms over us both and anything we can say about flags and history. My words for your flags, the words of the white man I am from the place where I am, can only be, at best, a radical gloss on Baraka's eloquence.

In your flags, you try to make lying symbols tell the truth.² Re-coloring, you scramble the codes. Result: the symbol lies naked. I've seen your flags hang in the art cube. I know they can provoke thinking and raging, even there. But I'm more interested in what happens when you take them out of the cube, out of art's gated community, and show them on the street, where the "real" flags are waging real war. The image I want to begin this with is this: you taking your liberated rebel flags up to the counter-Klan demo in St. Pete. (When was that?)

2000?) You took the red, white and blue out of the Confederate flag – that hick-stubborn symbol of a racism too mean and too damn dumb to die. And you remade it with red, black and green: the colors of Garvey's UNIA, now the colors of African liberation and an empowered diaspora. (And others you made all black, all white, and black and white: together, a witty and quite complete demolition of the logic of purity and of all pretensions to objective neutrality.)

I wasn't there that day, but I can imagine the scene. Florida, where I grew up and lived far too long, is drearily familiar. I'm seeing sorry Klanners, impotent power-lovers, basically boot-lickers, would-be death squads with their marching permit stuck up their asses. I'm seeing cops and troopers in aviation shades. And asserting their humanity through the most direct form of democracy, the most valid form of the count in this age of corrupted corporate politics and stolen elections, the Uhuru activists and their allies. And there in the midst of the jeering and yelling and scuffling on the edges, you with your new rebel flag. Truly, an American snapshot.

You had some supporters. You said you also got hassled up there, by a brother. Out of the art frame, those flags are even more potent. That messy dialogue between you and a Black man wanting to know what the hell

you're up to, those must have been some real words and gestures. For me, that's where your art begins to find its public. Not in the gallery, but on the streets, as an intervention where the battle flags are carried and crossed and the symbols are dense and too trusted. All our legacies stare us down from there: America, the state of exception, city thrown up on a stolen rock. Primitive accumulation, the Middle Passage, Manifest Destiny. The hard core, the dense knot of race-class-nation-capital, streets of gold and walls of tears. Raging flags, the anguish of symbols.

* * *

If the flag
 catch fire
 & a x burn in
 the only stripes is
 on our back
 the only star
 blown free
 in the northern sky
 no red but our
 blood, no white
 but slavers and Klux in hoods
 no blue
 but our songs

Amiri Baraka

"The X Is Black (Spike Lie)"

In the "pure samples" show in Sarasota, you hung your Israeli and Palestinian flags. Both in monochrome red. Blood red. Fabricated to your specs by a flag shop in NYC, only the stitching of the sewn canvas pieces bearing the echo of the original models.

You know I'm writing you from Berlin. It's been a long summer and fall of demos here. G. and I have been out with the anti-capitalist bloc nearly every week, marching and manifesting for an end to borders and deportation, an end to prisons and state repression, and an end to the neo-liberal race to the bottom. (I have friends in the groups, but as an "Ami" ex-patriot, I'm not a formal member of any. I join their protests and disruptions, they tolerate me.) And we've been out in the mobilizations against the neo-Nazis, who are again on the rise in a declining economy. It's no accident that they emerge, again and again, from the ruins of the war of all against all. Capitalism, we know, is civil war as a social relation. But I only now begin to grasp how necessary war is to this world system. Empire may be "materializing before our very eyes." (So Hardt and Negri.) But it needs the local destabilizations and conflicts of perpetual war to hold the rule of profit together. The export of war to the designated free fire

zones feeds the fear and hate, the racism and national chauvinism that props up the nation-state and maintains consent for its rule. The global regime of nation-states regulates and enforces the global divide and conquer of exchange value. Regions of neglect, failed states and ethnic cleansing, shantytowns and the prison industry, border wars, barbed wire and "black ops": these are all departments and testing grounds of the global war machine. The war machine doesn't just produce corpses. It also produces fear, obedience and profit. The "war on terror" is a war of terror on us all.

The German radical left, especially the dozens of mostly Kreuzberg groups and cells that make up the anti-capitalist bloc in the Berlin demos, is admirably clear about the lie of nationalism. For years now they've protested, with courage and fierce determination, the steady re-militarization of German national culture. Once a year, when the German state mounts a solemn ritual to honor and swear in new recruits to the Bundeswehr, the leftists attack it with the clamorous counter-fact of their bodies and voices on the street outside. I ache for the day when we've grown strong and enlightened enough to lay a protest like that on my militaristic America. (Us, we love our warriors, our generals, top guns and Navy SEALs. Abu Ghraib, Guantanamo, Bagram,

secret prison x? No, no, not systemic, just a few bad apples.)

But even here in Germany, there's a weird confusion I see strangely reflected in the equivalence of your two red flags. (Symbolic equivalence, equivalence of symbols: we know there's no real symmetry between desperately poor, dispossessed Palestinians and the American-subsidized power of the Israeli state.) A strong antifascist tradition emerged here from the postwar struggles to critically process German history, especially after the convulsions of 1968. Out of the more militant part of this tradition came the so-called *Antifa Autonomen* (antifascist, anarchist-autonomist) groups. Flags? These groups have flags: black ones, red ones, black/red ones, black ones with red stars. Mostly organized locally, they're capable of coming together fast into sizable coalitions to counter neo-Nazi groups and marches all over Germany. In the 80s, in the context of the squatter movement, these groups more or less invented the "black bloc."

After the fall of the Wall and the orgies of national unity that followed, some of these leftist groups started calling themselves the *Antideutschen* ("anti-Germans"). Some of them were doing important work in the former East, offering a needed critique of the rush to normalize old/new Germany. But then some took a

bizarre turn. They got so fixated on German fascism and the Nazi genocide that they began to see resurgent anti-Semitism everywhere. Lifting the Nazi crimes out of history, they built a politics on an indictment beyond time. Germany and the Germans suck, then, now, forever: the flip side of their coin is that the Israelis and the Americans can do no wrong. After September 11, when Bush declared the new war-without-end, the anti-Germans supported it. Little by little they had distorted their anti-capitalism until they ended up flying the flags of Empire. Literally. I'll never forget the May Day demo in 2003, when the anti-Germans showed up waving Israeli flags! This, just as the US occupation was planting itself in bomb-scarred Baghdad and after several years of Sharon's stepped-up repression and assassination in Gaza and the West Bank.

Kreuzberg and neighboring Neukölln are intensely multicultural parts of Berlin, with large populations of Turks, Lebanese and Palestinians. People there support with passion the cause of the Palestinians, and there have been clashes, some of them violent, between the anti-Germans and other leftist activists. This clash of positions is made worse by a conflict of organizational forms. Some of the most militant pro-Palestinian groups are old-style Marxist-Leninist formations, centralized and top-down. The anti-Germans, like the Antifa

Autonomen groups they came from, are antiauthoritarian and nonhierarchical – so-called rhizomes. The conflict often took the form of a battle of flags, one bloc carrying Palestinian and the other Israeli flags at demos. The fights to steal or keep the other side's flags eventually led, last May, to the stabbing of an anti-German by a pro-Palestinian militant.

For those of us who care about the future of the radical left, this is an unbelievably divisive and destructive waste of energy. Over the summer I saw a group of a hundred anti-Germans lead a provocation march, under Israeli flags, from Turkish Neukölln right into the heart of radical Kreuzberg. It is bitterly ironic that only the presence of riot cops and paddy wagons deterred more violence. This is, to paraphrase an activist friend, the anguish of symbols. Once your group has a flag and puts it out there, then you're obligated to defend it. You're vulnerable, you let yourself become unfree, you're a slave to your flag. Flag-blind, you can only see red.

* * *

We have to thank Michael Moore for making visible one of the hidden scandals of American politics.³ In the election of 2000 we saw widespread polling abuses and the

illegal disenfranchisement of tens of thousands of Black Americans through cooked up felon lists in Florida and other states. (These felon lists are of course themselves a legal crime of exclusion – another insufferable institution of stratified structural violence.) We know the result, the “selection” by a conservative Supreme Court. But one thing most of us missed, until Moore got hold of the footage, was the sad spectacle of the Democratic Party preventing men and women of the Congressional Black Caucus from formally registering their protests of a stolen election. For all to see now, there was Al Gore hammering with the gavel to silence these brave people, one after the other, because not one motherfucker in the all-white, all-millionaire Senate would sign their testimony into the record. The same Democratic Party that counts, year after year, on the loyalty of Black voters repays that loyalty by saying, in effect, that the exposure of Jim Crow in the year 2000 is not as important as securing the succession of the status quo and the legitimacy of the Bush regime. That’s a betrayal on a par with the Party’s support for Clinton’s class war disguised as welfare “reform”: the politics of continuous triangulation to the right, one more turn of the neo-liberal vicious circle.

Fahrenheit 911 has some serious flaws. Despite a generally anti-racist thrust, it contains some

dismayingly racist moments. (The implicit endorsement of racial profiling of Muslim-Americans for one, for another the denigration of other ethnic groups in the token coalition of the willing.) Moore is no radical. He only seems to be one, within the restricted political bandwidth that passes for the American mainstream. Trying too hard to build common ground with those too-far lost in Wonderland, his film concedes what should never be conceded. His half-critique leaves intact the ground of militarized capital – the insane patriotism of fearful middle America. Where in this film are the images of the 17 million people who filled streets in cities all over the globe to say no to this war before it was begun, in the largest linked sequence of popular demonstrations in world history? Why did Moore cut this unprecedented cosmopolitical event out of his account? Because his target audience of neo-nativist, Tom Clancy-fed, UN-hating know-nothings might have been displeased and turned off? Where does the tactical end and pandering begin? The American public is hardly innocent. Yes, of course it is the target of the most intense, relentless manipulation machines ever devised and must even be seen as the manufactured product of such manipulation. But in those moments of history when it celebrates itself and its power and privileges as birthright or sign of divine approval, when it advertises its “democracy” as the

Great-Model-and-Gift-to-the-World, or when it stubbornly and uncritically demands, approves and supports its government's wars to enforce the current global pecking order: in those moments, the American public is first among the least innocent in the world.

Moore apparently hoped to peel away some of this public and gently lead it toward the light. But this can't be done in parts. To break this public's enchantment with its own chains requires a critique that goes to the roots and grasps the status quo as a totalizing tendency – as an all-encompassing identity-structure or subject-machine with a headlock on every aspect of life today. Americans have to be confronted with the hard, ugly truth, that their cherished and privileged consumptions are built on the misery of the global majority and enforced by a war machine that never sleeps. And the "American way of life" *is* the global race to the bottom that's recklessly degrading the shared ecological base. In short, if we don't transform this picture in a radical way, every SUV everywhere is on the same highway to hell. The greedy little tale of the Bushes and Bin Ladens doesn't even begin to touch the immensity of this and of our task in face of it.

Even so, Moore did say some things that needed saying at a time when most people willing to say them were being held to the margins. And I'm grateful to him

for showing us another little gem of repressed imagery. Why is it we were never shown this footage of the motorcade from Bush's first inauguration? Yeah, the footage that shows his limo getting egged by an angry crowd, forcing his bodyguards to abort his plan to get out and shake hands. Why is that? Because corporate media had circled the wagons around this pretender and were going to do their part to manufacture legitimacy and consent at any cost. So we were treated to brain-numbing coverage of the first lady's dress in long-historical perspective and other urgent national subjects but were denied the political images that really mattered. I mean, *they egged his ass!* Shouldn't we all have seen that? What, we can't be trusted with such images? Of course we can't, we might be encouraged to go tear something up or burn down the big house! This isn't conspiracy, it's just the imperatives of systemic logic. It's about maintaining a structure for getting and keeping power, so that a dominant minority can go on screwing us over, whether we like it or not. Also called social reproduction; see under: capitalism.

Many of us knew there were protests at Bush's first inaugural. But there were only rumors of their size and intensity, and our vigilant Fourth Estate dutifully kept the images under lock. So we never saw those angry citizens who mooned Bush from the bleachers as he took

the oath. (Ass-flags!) And how many of us knew that black bloc militants took over the Navy Memorial and held it long enough to replace the American flags with a black one, before making a getaway? Since then, a photo has emerged that has become for many of us the very image of hope. It shows a black-clad protester leaping from a flagpole on the Navy Memorial, over the heads of DC cops, and into the arms of comrades in the crowd.⁴

At the time, I was still in Sarasota. But I was so excited to read of this action, in a zine called *Clamor* in the Spring of 2001, that I was inspired to expropriate an American flag from one of the county beaches (What are we flying them there for, anyway? In case foreigners come ashore without a map?) and to dye it black in a bucket.⁵ It was beautiful, the sewn stars and stripes still visible, much like the sewn sections in your red flags. But it was wind-torn and frayed at the edges, a striking double of the flag in Mapplethorpe's black and white photo.

I imagined bringing it out for one of our Carnival of Democracy Players street actions. But before I had a chance to use it, Bin Laden dropped the twin towers, and the chill set in. I'll never forget driving to work the week after, and seeing the American flags everywhere. Sure, I know it was a complex collective response that also signaled solidarity with the victims. But no one

who isn't a fool didn't also see at once what it really meant. Decades of conditioned patriotism and obedience and enforced stupidity were "spontaneously" kicking into gear, and the space for any kind of dissent or critical questions was slamming shut: the clamp down had begun. And no one can say that the Bush militarists did not fully exploit their advantage. My friends and I were staggering around for weeks, asking ourselves: what is this place? Who are these people? Where am I living? I know you know what I mean, John. You still live in Sarasota.

But even these events seem long ago now. It's the morning after, and we're deep in the agony of our collective hangover. The Bush junta is back for four more years – this time, apparently, with a mandate from the people. But who can believe that? That at this time fully a third of the country (the other "other" America) is made up of very dangerous bible-thumping, difference-hating, gun-waving, flag-kissing semi-fascists I can and do believe. But can anyone trust that this "election" was not stolen through rigged and hacked voting machines and other tricks of the trade, to say nothing of the now-dependable effects of decades of lobotomizing spectacle and neglect? No, trust will not be theirs. Nor obedience. We will see what time discloses. Meanwhile, as the new round of witch hunts is being prepared, I'm

with those who remember what the old philosopher said:
 "Fuck this ballot, reclaim the streets!" Here's my flag
 fantasy, if I have to have one: fast cells of cultural
 pranksters are afoot in the night. And dawn's early
 light reveals, in cities and towns all over the land,
 that the gigantic stars and stripes flying obscenely over
 a well-known car dealer near you has been replaced by an
 elegant and eloquent field of black: the black flag of
 self-organized direct action and collectively liberated
 desire.

* * *

If the flag
 catch fire
 & an x burn in
 that x
 believe me,
 is black

Amiri Baraka

"The X Is Black (Spike Lie)"

Cut to Gettysburg College. Controversy flares up over an
 exhibition of your art of re-coloration and your plan to
 "lynch" a Confederate flag. The racists mobilize against
 this insult to their sacred "heritage," and the College
 responds to the pressure with the usual back-peddling and

capitulations. To maintain the integrity of your position, you have to boycott your own show. In your open letter of protest, you have to remind the bigots that the heritage they so anxiously want to "protect" is inseparable from the history of slavery, terror and genocide, of Jim Crow, the Klan and American apartheid. And so the noose and your proposed ritual remember that heritage quite rigorously, at the same time that they would have lynched its cherished-hated symbol. You had to remind the anti-art pinheads about the law and about that freedom they so loudly claim and trumpet every chance they get. And in return for this lesson in enlightenment, your Gettysburg Redress, all these ingrates can come up with is threats. Hands off Sims!

The past isn't dead, quipped a Southern writer in an over-cited line trotted out on occasions far less important than this one: it's not even past. The civil war never ended, and it's high time we rediscover that. Seems we are. Civil war is general, far and wide. Under the would-be Great Unifier, the lines have been drawn all over the globe, and the fissures are spreading. But to end the war, we have to break the system that makes war. The old Russian-Sino-style bureaucratic socialisms, with their leader cults and all too real Gulags, are a failed model – no argument there. But the post-1989 world order with its miserable reign of states and corporations is

every bit as much a failure. If we fail in our turn to think and act beyond it, capitalism will surely ruin us. Our inheritance amounts to this: we now know that the needed revolution is one we'll have to make without parties or "leaders," generals or bureaucrats. No one will be empowered to represent us, do our thinking for us but in our name, or draw the limits to our collective desire. It's a startling insight, to begin to grasp that we don't need states and corporations to accomplish the things we need and want to do. No technological limit is stopping us, at this point, from self-organizing the production of basic needs, in networks and rhizomes of free cooperation. The blockages are social and political: What do we want and need? How do we want to live? How to live in common and together? And ethical: How to accomplish this rupture without the categorical destruction of singularities? How to hold revolutionary violence to the unavoidable minimum? Hardt and Negri: "The possibility of democracy on a global scale is emerging today for the very first time."⁶ And a radical mutation of democracy at that! What begins to emerge is the true image of permanent revolution: a continuous evacuation and dispersal of power, unending events of opening, perpetual reorganization. And, this time, with more care and greater awareness. No repetition of past defeats, no closing back into lazy structures and habits

of isolation and passivity, hierarchy and domination. We don't lack new theories and practices, new action forms and collective names. Time now to put them in play, and in doing so to invent new ones. Time to take back the collective imagination we've so far known only as historical and systematic dispossession. The determination to reclaim these questions and to pose them in practice, without any certainty from above or in advance: this refusal of fear would already be anti-capitalist. Anarchy is *their* nightmare, *their* emergency; for the rest of us, the twilight of the state and the end of copdom would merely be the real beginnings. No peace, then, without global mutations of justice. No more poems that are not hammers, while prisons and borders are standing anywhere. No more art, to decorate a world of nations and flags. Keep trying, if we want to become human.

What's in a flag? In a word, the worst. The absolute worst. One day, one fine day, if we survive ourselves and succeed in struggling and creating our way beyond capitalism, people will look at flags in museums and wonder how the hell those old time people could have been so barbaric. This is where your art takes me. The anguish of symbols. Flag rage.

You end your open letter with a call to bury a Confederate flag in Gettysburg. You challenge someone,

anyone, to step forward with an offer for a permanent burial space there, as way of letting the community redeem itself and of bringing your *Recoloration Proclamation* to closure. Too soon, too soon! Don't let them off too easy! But then I see your ruse. Either way, whatever happens now, there can be no closure there. So, yeah, let's bury it. There, everywhere. That flag, and all the others. But before we do, let's burn them, and dance on the ashes.

(2004)

Chapter Five

"Everything for Everyone, and For Free, Too!"

A Conversation with Berlin Umsonst

Initiated in the Spring of 2003, Berlin Umsonst (Berlin For Free) began as a campaign to develop a "culture of everyday resistance" to the official discourse of scarcity, cutbacks and structural adjustment in the city of Berlin. It evolved into a collective name and open action form that has spread to other German cities, including Hamburg, Cologne and Dresden. The Umsonst slogan ("*Alles für alle, und zwar umsonst!*") is now heard from the anti-capitalist bloc at all the big Berlin demos. This conversation with three members of Berlin Umsonst was recorded in late July 2005. At their request, they are identified here by pseudonyms.

Gene Ray: So it's Spring 2004, and the MoMA has come to Berlin, with this blockbuster exhibition at the Neue Nationalgalerie. When did the incredibly long lines start? Was that from the beginning?

Kalle: You would need to ask, when did the media hype start? The hype started weeks before the show opened, so it was clear that from the first day there would be lines.

Peter: At certain points, people had to wait three to four hours to get in! And they had this VIP entrance where you paid double or triple the normal fee and then you could get in immediately.

GR: And the posters were everywhere in Berlin...

Peter: Yeah, they had these neat posters with pink type: "MoMA in Berlin."

Kalle: With a strong corporate design. You only needed a glimpse to recognize it.

Peter: So we thought it would be cool to have a For Free action in a field that's not directly related to your existential needs, which until then had been our focus.

Public transportation, sure, everyone agrees we need that. But culture, well, a lot of people say that's a luxury. You don't need it. So we wanted to make a statement that things should be free in every area.

Kalle: Not only what you need to survive.

Peter: Right. So MoMA was perfect for us. We downloaded their official poster from their website and changed it. Instead of saying "MoMA in Berlin," our version said "MoMA for Free." Then we had a few sentences saying that art and culture should be available for everyone and should be free in this society. And we had it in German, English and Turkish. And then it gave a date: Sunday, April 17, 4pm. MoMA for free. Everyone's going to get in free on that date and time.

GR: Was it clear that everyone should *try* to get in free then, or was it presented as the MoMA's offer?

Peter: Well, we had a tiny little Berlin Umsonst label at the very bottom. So if you really looked closely, you would see that it actually wasn't the MoMA. But otherwise, the whole poster looked exactly the same, and it was announced as if the MoMA itself was saying: you'll get in free. We had about 2000 of the posters

printed and started putting them up two weeks before the date. Immediately, the media was reporting it. The MoMA had to make a public statement saying that no one is going to get in for free! Which was great!

GR: So the media picked it up as, there are all these posters out there, what's going on?

Peter: Right, and then they went to the MoMA. They also approached our group and wanted to do interviews. The expectation was, oh, these autonomist rioters are going to smash up the whole building.

Kalle: Which is all glass! It's a big cube with glass walls 30 meters high. So it had their worst fantasies of violence working!

Peter: It was funny. We knew we wouldn't be able to get in. But they gave us the opportunity to pretend that we had a strength we didn't really have. So we gave an interview on RBB, the local television news channel, and we said, "Well, we've decided not to smash the place up. We'll just try to get in for free!"

Kalle: We'll be generous this time!

Peter: It got a lot of sympathy because people hated waiting for hours and they hated the VIP shit. And on the actual day, there were hundreds of cops and about 400 people who came to protest.

Kalle: They had to close down the show for two hours!

Peter: For two hours, they wouldn't let anyone in. They thought we would go in and do damage, or whatever.

Kalle: And we were dressed pretty, so they couldn't recognize us so well.

Peter: Some members came in suits and gave statements to the media. They totally confused everyone by making radical leftist statements in suits.

GR: You weren't in a bloc. So their crisis actually was that they couldn't distinguish you from the other visitors.

Kalle: We went as a culture bloc this time!

Peter: We also had materials and banners prepared. We had this whole gate constructed, a For Free gate we thought people could go through. But all that got

confiscated. The cops had all these checkpoints around the museum and confiscated all our fliers. We had a lot of fun stuff planned to involve the visitors. But we couldn't do any of that.

GR: Was anything in this action actually illegal? Was the poster illegal?

Kalle: No. And there's a big public plaza in front of the museum. It's normally totally legal to be there.

GR: So what was the justification for confiscating your fliers and props?

Peter: Well, if you don't announce and register your rally, they can say you're illegal. In Germany, there's a constitutional right to have a spontaneous demonstration. But if you bring fliers, they can always argue that it's not spontaneous.

Kalle: Besides, cops don't need justifications. They do what they want to do, then let the judge decide two months later in court. Whether or not what the cops did was legal, your demo got busted. That's how it works.

Peter: The nice thing was, on the same day there was a demo going on against rising public transportation fares. After an hour and a half in front of the MoMA show, everyone decided to join the other protest, and 400-500 people left together as a spontaneous march to go and join up with that.

GR: Nice exit. Let's go back to the origins of Berlin Umsonst. What was the context for the "For Free" idea?

Peter: Umsonst was an initiative of FELS [Für eine linke Strömung: For a Leftist Current], an established Berlin group that has been doing political work for 15 years. The idea was to come up with an everyday practice or culture of anti-capitalist resistance. There are many groups in the Berlin radical left that do anti-capitalist work, but there isn't an everyday practice of resistance.

GR: What do you mean by that?

Peter: Well, we wanted to find areas where there are already practices of resistance, and that already had anti-capitalist elements.

Kalle: Areas where people are already involved.

Peter: Right, we were looking for areas where people already do break capitalist rules, but they maybe do it secretly. Like, you ride the metro without paying. Or you want to get into the city swimming pool, but you don't have the money. Or you want to go to an art show, but you can't afford it. So a lot of people would maybe try to sneak in. But they don't do it collectively, in any organized way.

Kalle: Or they might do it and feel guilty about it afterward.

Peter: So we thought, there are already these little subversive actions in peoples' everyday lives. And this is maybe where we can intervene and strengthen them. Maybe we can take these moments of resistance and say, OK, now we're all going to do this together and not feel guilty about it. We do it publicly, as a political action. And it's nothing new that we invented. There's a long tradition of this kind of autonomist appropriation – in Germany in the 1980s. And in Italy in the 1970s, where people collectively lowered their rent or bargained lower prices in the supermarket. So we just recovered and reinvented it, in the context of Berlin today.

Antje: The broader situation was also that Berlin was going bankrupt. Everything was put under a sort of austerity regime: we can't continue social spending because there is no more money, and so on. So the concept of Umsonst was to say, this financial mess is not our problem. We aren't responsible for these debts, which were mainly the result of real estate speculation. The For Free campaign was to break with this whole neoliberal discourse about cutbacks and increases in the fees the public has to pay for city services. We said, no, everything should be for free: free public transportation, free recreation, free culture.

GR: Is Umsonst a group? A network? You've called it a campaign. . .

Peter: Well, groups are involved, like Fels. But it's an open campaign, with the idea that everyone can use it and take part in it. We don't have a copyright on it. We came up with the concept, as a kind of action form, and it's available for anyone to use.

GR: So would it be right to say that it's a collective name like the "Überflüssigen" (the Superfluous or Unneeded Ones) – a form of direct action to address a certain cluster of issues, and any group or ad hoc

coalition can use this label for their own actions in this direction?

Antja: Yes.

GR: Was the idea to demonstrate, in a symbolic or exemplary way, what would be possible in a certain direction of collective resistance, or was it your intention to actually mobilize and organize masses of people into a kind of urban movement?

Antje: I think we were not very clear about that. When you look at the actual practices of the actions, they are mainly symbolic. The numbers of people participating have been rather small. We didn't specifically decide to develop symbolic actions, but I think this is what happened, because security was too tight, and we had to deal with a lot of repression.

Peter: There were two levels. One is what Antje was talking about earlier: the need to break with this logic of governance that says, Berlin is broke, we need to cut back social programs, raise prices, all of that. So one thing was to intervene and show a different possibility. In this, I think Umsonst has been successful. We got a lot of media coverage and public sympathy, and a lot of

people came to our actions. And the idea has spread to other German cities. We also got a lot of repression, which shows we hit a sore point. So on the level of public discourse, I think we did break this argument about financial constraints.

But then we also always had in mind that people would be politicized through this campaign, and would maybe start to organize themselves and come up with their own ideas about where to intervene with Umsonst actions. On this level, after two years, we have to say that this didn't really work. People come to our actions in Berlin, but it doesn't really spread or take off. We can't provide the organizational infrastructure so that people can stay involved and have continuity. If they come to our actions, they like it. But then they go home and they're alone again. So that was an aim, but we never reached this mass effect.

GR: How do you make decisions? How do you decide what actions to do and how to do them?

Peter: In terms of Umsonst? Well, first of all, within Fels, we don't vote. We're not democratic in the bourgeois sense! We decide by consensus. We discuss everything, and everyone has to agree, otherwise it doesn't happen. For Berlin Umsonst, we came up with a

catalog of criteria for actions. Like the need to connect with people in areas where they're already doing things, like riding the metro without paying. Also, we want to violate rules, but we know we can't go too far into illegality without becoming exclusive. So we use these five or six criteria to find areas for Umsonst to intervene. Then there are a number of groups that have been participating in the actions. And what we do then is to get agreement from as many groups as possible, to broaden the base and bring people into the actions. And of course, these groups can propose their own Umsonst actions as well.

GR: So it's a network, as well as a campaign form. What's the relation to ACT!

Peter: ACT! came after Berlin Umsonst. ACT! is an alliance of radical left groups that was formed in 2004. Fels is one of the groups in this coalition.

Antje: The thing is, Berlin Umsonst is a form to do a certain kind of action, and this kind of action is not applicable to every situation. When the defensive protests against the federal social cutbacks started, against Hartz IV and so on, ACT! was involved in that, but Berlin Umsonst not really so much. Against the

workfare reforms like Hartz IV, we mainly worked in the coalition of groups called "Das Ende der Bescheidenheit!" [No More Modest Demands!].

GR: This was responding to the so-called social "reforms" at the federal level – really a neoliberal structural adjustment program for Germany?

Antje: Right. There was an alliance of groups that met every week on that, last year. And the ACT! groups were part of that. And there were working groups on different themes, also an Umsonst working group. It was very dynamic.

Peter: And Berlin Umsonst started earlier, so from the beginning there were groups involved in For Free actions that were never a part of ACT! We always had a lot of students involved. For the MoMA action, for example, a lot of art students came, because that was totally their field to intervene. And now I think we can count on the ACT! groups, whenever we come up with new Umsonst actions. But it was always the idea to have people involved who are not organized at all.

GR: So Fels is a kind of anchoring group, but Umsonst functions more like an open action category. Every

action is going to have a different participation and composition.

Kalle: Yeah, and this is how it worked between the cities. The label is working in Dresden, even though there is no ACT! outpost there. And in Hamburg, the same.

GR: Is it because of what Umsonst has done in Berlin that this form has spread to other cities? Meaning that groups have sprung up there?

Antje: Only in Hamburg is there another Umsonst group that meets on a continuous basis.

Peter: What about Dresden?

Antje: Dresden is over, because of the repression there. In Cologne a core of groups also did one or two actions under the label of Umsonst. Maybe they will do some more.

GR: But in Hamburg there's a group.

Antje: Right.

Peter: At a congress of leftist groups last year, we organized a workshop to present the Umsonst idea. And there were 50 or 60 people from all over the country, about ten different cities, who came to the workshop. So there is a lot of interest. But, I mean, it's a lot of work, too.

Antje: But it has this open source character. It's out there now and people can use it.

GR: What were the first Umsonst actions?

Peter: The first ones were swimming pool actions, to protest the city raising the price to get into the pools. We had about a hundred people who rode by bike to pools in the city and did protests at each one. Then at the last one, we tried to get in. It didn't work, because the cops found out and were there. But it was a lot of fun. We blocked the streets, dressed up for a day at the pool, and played volleyball in front of the cops. And at the same time, we had fliers and banners and a very clear political message.

GR: The one I remember vividly from photos, maybe from Indymedia, was the action last year at the Badeschiff on the Spree River.

Peter: That was last summer. There was a big group of comrades from Spain in town, and we wanted to do something fun with them. Badeschiff is this private swimming pool that's actually a ship on the Spree that they filled with water. It's like you're swimming in the river, but you're actually in this boat that's a pool. So we got a bunch of little boats and rafts and air mattresses, and we all dressed as pirates and entered the pool from the river. We refused to pay. They had security there, but they were so confused that they didn't do anything about it.

GR: How long were you there?

Peter: About half an hour.

GR: How did people respond?

Peter: The guests were confused, but they liked it and had fun, too. And it's always part of Umsonst actions that we try to include the staff. We always tell them: "This is a protest, but it's not directed against you."

GR: Umsonst actions seem to be a lot of fun. How important is this idea of "fun," as a tactic to pull people in?

Antje: I think it's quite important. And it's a response to the massive repression you are confronted with at the large demos. In Berlin at these large rallies, somehow the police are always managing to beat people up. So fun makes it more difficult for them. It's the same with this pink-silver idea. You dance around and confuse the police, who can never be quite sure: is this a political action or a cultural action? It's good to break down these clear divisions.

This is also part of the Umsonst "Pink Point" or "Ride Pink" campaign. We wanted to break with this old term for illegally riding the buses and metro. In German, it's called *schwarzfahren*, "riding black," which is also maybe a racist term. So we decided we will call these actions "riding pink." Actually this idea came from the Hamburg group. The idea is to get beyond these negative criminal and racist associations with a new term, so that people feel safer doing it.

Peter: For the first Ride Free action, we printed tickets that looked exactly like the normal ones, but they said, "For Free." On the backs, we had our website

and information about the campaign. We handed them out on the metro and people loved it. That's where you reach them – in the areas of our everyday problems. Like that, you don't impose an abstract political statement on anyone. Public transportation is something everyone needs, and when prices go up, people know exactly why. The direct response of people on the trains was very positive.

The concept and preparation of the Pink Point campaign was done not just by Fels, but also by other groups at the Open University, which is an open space for leftist groups at the Humboldt University. All the planning meetings were held there, and a lot of other groups were involved. The metro had just taken away the old discounted semester fare that had been available for students, so the idea was to focus mainly on students who needed the metro to get to classes everyday but had lost their discounted fare. We designed a pink button that people could wear. And we made pink meeting points on the platforms at the metro stations, where people could meet and then go together on the trains without any tickets. The controllers who check tickets mostly work in pairs. So if you can get seven or eight people together, it's harder for them to get you off the train.

We did three actions that worked really well. At one point we had about 50 people riding pink.

Controllers and also two cops came in, but they left the train without doing anything. So the publicly announced actions went well, but the students didn't start doing it on a daily basis. It was too hard to organize and make it available to everyone on a daily basis. A couple of people got caught and had to pay fines, but we threw a big party and raised the money for that.

GR: Is the penalty or fine different if this is done as a political action, as opposed to just sneaking on?

Peter: Yeah, if you sneak on the train and pretend that you have a ticket, they fine you 40 Euros. But with riding pink, you're not pretending to have a ticket. In fact, we go up to all the guests and tell them that we didn't buy a ticket and don't want one, because we don't think it should be necessary to buy one! So they can only say that it's trespassing. The three people who were fined were fined for that.

GR: Is this ongoing?

Peter: Yeah, our latest idea is called "Pink Tuesday." We're trying to get cultural institutions, movie theaters and clubs involved, so that people who get caught riding pink can go on Tuesdays to the participating institutions

and they'll get in free. We're trying to decriminalize it and broaden support beyond the radical left.

Kalle: But I get the impression that Umsonst actions have somehow mostly transformed into Überflüssigen actions, which are more closed and exclusive because they are more offensive and militant. Like visiting luxury restaurants.

Peter: Right now, the Berlin Umsonst campaign is discussing if and how we continue. But there are action forms and campaign forms that have already evolved out of it. The Überflüssigen are definitely inspired by Berlin Umsonst. And it's maybe a more adequate or effective form to intervene in certain areas and situations.

GR: What are the differences between the Umsonst and Überflüssigen action forms?

Kalle: The Umsonst actions are planned openly. The Überflüssigen actions are prepared secretly, in order, for example, to get into luxury restaurants, bust the buffet and spend some time there before the police comes. Take your pictures and video, to publicize the action later, but then get out of there.

Peter: The Überflüssigen actions are definitely more exclusive in terms of participation. This is a critical point that we have always discussed. Although we try to develop inclusive forms of action that also break rules, it always tends to exclude people who are handicapped or who don't have a legal residency status. If you're in a wheelchair, you're not going to climb over a fence to get into a public swimming pool. Or if you are an illegal immigrant and get caught in a semi-legal action or demo, you might be deported. Beside that, the more you go toward illegality, the less people are going to participate. With the Überflüssigen, if you announce this kind of action publicly, it's not going to work. But it has been very effective for getting media coverage. For example in Hamburg last May Day, a 5-star restaurant was practically taken over by 35 people. This was a mixed group, but some of them were Überflüssige.

Kalle: The Überflüssigen wear a "uniform." This is another difference.

GR: They wear white theater masks and red, hooded sweatshirts with "Die Überflüssigen" on the back. . .

Peter: This is for protection. There are so many cameras and videos around now you really need to be

careful. And so, because this kind of action can't be prepared openly, it's pretty exclusive in terms of participation. But the press and media totally love it. The action in Hamburg was in all the major newspapers the next day. Even the conservative yellow press was running photos and interviews. One guest, a kid, said, "They really looked like they were having fun!" Because it touches popular resentment, the media loves it.

GR: How did the action work?

Peter: In Hamburg, the group went into this really fancy restaurant with boxes that said, "5 Stars To Go." Then they went up to the buffet and started packing the boxes with food. One person gave a speech, fliers were handed out, then everyone disappeared. The staff actually really liked it. They handed the food over right away. The guests were totally confused. The management came up and said: "Look, we have some prominent, high-security guests here. We don't want to call the cops right now, but how long are you going to stay?!" The group said, no, this is a short action. We're going to get our food and pass out some fliers, and then we'll be gone! The flier made the point that no one who works at this place would be able to afford a single dessert. And the whole

flier text was reprinted in the yellow press. So we gained in coverage what we lost in participation.

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Websites:

Berlin Umsonst: <http://www.berlin-umsonst.tk/>

FelS: <http://www.nadir.org/nadir/initiativ/fels/>

ACT!: <http://act.so36.net/>

Die Überflüssigen: <http://www.ueberfluessig.tk/>

(2005)

Chapter Six

Something Like That

She looks at her left hand, at the three chalk-dusted fingers precariously pinching a small button of granite protruding from the rock wall. Beneath the skin of her forearm, the stringy muscles leading back from the hand and wrist are pumped full of blood and burning dully. How long does she have? Not long. Her eyes fly up again to the steel ring bolted into the rock and to the deep diagonal flake that cuts across the wall just below it. She will have to move very quickly. Very soon, at a moment she will not have been able to choose or prevent, for it will simply have happened, suddenly and brutally – very, very soon, that is, her forearm, filled with lactic acid, will already have given out, her fingers will have slipped off the

granite button, and she will peel off the wall. She looks at the rock below her left hand, in the area where she will have to step with her left foot. She rapidly scans the rock, again, looking for any feature that might give purchase. That might "stick," as they say. Might, that is, be hospitable, support weight, through the medium of a rubber-soled climbing shoe, and, offering some point of mechanical advantage, enable body weight to disperse itself among two other such points, so that, dynamically levering – and so on. She doesn't think this, however, because there is no time for the process that would compose such formulations or the monologue that would silently pronounce them. The intensity of her concentration at this moment excludes any such streaming interiority. She is precluded, in her current situation, from thinking according to any process of intellection that would sustain an awareness of itself adequate to the concept of self-consciousness. That is to say, she cannot, given her present disposition, manage a further doubling of her subjectivity into subject and object, neither in that philosophical mode that divides thinking into the labor of a cognitive faculty *on the one hand* and, *on the other*, a surplus of lucidity which at the same time observes, reflects and critically evaluates the products of that labor – nor in that not necessarily less

rigorous literary mode that divides a singular existence into (1) the experience of a body in time and place and (2) the stylized voice of a simultaneous scribbler who continuously translates that experience into wordy narratives, glosses and commentaries. Nor does she, however, up there, peering at the bulge on the wall, think something less mediated – something more crudely direct and, so to speak, going behind or below such standardized and hierarchical constructions of self-division. Something as terse and precise as a telegram, but perhaps without need of words at all – some kind of mental placeholder, say, that would, as a quick notional shorthand, be equivalent to the words “slight bulge, nothing more.” No, nothing like this is going on in her head. It is not that there is no language specially adapted to the needs and experiences of climbing, however. There is such a language, and she is competent in it and can use it at will. Nor is it that there is no calculus, no rule-governed operations for instrumentally manipulating signs and symbols, specific to climbing. For such a thing in fact exists, as a form of intellection that is performed consciously and more or less continuously as the climber ascends. She actually engaged in just this kind of thinking only a moment earlier. Just prior to moving up

onto the slight supports that now dubiously bear her weight, she estimated that she had by then ascended four meters or so above the last steel ring bolted into the rock. This same ring, through two mediations of equipment, connects her to the wall. Should she fall from that point, four meters above the last ring, she would fall, along the line drawn by her climbing rope, down to this ring, to which her rope is linked by two aluminum carabiners. But she would also fall that same distance again, before the slack created in the rope by the fall eliminated itself and brought her to a stop. So this calculus of risk assessment, which she indeed performed with all due diligence, yielded a result that appears to be less than ideal. Should she come off the rock, she would be looking at an eight-meter fall. This is assuming, of course, no unexpected contingencies in any of the elements that, together, make up the system that affords her this degree of relative security. But such calculations are performed in the lulls and pauses of a climb and not during the execution of the exceedingly difficult, strenuous, or delicate moves and sequences that are, in a way, its point. For these require a level of intense and sustained attention that excludes what we usually mean by thinking. Just now, for example – or rather, to repeat – she is far

too present to the rigors and demands of her current predicament to indulge in that division of mental activity that would make her, at the same time, present to herself, as an object of thought. She is not, to be sure, frozen by terror up there, nor even incapacitated by fear. Rather, so near the limits of what she is able to do, she is fully absorbed by the doing of it. The attempt she is about to make, and the bodily preparations required to begin that attempt, have taken the place of conscious intellection. Or have nearly done so. For just then, at the very moment that she has confirmed, again, that on the part of the wall available to receive her left foot there is only the barest convexity of the rock, the surface of which evinces a degree of granulation so fine as to evoke little more than the descriptor "smooth" – just then, she has become aware that her left leg, flexed close to the wall and ending in a shod foot pinned, along the inside edge of the big toe, to an inch of ledge-like extrusion below her – this left leg has begun to tremble rhythmically. She has become aware of this viscerally, as it were. That is, she did not see it, even in her peripheral vision, as she leaned out slightly and bent her neck back and to the side, in order to scan the rock and scrutinize the bulge she has just confirmed is there, so intently and piercingly focused is the look that

connects her eyes to that small area of the wall. And yet – hence the “nearly” – having registered the regular spasms now passing through what could be called the meat and bones of one leg, she now somehow manages an interval of cognition sufficient to silently form the words “sewing-machine leg.” This summoning, this flashing invocation of climber’s jargon, is accompanied by the slightest tightening of the skin at the corners of her mouth. Anyone close enough to her on that wall to observe this passing change in her expressive visage might mistake it for a grimace – testifying, perhaps, to something like pain or fear. An observer coming to this conclusion would be wrong, however. Not because, in her tenuous hold on the rock, she is not also feeling pain and fear. She certainly is. It is rather that the slight elongation of her mouth corresponding to the fleeting appearance of this phrase, these two words that pass through her mind like the merest stirring of air over the site of an ephemeral mental process, is in fact a smile – a spontaneous, bodily registration of pleasure. An observer in the position of all-seeingness that, in certain old traditions of theology, writing and science, was assigned to God, the narrator, or the theorist – a hypothetical observer, that is, who, knowing all that is seen and moreover knowing it

immediately, fully and securely, with an immediacy and a fullness and security rescued from all factors that, either logically or in the contingency of time and place, render the very possibility of such knowing problematic and doubtful in the extreme – an all-seeing and knowing hypothetical observer of an ideal type who saw, and thus could know, *both* that this phrase “sewing-machine leg” passed through her mind as she clung to the rock, up there on the wall, *and* that the convulsive movement that passed briefly over her face in the vicinity of her mouth was in fact a smile – such an observer would be inclined to interpret the coincidence of these two pieces of data – correction, these objects of knowledge – as evidence of precisely that doubling of the mental process called self-consciousness and, even more, as evidence of a self-consciousness that had developed itself into that further, highly sophisticated modality much favored in certain circles as the aesthetic category of irony. Be that as it may, the fraction of a second required for this bit of slang to come to mind, and for signals to be sent, via strings of nerves, to the muscles of the cheek and jaw, does not entirely or irreparably break her concentration. She does not need to make any special effort to ignore the intrusion of this thought and its answering muscular

contractions. She has already abandoned it, shed it without further ado, and returned herself fully into the unfolding of the problem at hand. If, later, she were to recollect this climb – or if she was compelled to do so by the ventriloquizing power of a fiction or textual artifice such as this one – it is not certain she would remember having thought, at that point, the phrase “sewing-machine leg.” Nor, if she were in fact to remember it, could she be sure of not confusing this memory with the memory of some other climb, it being the case that the phenomenon thereby denoted is, after all, not too rare. All climbers who climb close to their limits with any regularity will know this uncomfortable and somewhat unnerving spasmic experience well, and the invocation of the phrase by those who know and appreciate it is all but fully automatic. So automatic in fact that it would seem to put into question, or to put even more into question, the mental process that produces these words, or rather recovers them from somewhere, even in such a daunting and all-consuming situation of pronounced high precarity. She wastes no time on it, she doesn’t give it a thought, up there on the wall from which she will very soon have peeled and perhaps have commenced, as they say, to “take a screamer.” She swings her head to the right and throws a rapid glance down to

where her right hand is under-clinging a flake of rock that opens down, in the direction of the ground. Close to that hand, a few inches to the right, is the knee of her right leg, flexed into an acute angle. The foot of this leg is directly below her right hand. Being higher than the left foot, it is bearing much less of her body weight. In fact, it is hardly bearing any weight at all, beyond that of the right leg itself. There is simply no getting around the fact that her position there, up on the wall, has become highly insecure and, regarding the probability of falling, is becoming arithmetically or perhaps even geometrically more so with every passing second. "Sketchy," is the word, in climber's lingo. She does not silently pronounce this word, however. Even if she would have liked to, she no longer has time for such enunciations or the processes that would generate them. Any second now, the fingers of her left hand are going to shoot off that button of rock like a snapped rubber-band. She needs to move, she needs to move *right now*. Her preparations complete – or, rather, as complete as they will be permitted to be – she swings her head back to the left and spits out something close to a growl. The intentionality behind this utterance was aiming at the emphatic delivery of two words: "Watch me!" In fact, the exclamation that emerged from between her lips

was more like this: "Raaatchm!" As improbable and even incredible as it may seem, this message, this – call, was apparently understood by its intended receiver. For immediately an answering call comes up the wall along the rope. It is the voice of the trusted comrade who is belaying from the ground twenty meters below. The voice sings, "Yo!" Up on the wall, she has already gone into action. Leaning in to the rock and pulling down with the three fingers of her exhausted left hand, she shifts and commits her weight up, in the direction of her right foot. Immediately thereby her left foot is set free of the tiny ledge that had been its home. She brings this foot up and, letting it find the slight bulge on the wall, smears the rubber of the climbing shoe directly under the ball of the foot against the rock. She now pulls on the under-clinging right hand and, extending both legs, lets go with her left hand and swings that arm out and over her head. Standing up onto the toes of her right foot, she releases the under-clinging right hand and simultaneously reaches up as far as possible with the extended left arm, the hand of which now wraps around the diagonal, upwardly opening flake of rock. Her fingers sink themselves deeply into the crack behind the flake. The move complete, she shifts her weight slightly over the toes of the right foot and consolidates

her position. Already her right hand has unclipped the quick-draw – a short nylon runner threaded with two aluminum carabiners – from her climbing harness. She brings it up and clips one of the carabiners into the metal ring bolted into the wall just above the flake. She reaches down and slides her right hand as far as it will go along the climbing rope tied into her harness. Her fingers tighten around the rope and she lifts it to a level even with her breasts. Holding it there, she brings her head down to it and bites the rope. Gripping it in her teeth, she reaches down again with the right hand and brings up two more feet of rope, which she now raises and clips into the second carabiner of the quick-draw hanging from the ring. She is now clipped into the wall, in a position of relative security. And already, everything has shifted into another temporality, another modality of perception and experience. For now she hears and feels her breath, going in and out through her open mouth. She notices that the sun is warm on the skin of her shoulders and arms, warm on the backs of her legs. She gently shakes out her left leg, letting it hang limply from its hip socket. She wraps her right hand over the edge of the rock flake, releases the exhausted fingers of the other hand, and lets her still burning left arm dangle loosely at her side. She presses

her cheek against the warm rock of the wall and looks up into the sky, which she now sees is vivid blue, and cloudless. She feels her heart pumping blood, feels the rough grain of the rock beneath her fingers, behind the flake. She hears, and then sees, a bee fussing along close to the wall just above her. Only now does she look down to smile at the trusted comrade far below. Only to such a comrade, into whose real hands she has learned to place a responsibility for her real body, would she entrust her fictional representation and thereby submit to the absolute and irreducible power of a third-person narrative – if, that is, she were prepared to expose herself to this kind of representation at all, which is far from clear and in fact unlikely, with, yes, all that as a result may be implied about the legitimacy of these very words. Words that, after all, speaking of a “her” but authored by a “him,” mark the opening of sexual difference, in the context of a book that presumes to address the problem of power, no less. Some days later, in the city, while drafting a text for the next meeting of her affinity group, she might suddenly remember this climb and think: it’s just like that. The tenuousness, the intensity and pressure of time, the need to carry the fear and doubt and yet move out, without delay. But in the dark. Yes, maybe

it would be like climbing, on a climb like that, except it would already be dark. No, she might think, after a pause, that's not quite right. Because it wouldn't be just one who is climbing, in the revolution. It would be like climbing on a climb like that, in the dark. But also without a rope. Because the trusted comrade, all the trusted and singular comrades, would be up on the wall too, climbing by feel and, maybe, by the partial light of the moon and stars. Yes, possibly it would be something like that. That, another might add, and also the words passing back and forth in darkness – there, among comrades, somewhere on the wall. These words that, filling the dark with a loving and distressed intentionality, would hold the place and take over the functions of the missing rope. "Or else," this other could say then, "even entirely more so than that." She might be silent for a long time, considering what the other has said. Yes, she could respond eventually. Even more so, or otherwise than that.

(2006)

Notes

Chapter One

¹ "Militant" is a tricky term, problematically entangled as it is with the military genealogy of vanguardism and with Lenin's militarized clandestine party form. Militancy is poison, in so far as it does no more than mirror the military power it is sworn to fight. However, there is a non-Leninist militancy that is both redeemable and necessary today: it implies, to begin with, a selective endorsement of forms of direct action that go beyond occasional petitions and demonstrations. And while it does not advocate violence in every situation, it does not reject all forms of violent struggle in advance or treat the problem of violence as one that has already been solved (as do, for example, those full-throated pacifists who chastise the black blocs for breaking the windows of transnational corporations). Militancy is inseparably bound up with the problem of oppositional violence in the face of

state and systemic violence. There are no abstract solutions to this problem and the dilemmas that derive from it: there are only situational decisions that need to take into account both tactical and strategic calculations of effectiveness and the incalculables of a rigorous practical ethics. Militants today cannot, as those of the past have done, simply dismiss ethics as an aspect of bourgeois ideology. But they are right to reject all ideologies of pacifism that deny or discount the realities of state and systemic violence or the right to self-defense in the face of them. In other words, militancy must not devolve into a form of militaristic ideology. And to say, as I do in the third part of this paper, that the issue of revolution has not gone away is to affirm that questions of self-defense are now, like everything else, globalized. That these problems are urgent today is underscored by the increasingly panicked insistence with which official discourse – shared by all states and echoed obediently by corporate media – crudely equates every kind of militancy with “terrorism.” In view of this, I am a sympathetic reader of both Ward Churchill’s critique of pacifism and Alain Badiou’s attempt to rescue the militant as an agent of revolutionary subjectivity and commitment. See Ward Churchill and Mike Ryan, *Pacifism as Pathology: Reflections*

on the Role of Armed Struggle in North America (Winnipeg, Manitoba: Arbeiter Ring, 1998) and Alain Badiou, *Ethics: An Essay on the Understanding of Evil*, trans. Peter Hallward (London: Verso, 2001).

² Herzfelde had taken over the publishing permit of the defunct *Neue Jugend*, and he, Grosz, and Heartfield began publishing a journal under this name in July 1916. Jung soon joined the editorial board, and the new collective also took on *Freie Strasse*. *Neue Jugend* was banned by the German censor for its February/March 1917 issue, after which the collective changed its name to Malik-Verlag. In addition to publishing journals, including three issues of *Der Dada*, the organ of Club Dada, edited by Hausmann, Malik published a book series called *Kleine Revolutionäre Bibliothek*. Among its titles was Lukác's *History and Class Consciousness*, published for the first time in German by Malik in 1923. The history of the collective was rescued in a 1962 exhibition; see the catalog *Der Malik-Verlag, 1916-1947* (Berlin: Deutsche Akademie der Künste, 1962).

³ *Der blutige Ernst* was published by Trianon Verlag, but the editors and contributors overlapped with the Malik circle.

⁴ It's high time all these Malik-Verlag journals were liberated from the specialists and made accessible through on-line facsimiles and translations. The drawings discussed were among those collected and published by Malik in 1921, under the title *Das Gesicht der herrschenden Klasse* [The Face of the Ruling Class]; republished by Makol Verlag, Frankfurt/Main, 1972.

⁵ The manifesto was published in Richard Huelsenbeck, *En avant dada: Eine Geschichte des Dadaismus* (Hannover: Steegemann Verlag, 1920). Huelsenbeck's 1920 *Dada Almanac* ("Commissioned by the Central Office of the German Dada Movement") has been translated and published, ed. Malcom Green (London: Atlas, 1992); the manifesto is on pp. 73-5. An English translation of parts of *En avant dada* is in *The Dada Painters and Poets*, ed. Robert Motherwell (New York: Wittenborn & Schultz, 1951), pp. 21-47.

⁶ For context and bibliographies, see Barbara McCloskey's excellent *George Grosz and the Communist Party: Art and Radicalism in Crisis, 1918 to 1936* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1997); and John Willet, *Art and Politics in the Weimar Period: The New Sobriety, 1917-1933* (New York: Da Capo Press, 1996). See also *Berlin in Lights: The*

Diaries of Count Harry Kessler (1918-1937), trans. Charles Kessler (New York: Grove, 1999). On Jung, see his still untranslated autobiography *Der Weg nach unten* [The Way Under] (Neuwied/Rhein: Luchterhand, 1961). On the KAPD, see the histories and documents archived at <www.kurasje.org>.

⁷ Jean-François Lyotard, "A Memorial for Marxism: For Pierre Souyri," trans. Cecile Lindsay, in *Peregrinations: Law, Form, Event* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1988), p. 65. The essay first appeared as "Pierre Souyri: Le Marxisme qui n'est pas fini," in *Esprit* (January 1982). It matters not at all that Lyotard, by the time he wrote these words, had "drifted" away from the Marxism he and Souyri shared. Lyotard's *différend* with Marxism doesn't prevent him from acknowledging the real ground of commitment.

⁸ On the battle over militarization at the University of Hawai'i at Manoa and on the occupied islands of Hawai'i, see the website of the Save UH/Stop UARC Coalition: <www.stopuarc.info>; and that of the group DMZ-Hawai'i/Aloha 'Aina: <www.dmzhawaii.org>.

⁹ The text at the center of the Churchill controversy, "Some People Push Back: On the Justice of Roosting Chickens," was

written on September 12, 2001 and published on-line. Since then, Churchill developed it into a book, *On the Justice of Roosting Chickens: Reflections on the Consequences of US Imperialist Arrogance and Criminality* (Edinburgh: AK Press, 2003). The original text, as well as an extensive on-line archive on the controversy is maintained on the anarchist antiwar site <www.kerplebedeb.com>.

¹⁰ For an orienting discussion of mourning in its relations to historical trauma, systemic critique, ethics, and the unfinished tasks of revolution, see "Introduction: The Hit" in Gene Ray, *Terror and the Sublime in Art and Critical Theory: From Auschwitz to Hiroshima to September 11* (New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2005), pp. 1-18.

¹¹ "[L]'organisation révolutionnaire a dû apprendre qu'elle ne peut plus *combattre l'aliénation sous des formes aliénées.*" Guy Debord, *La Société du Spectacle* (Paris: Gallimard, 1992), §122, p. 120; *Society of the Spectacle*, trans. Donald Nicholson-Smith (New York: Zone, 1995), p. 89.

¹² See <www.caedefensefund.org>.

¹³ Critical Art Ensemble, *Electronic Civil Disobedience and Other Unpopular Ideas* (Brooklyn, New York: Autonomedia, 1996), p. 26. This and all the other cited CAE books are available for free download from the group's website: <www.critical-art.net>. Ahead of the curve in this as in so much else, CAE and its publisher, Autonomedia, issue these texts under "anti-copyright."

¹⁴ This self-representation is from the group's website: <www.critical-art.net>. On CAE's cell form, see also CAE, *Digital Resistance: Explorations in Tactical Media*, (Brooklyn, New York: Autonomedia, 2001), pp. 65-80. For CAE's own account of the group's relation to tactical media and the N5M festivals, see *ibid.*, pp. 3-11. For another insider account, see Geert Lovink, *Dark Fiber: Tracking Critical Internet Culture* (Cambridge, Massachusetts: MIT Press, 2002), pp. 254-74.

¹⁵ There are signs that this slippage is a deliberate strategy of writing. See CAE, *Digital Resistance*, pp. 27-8.

¹⁶ CAE, *Electronic Civil Disobedience*, p. 24.

¹⁷ *Ibid.*

¹⁸ Ibid., p. 11. The passage continues: "Nothing of value to the power elite can be found on the streets, nor does this class need control of the streets to efficiently maintain state institutions. . . . [A]s capital has become increasingly decentralized, breaking through national boundaries and abandoning the cities, street action has become increasingly useless."

¹⁹ See for example Lovink, *Dark Fiber*, pp. 34 and 311.

²⁰ CAE, *Electronic Civil Disobedience*, p. 28.

²¹ Ibid., p. 22.

²² The debate was carried on in the pages of the group's journal, *Socialisme ou Barbarie*. See Paul Cardan [Cornelius Castoriadis], "Prolétariat et organization," No. 26 (November-December 1958); [Claude Montal] Claude Lefort, "Organisation et parti," No. 27 (April-May 1959); and Cardan [Castoriadis], "Prolétariat et organisation (suite et fin)," No. 28 (July-August 1959). In English see Castoriadis, "Proletariat and Organization, I," trans. Maurice Brinton, in *Political and Social Writings*, Vol. II,

1955-1960, (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota, 1988); and Lefort, "What Is Bureaucracy?" trans Jean Cohen, *Telos* #22 (1970). For context see, Castoriadis, "The Only Way to Find Out If You Can Swim Is to Get into Water: An Introductory Interview," [1974], in ed. David Ames Curtis, *The Castoriadis Reader* (Oxford: Blackwell, 1997); and Marcel van der Linden, "Socialisme ou Barbarie: A French Revolutionary Group (1949-65)," *Left History* 5.1 (1997).

²³ Debord probably joined Socialisme ou Barbarie some time in the Fall of 1959, although an earlier contact with the group is mentioned in a 1958 letter to André Frankin (8 August). He submitted a formal resignation to the group on 5 May 1961. In the interval, he collaborated with Socialisme ou Barbarie member P. Canjuers [Daniel Blanchard] to write a text establishing the common ground between the two groups, for internal circulation among the two memberships: "Preliminaries Toward Defining a Unitary Revolutionary Program," dated 20 July 1960, in English in *Situationist International Anthology*, ed. and trans. Ken Knabb (Berkeley: Bureau of Public Secrets, 1981). References to and critical comments about Socialisme ou Barbarie can be found in many of the 12 issues of the *Internationale situationniste*, beginning with No. 2

(December 1958). Arthème Fayard has republished an indispensable complete run of the journal in a single volume in 1997. English translations of many situationist texts and some complete issues of their journal are now archived on-line at <www.cddc.vt.edu/sionline>. Debord's resignation letter and other relevant letters to Frankin, Blanchard, Attila Kotanyi, J.-L. Jollivet, and Edouard Taube are in Debord, *Correspondance*, Vol. 2, September 1960–December 1964 (Paris: Arthème Fayard, 2001).

Bill Brown (aka Bill Not Bored, aka Johnny Boredom) has been among the few outside France to grasp the importance of the intersection of these two groups. His journal *NOT BORED!* has published English translations of the relevant correspondence, as well as important texts and commentaries by Castoriadis, Blanchard, Pierre Vidal-Naquet, and others. He has also analyzed the relations between the groups in three critical essays: "Workers' Councils, Cornelius Castoriadis, and the Situationist International" (November 1996); "Cornelius Castoriadis, 1922-1997" (July 1998); and "Strangers in the Night" (June 1999). All of them, as well as an extensive archive of other situationist texts in translation, are accessible at <www.notbored.org>.

²⁴ Gilles Deleuze, "Three Group-Related Problems," in *Desert Islands and Other Texts, 1953-1974*, trans. Michael Taormina (New York: Semiotext(e), 2004). The text was written as a preface to Guattari's 1972 *Psychoanalysis and Transversality*.

²⁵ "La théorie révolutionnaire est maintenant ennemie de toute idéologie révolutionnaire, *et elle sait qu'elle l'est.*" Debord, *Société du Spectacle*, §124, p. 121; *Society of the Spectacle*, p. 90.

²⁶ As the lucid and incisive analyses of the Retort collective make clear, al-Qaeda embodies the worst tradition of vanguardism. See Retort (Iain Boal, T.J. Clark, Joseph Matthews, and Michael Watts), *Afflicted Powers: Capital and Spectacle in a New Age of War*, (London: Verso, 2005).

²⁷ I want to be as fair as possible here. When I raised this issue during a brief conversation with Steve Kurtz in Berlin in September of 2005, he claimed that CAE had been misunderstood and pointed out that the chapter "Electronic Civil Disobedience," in the 1996 book in question, is followed immediately by "Resisting the Bunker" – not at all

a retreat from the streets. The problem is that CAE's references to protest culture tend to be tonally dismissive rather than sympathetic – even though, it is true, CAE itself has worked in coalition with ACT-UP and other activist groups. And while the “Resisting the Bunker” chapter does include the claim that bunkers “must be kept under siege,” the whole discussion of what is there called “nomadic action” begins from the premise that “bunker disruption should not be the center of resistant activity.” (*Electronic Civil Disobedience*, p. 38.) So while there is a certain tension between these chapters, the second doesn't successfully qualify the impression left by the first, that street protest is a failed model, even if such a balancing qualification was the intent. Given the confusion, it would be helpful if CAE addressed the problem directly and clarified its position.

²⁸ Critics (including Steve Kurtz and a number of hackers) of the “Floodnet” program developed by Electronic Disturbance Theater and other forms of “hacktivism” have argued that certain DoS attacks can be counterproductive for a variety of reasons. See Lovink, *Dark Fiber*, pp. 268–70 and 274; CAE, *Digital Resistance*, pp. 13–28; and

Metac0m, "Hacking Globalization," *The Hacktivist* 3,
<www.thehacktivist.com>.

²⁹ Here I follow common usage of the term "hacking," meaning those practices of cyberspatial intrusion and intervention so familiar in both corporate media hype and the cyberpunk imaginary. In a stimulating reworking of Marx, Deleuze-Guattari, and Debord, McKenzie Wark has attempted to generalize the "hacker ethic" – that is, a broader commitment to the free appropriation of all forms of immaterial property as an open commons and to the collective redeployment of these forms in anarchic gift economies – into a new model of revolutionary theory. We will need to come to terms with his bold and promising reconceptualizations, and the sooner the better. McKenzie Wark, *A Hacker Manifesto* (Cambridge, Massachusetts: Harvard University Press, 2004).

³⁰ And the attacks of September 11 and the fate of the World Trade Center complex have obviously undone all glibly-held certainties about invulnerability. Were the twin towers bunker or symbol? They were both. Again, see Retort, *Afflicted Powers*, especially pp. 16–37.

³¹ See CAE, *Digital Resistance*, especially pp. 83–133. These problems do not figure centrally in the groups's current work at the intersections of "gentech" and biopower. See CAE, *The Molecular Invasion* (Brooklyn, New York: Autonomedia, 2002).

³² The return of strategic thinking after September 11 and the declaration of the perpetual preemptive so-called war on terror is legible in much of the writing in the reader of the 2003 Next 5 Minutes "International Festival of Tactical Media." There, CAE acknowledges the need for strategic theory and practice, but argues that the N5M festivals, centered on workshops and skill-sharing, are not the proper forum for such strategizing. See *Next 5 Minutes 4 Reader*, at <www.next5minutes.org>.

³³ Theodor W. Adorno, "Commitment," in *Notes to Literature*, vol. II, trans. Shierry Weber Nichol森 (New York: Columbia University Press, 1992).

³⁴ "Le dadaïsme a voulu *supprimer l'art sans le réaliser*; et le surréalisme a voulu *réaliser l'art sans le supprimer*." Debord, *Société du Spectacle*, §191, p. 186; *Society of the Spectacle*, p. 136.

³⁵ Bruce Altshuler, *The Avant-Garde in Exhibition: New Art in the 20th Century* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1998), p. 108. On the First International Dada Fair see also McCloskey, *George Grosz and the Communist Party*, pp. 69-75, and Willet, *Art and Politics*, pp. 53-4.

³⁶ According to Duchamp, he drew a moustache, goatee, and the graffito-caption "L.H.O.O.Q." on a reproduction of the Mona Lisa in Paris in October 1919. He showed it to Picabia, who improvised a version, sans goatee, and published it in his journal in March 1920. Pierre Cabanne, *Dialogues with Marcel Duchamp*, trans. Ron Padgett (New York: Da Capo, 1979), pp. 62-3. Since Picabia had three works in the International Dada Fair, we can assume the journal was known in Berlin.

³⁷ Altshuler, *Avant-Garde in Exhibition*, p. 109. Brigid Doherty describes Grosz's piece, titled *MiBachtung eines Meisterwerkes von Botticelli (Primavera)* [Disrespect for a Masterpiece by Botticelli], as "an 'X' taped across the glass of a framed reproduction." Doherty, "The Work of Art and the Problem of Politics in Berlin Dada," in *October* 105, Dada Special Issue, ed Leah Dickerman, (Summer 2003):

87. Well, if he didn't slash the reproduction, he should have. Among the masterpieces "corrected" through the addition of cut-out photographs and other collage elements were the *Apollo Belvedere* and the *Venus de Milo*, and paintings by Rubens, Picasso, and Rousseau. For a sharp reading of Grosz and Heartfield's corrected Picasso, see Charles W. Haxthausen, "Bloody Serious: Two Texts by Carl Einstein," in *ibid.*, pp. 111-8.

³⁸ "Die Bewegung Dada führt zur Aufhebung des Kunsthandels." The critical consciousness of the most politicized tendency of Berlin Dada can be measured in Grosz and Herzfelde's *Die Kunst ist in Gefahr. Ein Orientierungsversuch* [Art Is in Danger: Toward an Orientation] (Berlin: Malik-Verlag, 1925). See also the introduction Herzfelde wrote for the 1920 Dada Fair, "Zur Einführung in die Erste internationale Dada-Messe," is reprinted in *DADA total: Manifeste, Aktionen, Texte, Bilder*, eds. Karl Riha and Jörgen Schäfer (Stuttgart: Reclam, 1994), pp. 146-8; and is in English, trans. Brigid Doherty, in *October* 105 (Summer 2003): 100-4.

³⁹ For a more developed version of the situationist interpretation, see Jules-François Dupuis [Raoul Vaneigem], *A Cavalier History of Surrealism*, trans. Donald Nicholson-

Smith (Edinburgh: AK Press, 1999). For a periodized academic account, see Helena Lewis, *The Politics of Surrealism* (New York: Paragon House, 1988).

⁴⁰ See Peter Bürger, *Theory of the Avant-Garde*, trans. Michael Shaw (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1984).

Chapter Two

¹ This definition is from the group's website: <www.critical-art.net>. It condenses a longer discussion in the "Introduction" in Critical Art Ensemble (hereafter CAE) *Digital Resistance: Explorations in Tactical Media* (Brooklyn, New York: Autonomedia, 2001), pp. 3-11. This and all other cited CAE books can be accessed in digital form on the group's website.

² CAE, *Tactical Media*, pp. 2, 8.

³ Francis Fukuyama, *The End of History and the Last Man*, (New York: Harper Perennial, 1993).

⁴ "Electronic Civil Disobedience"[1994], in CAE, *Electronic Civil Disobedience and Other Unpopular Ideas* (Brooklyn, New York: Autonomedia, 1996), p. 24.

⁵ Ibid.

⁶ See chapter one, part IV, above.

⁷ See <www.caedefensefund.org>.

⁸ See David Garcia, "Learning the Right Lessons," January 25, 2006; and Brian Holmes's reply, "Let's Have a Discussion," February 1, 2006, both posted at <www.metamute.org>. Nato Thompson replies to critics of "The Interventionists" in "Please don't ruin the integrity of political art!", at <artwurl.org>.

⁹ See <www.forkscrew.com>.

¹⁰ See <www.coppergreene.org>.

¹¹ Seymour M. Hersh, "The Gray Zone: How a Secret Pentagon Program Came to Abu Ghraib," *The New Yorker*, May 24, 2004; archived online at <www.newyorker.com>.

¹² Dora Apel, "Torture Culture: Lynching Photographs and the Images of Abu Ghraib," *Art Journal*, vol. 64, no. 2 (Summer 2005), p. 97; and Faye Hirsch, "Graphic Art in the Summer of Discontent," *Art in America*, October 2004.

¹³ Greil Marcus analyzes Bertrand's poster and this panel in context in "The Cowboy Philosopher," *Artforum*, March 1986, pp. 85-91 and in *Lipstick Traces: A Secret History of the Twentieth Century* (Cambridge, Massachusetts: Harvard University Press, 1989), pp. 413-25. The translations for the dialogue in bubbles is as quoted by Marcus in the latter.

¹⁴ Michael Hardt and Antonio Negri, *Empire* (Cambridge, Massachusetts: Harvard University Press, 2000); and *Multitude: War and Democracy in the Age of Empire* (New York: Penguin, 2004).

¹⁵ Guy Debord, *The Society of the Spectacle*, trans. Donald Nicholson-Smith (New York: Zone, 1994).

¹⁶ McKenzie Wark, *A Hacker Manifesto* (Cambridge, Massachusetts: Harvard University Press, 2004).

¹⁷ CAE, "Framing Tactical Media," in *Next 5 Minutes Reader*, International Festival for Tactical Media, September 11-14, 2003, Amsterdam, online at <www.next5minutes.org>.

Chapter Three

¹ "Art's double character as both autonomous and *fait social* is incessantly reproduced on the level of its autonomy." Theodor W. Adorno, *Ästhetische Theorie*, eds. Gretel Adorno and Rolf Tiedemann (Frankfurt/Main: Suhrkamp), p. 16; *Aesthetic Theory*, eds. Gretel Adorno and Rolf Tiedemann, trans. Robert Hullot-Kentor (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1997), p. 5.

² Herbert Marcuse, "The Affirmative Character of Culture," in Marcuse, *Negations: Essays in Critical Theory*, trans. Jeremy J. Shapiro (Boston: Beacon Press, 1968).

³ Louis Althusser, *Lenin and Philosophy and Other Essays*, trans. Ben Brewster (New York: Monthly Review Press, 2001), pp. 115-20.

⁴ All such arguments today tend to derive, wittingly or not, from Jacques Derrida's brilliant reading of Kant's *Third Critique*, in particular his deconstruction of "disinterestedness." See chapter 1 ("Parergon") in Derrida, *The Truth in Painting*, trans. Geoff Bennington and Ian McLeod (Chicago and London: University of Chicago Press, 1987), pp. 15-147.

⁵ "The Culture Industry: Enlightenment as Mass Deception" in Max Horkheimer and Theodor W. Adorno, *Dialectic of Enlightenment: Philosophical Fragments*, ed. Gunzelin Schmid Noerr and trans. Edmund Jephcott (Stanford, California: Stanford University Press, 2002). Today the critic and theorist most strongly associated with this analysis (and, rightly or wrongly, with its most pessimistic and foreclosing tendencies) is Benjamin H.D. Buchloh. See for example the "Introduction" to Buchloh, *Neo-Avantgarde and Culture Industry: Essays on European and American Art from 1955 to 1975* (Cambridge, Massachusetts: MIT Press, 2000), especially pp. xxxi-iii.

⁶ *Critique of Separation* is the title of a 1961 film by Guy Debord in which the voice-over narration includes this utterance: "The only adventure, we said, is to contest the totality, whose center is this way of living, where we can test our strength but never use it." And: "Everything involving the sphere of loss – that is, what I have lost of myself, the time that has gone; and disappearance, flight; and the general evanescence of things, and even what in the prevalent and therefore most vulgar sense of time is called wasted time – all this finds in that strangely apt old military term, *lost children* [*en enfants perdus*], its intersection with the sphere of discovery, of the exploration of unknown terrains, and with all the forms of quest, adventure, avant-garde. This is the crossroads where we have found ourselves and lost our way." *Guy Debord: Complete Cinematic Works: Scripts, Stills, Documents*, ed. and trans. Ken Knabb (Oakland, California: AK Press, 2003), pp. 31, 35. The phrase "decolonization of everyday life" sums up the situationist project from its inception and appears, probably not for the first time, in "Minimum Definition of Revolutionary Organizations," a short text adopted by the 7th Conference of the Situationist International in Paris in July 1966 and published in

Internationale situationniste 11 (October 1967): "Such an organization sees the beginning and end of its program in the complete decolonization of everyday life." Ken Knabb, ed. and trans., *Situationist International Anthology* (Berkeley, California: Bureau of Public Secrets, 1981), p. 223.

⁷ Peter Bürger, *Theorie der Avantgarde* (Frankfurt/Main: Suhrkamp, 1974); *Theory of the Avant-Garde*, trans. Michael Shaw (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1984).

⁸ Bürger, *Theorie der Avantgarde*, pp. 44, 77-8; *Theory of the Avant-Garde*, pp. 109, 56-57. It would be remiss not to acknowledge the critical responses to Bürger authored by Benjamin Buchloh and Hal Foster. Both are aimed at Bürger's dismissal of the post-1945 "Neo-avantgarde" and, to some extent, at Bürger's categorical division between "historical" and "neo-" avant-gardes. Both responses seek to rescue the dismissed bodies of work and to reestablish the possibility of contemporary avant-garde, or at least "critical," artistic production. My criticism of Bürger, issuing from other concerns and aims, intersects very little with the conclusions of these finally modernist critics, although I do feel close to Foster's resistance

both to "Frankfurt School melancholia" and to that "dialectic of failure," shared by Bürger and Buchloh, in which the appearance of innovative practices is punctual, final, and assumed to be fully and immediately graspable by all who come after. Buchloh, "Theorizing the Avant-Garde," *Art in America*, vol. 72 (November 1984), pp. 19-21; and Foster, "What's Neo about the Neo-Avant-Garde?" in *October* 70 (Fall 1994), pp. 5-32.

⁹ Bürger, *Theorie der Avantgarde*, pp. 72-3; *Theory of the Avant-Garde*, pp. 53-4: "In summary, we note that the historical avant-garde movements negate those determinations that are essential in autonomous art: the disjunction of art and the praxis of life, individual production, and individual reception as distinct from the former. The avant-garde intends the abolition [*Aufhebung*] of autonomous art by which it means that art is to be integrated into the praxis of life. This has not occurred, and presumably cannot occur in bourgeois society unless it be in the form of a false sublation [*falschen Aufhebung*] of autonomous art. Pulp fiction and commodity aesthetics prove that such a false sublation exists.... In late capitalist society, intentions of the historical avant-garde movements are being realized but with results other

than what was intended [*mit umgekehrten Vorzeichen*]. Given the experience of the false sublation of autonomy, one will need to ask whether a sublation of autonomy status can be desirable at all, whether the distance between art and the praxis of life is not what guarantees in the first place that space for free play within which alternatives to what exists become thinkable." (Translation modified.)

¹⁰ Adorno, *Ästhetische Theorie*, p. 9; *Aesthetic Theory*, p. 1.

¹¹ Theodor W. Adorno, *Negative Dialektik* (Frankfurt/Main: Suhrkamp, 1975), p. 15; *Negative Dialectics*, trans. E.B. Ashton (New York: Continuum, 1995), p. 3: "Philosophy, which once seemed overtaken, keeps itself alive because the moment of its realization was missed. The summary judgment that it had merely interpreted the world, that by resignation before reality it had also crippled itself, becomes a defeatism of reason after the transformation of the world has failed." (Translation modified.)

¹² For an orienting discussion of Meyer Shapiro, Clement Greenberg and Dwight MacDonal in the context of post-1945 Marxism in the United States, see Serge Guilbaut, *How New York Stole the Idea of Modern Art: Abstract Expressionism*,

Freedom, and the Cold War, trans. Arthur Goldhammer,
(Chicago and London: University of Chicago Press, 1983).

See also Fred Orton and Griselda Pollock, "Avant-Gardes and Partisans Reviewed" and the other essays in Francis Frascina, ed., *Pollock and After: The Critical Debate* (London and New York: Routledge, 2000).

¹³ T.J. Clark, *Farewell to an Idea: Episodes from a History of Modernism* (New Haven and London: Yale University Press, 1999).

¹⁴ These four writers have for a long time been the prime movers of the journal *October*. While divergences in approach and position persist among them, their shared if qualified endorsement of opus-based artistic modernism, the tonalities of which would even justify the word "loyalty," emerges strikingly in the final roundtable that concludes their collectively authored survey art history. Yves-Alain Bois, Benjamin H.D. Buchloh, Hal Foster, and Rosalind Krauss, *Art Since 1900: Modernism, Antimodernism, Postmodernism* (London: Thames & Hudson, 2005), p. 674.

¹⁵ Jacques Derrida, "Signature Event Context" in Derrida, *Margins of Philosophy*, trans. Alan Bass (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1982).

¹⁶ It could happen as follows. Presumably any project, any instrumental movement toward a specified end, rehearses a (positive) dialectic of closure and results in a work. If this were confirmed to be the case, then any gathering together of anti-capitalist practices into a project – say, "the project of decolonizing everyday life" – would constitute a work always already prepared in advance for institutional capture as profitable positivity. But a work in the sense of an artwork requires the closure of accomplishment: it must be "finished" in order to fully enter the circuits of commodification that end in exchange value. (Think of the famous question to Pollock: "But how do you know when it's done?") A project, however, can be open-ended and perpetual: a negative dialectic that refuses final, totalizing synthesis. The project of decolonizing everyday life, for example, aims at a generalization of autonomy – more opening than foundational closure. Such an aim defers completion to the moment of revolutionary reorganization of the social given – a moment that can and has been thought as the advent of a perpetualization of

negativity, of an interminable process of deconstruction and reorganization. It is always possible to misconstrue the movements of such a project as discrete "works," in order to capture them for art history and capitalization: it is in this sense that exchange value is "always already" there, as a possibility that haunts every use value. But as the example of the Situationist International shows, when refusal is bourn openly enough, then the violence of such a capturing misconstrual becomes so obvious as to risk exposing the social functions of the paradigm and thus subverts the operations of absorption. The resistance of anti-capitalist projects, a resistance I'm characterizing here as one deriving from its desiring force of refusal and breakout, should not be confused with attempts to short-circuit the work-form by bringing the deferral of closure into the gallery or other institutions of reception. In 1993, for example, Robert Morris published a collection of essays under the title *Continuous Project Altered Daily* (New York: Solomon R. Guggenheim Museum; and Cambridge, Massachusetts: MIT Press). But as the names of the co-publishers already make clear, whatever is collected under this title is intended to be received as the work of an artist whose identity as such, however critically or self-critically carried, is never in doubt or question and

therefore will comfortably take its place within an established oeuvre. I take it that the difference between such moves and the anti-capitalist practices I'm pointing to is qualitative.

¹⁷ Gilles Deleuze and Félix Guattari, *A Thousand Plateaus: Capitalism and Schizophrenia*, trans. Brian Massumi (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1987).

¹⁸ Bürger for his part seems to conclude that practices inevitably become works: "[E]fforts to sublimate art become artistic manifestations that, despite their producer's intentions, take on the character of works." Bürger, *Theorie der Avantgarde*, p. 80; *Theory of the Avant-Garde*, p. 58.

¹⁹ Here and in the sentences that follow, I refer to Maurice Blanchot's notion of *désœuvrement* ("unworking" or "worklessness"), as a "neutral" force of dissolution that haunts and ruins the work of art, especially as this notion was taken up by Jean-Luc Nancy, in his 1983 engagement with the thought and acephalic experiments of Georges Bataille, as well as to the fruitful textual call and response Nancy's text provoked. However I am suggesting pushing this

notion more in the direction of a politicized evacuation of the work-form. Even "ruined" or unworking works in Blanchot's sense meet the minimum conditions of the bourgeois paradigm and would in my schema function without problem as critically affirmative works. Indeed for Blanchot this "empty power" of unworking is the negative aspect of the artwork (or that aspect of it that is always slipping toward the abandon of a negativity without reserve), without which its positive (meaningful and "enlightened") aspect would not be possible. Both aspects together – and the ambiguity between them – constitute "the irreducible *double meaning*" of what he calls "literature." Blanchot, "Literature and the Right to Death," in *The Station Hill Blanchot Reader: Fiction and Literary Essays*, trans. Lydia Davis, Paul Auster and Robert Lambertson (Barrytown, New York: Station Hill Press, 1998) pp. 387, 398-9. The "power without power" of Blanchot's unworking work touches everything at stake here, however, and there is much to think in the links between the desire to evacuate the work-form and the desire to evacuate the place of state power. The incomparable constellation that has formed around Blanchot's notion and Nancy's text is in any case indispensable to this "essay." It is also clear that this constellation, which includes among others Jacques

Derrida, Marguerite Duras, Emmanuel Levinas and Dionys Mascolo, will one day have to be brought into critical articulation with the rewriting, by Paolo Virno and Michael Hardt and Antonio Negri, of revolutionary theory in terms of generalized biopolitical production and (immaterial) living labor. For some points of entry into this constellation see Jean-Luc Nancy, *The Inoperative Community*, ed. Peter Connor and trans. Peter Connor, Lisa Garbus, Michael Holland, and Simona Sawhney (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota, 1991); Maurice Blanchot, *The Unavowable Community*, trans. Pierre Joris (Barrytown: Station Hill Press, 1981) and *Friendship*, trans. Elizabeth Rottenberg (Stanford, California: Stanford University Press, 1997); Jacques Derrida, *Given Time: I. Counterfeit Money*, trans. Peggy Kamuf (Chicago and London: University of Chicago Press, 1992) and *Politics of Friendship*, trans. George Collins (London: Verso, 1997); Giorgio Agamben, *The Coming Community*, trans. Michael Hardt (Minneapolis and London: University of Minnesota Press, 1993); and Marguerite Duras, *The Malady of Death*, trans. Barbara Bray (New York: Grove, 1986), but perhaps above all her *Destroy, She Said*, trans. Barbara Bray (New York: Grove Weidenfeld, 1970), a text that predates Nancy's essay by more than a decade but, in processing and transfiguring the experience of the

Comité d'action étudiants-écrivains in May 1968, belongs in the strongest way to the constellation. On the new, radically generalized productivism, see Michael Hardt and Antonio Negri, *Empire* (Cambridge, Massachusetts: Harvard University Press, 2000) and *Multitude: War and Democracy in the Age of Empire* (New York: Penguin, 2004); and Paolo Virno, *A Grammar of the Multitude: For an Analysis of Contemporary Forms of Life*, trans. Isabella Bertolotti, James Cascaito, and Andrea Casson (New York: Semiotext(e), 2004).

²⁰ T.J. Clark and Donald Nicholson-Smith, "Why Art Can't Kill the Situationist International," *October* 79 (Winter 1997), pp. 15-31."

²¹ Adorno, *Ästhetische Theorie*, p. 9; *Aesthetic Theory*, p. 1: "It is self-evident that nothing concerning art is self-evident any more, not its inner life, not its relation to the world, not even its right to exist."

²² Adorno, *Negative Dialektik*, pp. 359-60; *Negative Dialectics*, pp. 366-7.

²³ Horkheimer and Adorno, *Dialectic of Enlightenment*, p. xi: "Critical thought, which does not call a halt before progress itself, requires us to take up the cause of the remnants of freedom, of tendencies toward real humanity, even though they seem powerless in face of the great historical trend." While marking, again, the need to refuse or at least resist the Frankfurt School pessimism freighting the sentence, this dialectical understanding of "true humanity" as the limit of reification dissolves all rigid conceptions of human nature and historical finality and weathers well the once *de rigueur* critiques of "humanism."

²⁴ Hal Foster's summary catalog of standing complaints against the category will do fine here: "The problems with the avant-garde should be familiar, especially to readers of [*October*]: its ideology of progress, its presumption of originality, its elitist hermeticism, its historical exclusivity, its appropriation by cultural industries, and so on." Foster, "What's Neo about the Neo-Avant-Garde?", p. 10.

²⁵ This critique amounts to a tradition in itself, from Rosa Luxemburg and Anton Pannekoek; to *Socialisme ou Barbarie*,

the Situationist International, and the March 22nd Movement; to, now, Michael Hardt and Antonio Negri. Among many possible formulations, Debord's and Daniel Cohn-Bendit's, both strongly informed by the theoretical work of *Socialisme ou Barbarie*, would indicate how far this critique had come by May 1968. See part IV, "The Proletariat as Subject and Representation," in Debord, *The Society of the Spectacle*, trans. Donald Nicholson-Smith (New York: Zone, 1995), pp. 47-90; and part IV, "The Strategy and Nature of Bolshevism," in Daniel Cohn-Bendit and Gabriel Cohn-Bendit, *Obsolete Communism: The Left-Wing Alternative*, trans. Arnold Pomerans (Edinburgh, London, and San Francisco: AK Press, 2000), pp. 181-222.

²⁶ The term "militant" can mean many things, depending on context, and is at this point in need of a genealogy of its own to distinguish and clarify different usages. Its original referent would seem to be the members of a clandestine revolutionary cell, directed from afar and above by a revolutionary party and its inevitable "Central Committee." In this form, entangled with the top-down, ultra-centralized party form associated with Leninist vanguardism, militancy implies a personal subordination to "discipline" that amounts to the surrender of individual

autonomy: the militant lets the party leadership do all the thinking and blindly carries out orders like a good soldier of the revolution. Scattered references in situationist writings, notably in Raoul Vaneigem's *The Revolution of Everyday Life*, extend this critique by emphasizing the self-abnegation involved in separating political activism from the realm of pleasure, play, adventure and desire. The Retort collective has recently emphasized the return of the sacrificial and ferociously destructive aspects of this militancy in al-Qaeda's revival of the worst tradition of vanguardism. It must be said, however, that many activists today use the term "militancy" to refer to contestational tactics based on direct action, from classic non-violent civil disobedience to monkeywrenching, the destruction of genetically engineered crops, and other forms of selective property damage. Since today such direct actions are almost always carried out by qualitative affinity groups rather than old-style party cells, this contemporary usage already reflects the critique of militancy as incompatible with the conditions of autonomy and play. See Vaneigem, *The Revolution in Everyday Life*, trans. Donald Nicholson-Smith (London: Rebel Press, 2003), pp. 109, 174, and chapter 12 ("Sacrifice") and chapter 15 ("Roles"), pp. 107-16 and 131-50; and Retort (Iain Boal, T.J. Clark, Joseph Matthews, and

Michael Watts), *Afflicted Powers: Capital and Spectacle in a New Age of War* (London: Verso, 2005), chapter 6 ("Modernity and Terror"), pp. 171-196. The British theory collective *Aufheben* offers a short discussion of the situationist critique of the "militant" in "Whatever Happened to the Situationists?", *Aufheben* 6 (Autumn 1997), archived online at <www.geocities.com/aufheben2>.

²⁷ Pierre Naville, *La Révolution et les intellectuels: Que peuvent faire les surréalistes?* (Paris: n.p., 1926). For a discussion of the "crisis" triggered by this text, see Helena Lewis, *The Politics of Surrealism* (New York: Paragon House, 1988), pp. 55-69. While Benjamin cites the title of Naville's 1926 polemic, his invocation in the quoted passage below of "Naville's writing [*Schrift*]" refers to the 1927 text, "Mieux et moins bien," published in *La Révolution surréaliste* IX-X, pp. 54-57. There, Naville proposes the "systematic pessimism" glossed by Benjamin.

²⁸ Walter Benjamin, "Der Sürrealismus," in Benjamin, *Angelus Novus: Ausgewählte Schriften 2* (Frankfurt/Main: Suhrkamp, 1988), p. 213; "Surrealism: The Last Snapshot of the European Intelligentsia," trans. Edmund Jephcott, in *Walter Benjamin: Selected Writings, Volume 2, 1927-34*, ed. Michael

W. Jennings, Howard Eiland, and Gary Smith (Cambridge, Massachusetts and London: Belknap/Harvard University Press, 1999), pp. 216-7, translation modified. A close reading of Naville's two polemics together with Benjamin's characterization of them would likely reveal that the dilemmas and choices involved in giving revolutionary desire an adequate "practical politics" are more complicated than either acknowledges or implies. Certainly in retrospect, with so much more history behind us, we know this to be true. The immediate result of the Naville crisis is fairly clear: five surrealists (Breton, Louis Aragon, Paul Eluard, Benjamin Péret, and Pierre Unik) joined the French Communist Party in 1927. Naville meanwhile gravitated to the Trotskyist Fourth International. Benjamin's 1929 text is ambiguous with regard to organizational issues and doesn't register the Stalin-Trotsky split. These ambiguities however do not prevent us from appreciating the action-oriented position he enunciates: neither unwarranted optimism nor a pessimism that remains impotently "unorganized."

²⁹ Benjamin, "Sürrealismus," p. 214; "Surrealism," p. 217.

³⁰ Walter Benjamin, "On the Concept of History," trans. Harry Zohn, in *Walter Benjamin: Selected Writings, Volume 4, 1938-40*, ed. Howard Eiland and Michael W. Jennings (Cambridge, Massachusetts and London: Belknap/Harvard University Press, 2003), pp. 389-400.

³¹ Benjamin, "Sürrealismus," p. 215; "Surrealism," pp. 217-8, translation modified.

³² See Gilles Deleuze, "Three Group Related Problems" in Deleuze, *Desert Islands and Other Texts, 1953-1974*, ed. David Lapoujade and trans. Michael Taormina (Los Angeles and New York: Semiotext(e), 2004), pp. 193-203; and Klaus Theweleit, "Remarks on the RAF Spectre: 'Abstract Radicalism' and Art," in Eva Grubinger, ed., *group.sex*, trans. Jörg Heiser and Michael Robinson (Berlin and New York: Lukas & Sternberg, 1998), pp. 75-101.

³³ See, for example, Blanchot, *Friendship*, p. 64 ("the communist exigency") and p. 111 ("the exigency of refusal").

³⁴ Susan Buck-Morss, "Revolutionary Time: The Vanguard and the Avant-Garde," in Helga Geyer-Ryan, Paul Koopman, and

Klaas Yntema, eds., *Benjamin Studien 1* (Amsterdam and New York: International Walter Benjamin Association and University of Amsterdam, 2002), p. 212.

³⁵ Brian Holmes, "Liar's Poker: Representation of Politics/Politics of Representation," in Holmes, *Unleashing the Collective Phantoms*, online at <http://ut.yt.t0.or.at/site/index.html>. This is the place for a special thanks to Brian for the generosity of an intense and very helpful dialogue on these issues.

Chapter Four

¹ "The X Is Black (Spike Lie)" belongs to a cycle of poems titled "Incriminating Negrographs," in Amiri Baraka, *Funk Lore: New Poems (1984-1995)* (Los Angeles: Littoral Books, 1996), pp. 65-9. But one really needs to hear Baraka's powerful recitation of these words on the anthology *The United States of Poetry*, Polygram Records, 1996.

² See the online archive of flags, background narrative and documents under "Recoloration Proclamation" at www.johnsimsprojects.com.

³ Michael Moore, *Fahrenheit 9/11*, Dog Eat Dog Films/Lions Gate Films, 2004.

⁴ The photo by Stephen J. Boitano is reproduced in Dennis Loy Johnson, *The Big Chill: The Great, Unreported Story of the Bush Inauguration Protest* (Hoboken, New Jersey: Melville House, 2004), p. 111; as well as in Tish Stringer, "Media Diary," *The Journal of Aesthetics & Protest* 1 (October 2002), p. 22.

⁵ Ailecia Ruscin, "Welcoming George W. Bush: Inauguration Day 2001," *Clamor*, April/May 2001, pp. 78-9.

⁶ Michael Hardt and Antonio Negri, *Multitude: War and Democracy in the Age of Empire* (New York: Penguin, 2004), p. xi.