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Optimism of the Will

2018 FIELD Reports on the Global Resistance to Neoreactionary Nationalism

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Just about one year ago I asked several dozen associates around the world if they would submit a report about current, local conditions of cultural innovation and resistance, especially in opposition to the rise of extreme Right wing politics since the 2016 Brexit and US elections. Today, I am very pleased and proud to report that a special double issue of FIELD Journal containing all these reflections is now available online: http://field-journal.com/issue-12?cat=30 . I thank Grant Kester for encouraging me to organize this project, along with his remarkable team of UCSD based editors: Erika Barbosa, Noni Brynjolson, Paloma Checa-Gismero, Jonah Gray, Alex Kershaw and Jordan Rose, as well as the 36 outstanding artists, intellectuals and activists who contributed their insights to this volume.

“Another (art) world is possible,” theorist Gene Ray punned in 2004, wryly tweaking the upbeat motto of the World Social Forum with its vision of a different version of globalization from that of the corporate market hegemony then filling-in and exceeding all

social, political and economic voids left-over from the Cold War. Ray asked, in light of widespread populist resistance to this process of neoliberalization, what position should cultural practitioners be willing to take?[1] Although this was only a few years after the dot.com crash, 2004 still harbored another bubble of sorts, one that has only just recently imploded. Brian Holmes defined this electronically powered effervescence as a movement in which, "building on the success of the Zapatista Encuentros and the first global protest in 1998," activists tried to spread their message "'by any media necessary.'"[2] Amplified by both mainstream and independent, or "Indy" media, the role of cultural workers in these protests seemed to provide one answer to Ray's question. But the sphere of culture extended even further, taking on a genuinely utopian dimension. Propelled into circulation by theorists Antonio Negri and Michael Hardt, terms such as The Multitude and immaterial labor were invoked to explain the rise of a new political subjectivity made possible by post-industrial capital's need to exploit intangible affective, creative and bio-political power.

Meanwhile, a diverse array of artistic forms fell under the rubric of Tactical Media: an ephemeral intervention into public space or mainstream media by practitioners of low-cost, DIY (Do It Yourself) forms of social and political expression. Much of this sentiment was manifest in the so-called Battle of Seattle of 1999 in which bandana-wearing demonstrators, union activists and artists carrying giant puppets disrupted a meeting of the World Trade Organization (WTO).[3] Fueled in large part by extraordinary promises of emancipation linked with the spread of new electronic communication technology, the alter or counter-globalization movement demarcated itself from the aspirations of trans-national business by dreaming of a socially networked world in which previously inflexible geopolitical borders collapsed as social justice

and direct digital democracy swept the planet. This force allegedly came fully-loaded with a revolutionary potential that, rather than organize its resistance through trade unions or traditional party structures, was developing horizontal modes of leaderless connectivity and cooperation, as well as a post-modern form of collectivism.

Then came 9/11 USA, 3/11 Spain, 7/7 London and a series of terror attacks on unarmed civilians (including many lesser-reported attacks in the developing world), government-sponsored crackdowns on internet freedom, the invasion of privacy by the state, the commercialization of cyberspace and juridical limits on that sphere of seemingly limitless expression, and the 2007-2008 financial collapse, followed by widespread austerity measures and deep existential precariousness within everyday work and life. By 2011 people had had it. Led by young people reacting to their abruptly terminated futures, urban populations took over squares, plazas and streets in Tunisia, Morocco, Bahrain, Libya, Egypt, Syria, Greece, Spain, and of course Wall Street. Though many of these individuals and groups went on to develop long-range forms of activism the Arab Spring, Movement of Squares and Occupy Movement was short-lived, and in the case of Syria, where both tactical media artists and homegrown forms of creative resistance marked the start of opposition against the repressive Bashar al-Assad regime, has given way to one of the most tragic and devastating civil wars of all time, leading in part to a flow of displaced people northwards seeking refuge in more stable nations. A simmering reactionary sentiment began bubbling up as the enthusiasm of alter-globalism deflated. Whipped-up by well-funded conservative and far-Right ideologues opposed to immigration, capping carbon fuels, and the rights of women, people of color and the LGBTQ community these affects were

cleverly linked with a loathing for the 1%, as the so-called alt-Right appropriated and détourned a political critique long considered the prerogative of the progressive Left.

Now, ten years after the "great recession, and fourteen years after Ray's "Another (Art) World" bon mot, a vociferous form of reactionary ressentiment increasingly dominates the discourse against free-trade and open-borders, and the world of cyberspace has energized a very dark matter world of neo-fascists. From this perspective, Brexit and Trump should come as no surprise, for as The Guardian's Nikal Saval summarizes, "millions have rejected, with uncertain results, the punishing logic that globalisation could not be stopped."[4] Or as the late Egyptian Marxist Samir Amin stated immediately after news of the U.S. Republican victory ricocheted around the globe,

The power of Donald Trump falls into this category of false criticism of liberal globalization. The "nationalist" tone aims to strengthen Washington's control of its subordinate allies, not to grant them an independence that they do not even claim.

What to make of this moment and its surreal, uncanny reality or un-presentness? For one thing we need to understand it in as much detail as possible, a project that this special issue of *FIELD* seeks to facilitate (more on this below). But we would also be ill-advised if we forgot Antonio Gramsci's legendary statement regarding optimism of the will, a phrase he famously penned while interned within a fascist prison cell just under a century ago as global repression gave voice to a sublime resistance that went on to inspire millions in search of social justice. Our moment of tribulation is no different. The good news is that a vibrant Left global resistance exists, frequently manifest within the cultural

sphere, and dialectically recalibrating itself in light of the rise of the populist Right and other reactionary forces.



In December of 2018 Vida Movahed stood on a telecommunications utility box on Revolution Street in Tehran without her headscarf (which she waved like a flag attached to the end of a stick), in protest against Iran's compulsory hijab laws. She was quickly arrested. However, other women began to repeat this act. In response the Iranian government tried to prevent further protests by welding a peaked structure on top of utility boxes. An anonymous individual then circulated plans for producing a DIY device that would circumvent the peaked structure, and allow protestors to safely stand on the boxes again. They titled their plan "The Geometry of Resistance".

In order to gauge that struggle this special edition of *FIELD* features more than thirty leading thinkers, artists and activists from around the globe who report on local and regional conditions of progressive cultural opposition at a time of extreme reactionary retrenchment. Some are passionate, others scholarly, a few have even written from a fervent first person perspective, but none lack

conviction or commitment to a concept of justice involving freedom of expression, economic equality, environmental justice, individual identity and mobility as well as the expansion of democratic processes. And while there are definitely some unfortunate
gaps in coverage, especially in Africa, what these global *FIELD* reports collectively provide is a core sample of the cultural and progressive political response to a rightward shifting geopolitical landscape.

Five interrelated themes or tendencies stand out in these reports. Perhaps most prominent is the fight against censorship and attempts by authoritarian states and politicians to repress the rights of immigrants, working people, LGBTQ, women and minorities, this is clear in reports from Bangladesh, Turkey, China, Serbia, Poland, Brazil, Colombia, Mexico, Indigenous Canada and Gaza especially. Secondly, we find an ongoing process of self-organization amongst politically-minded cultural workers, or what Marco Baravalle terms alter-institutionality in which micro-organizations continue to generate working models of "another art world," though with more caution regarding the Internet than the days of either Seattle or Occupy. This tendency is exemplified in reports from Italy, India, Russia, Sweden, Germany, France, Spain (Barcelona), Puerto Rico and again Gaza, which lean towards the alter-institutional tendency, though none of these divide up so neatly as the report from Palestine, which intersects both trends, shows.

Along with these two distinct threads our global core sample is punctuated with reports on local struggles against climate change, gentrification, precariousness, colonial legacies and the white male privilege assumed by the populist Right. There are also a handful of accounts that take up a trans-global viewpoint in order to

examine the ambiguous politics of social networks and Twitter activism of Black Lives Matter (Chloë Bass) or the precariousness of academia in Southern Europe (Carlos Garrido Castellano). But one other significant theme is revealed in this global overview; a growing awareness that the very conditions of art's social and political engagement in the world have become complicated and at times compromised, forcing more than one author to ask, as Kim Charnley does, why is it that "social practice is a category that has thrived under neoliberalism, even as the infrastructure of social protection and social solidarity has been dismantled." Like me Charnley concludes we can only access the world we live in by recognizing contradiction, even as we struggle to change it. Therefore,
we find a dual-critique running throughout many of the *FIELD* reports whereby both the global art market and the "creative" economy, but also certain forms of socially engaged art practice come under critical scrutiny.

Full text: http://field-journal.com/editorial/optimism-of-the-will-2018-field-reports-on-the-global-resistance-to-neoreactionary-nationalism

[1] Another World is Possible was a key plank of the first World Forum for social justice program in Porto Alegre, Brazil, 2001. Gene Ray's essay "Another (art) world is possible: Theorizing Oppositional Convergence," was initially presented as a paper on a Radical Art Caucus panel at the College Art Association in 2004, and later published by the journal Third Text, vol. 18, Issue 6, (2004), pp. 562-572. An online PDF is available at: https://www.yumpu.com/en/embed/view/AyhQvo6nUpOdcTZD. Accessed on-line December 11, 2018.

[2] Holmes is referring to Zapatista Encuentros or encounters in which members of the Zapatista Army of National Liberation (Ejército Zapatista de Liberación Nacional or EZLN) gathered to discuss their objectives before posting them online. See: Brian Holmes, "do-it-yourself geopolitics," in Collectivism After Modernism: The Art of Social Imagination after 1945, edited by Blake Stimson and Greg Sholette (University of Minnesota Press, 2006), pp. 273-292.

[3] Between November 30 and December 1st 1999 over 4000 loosely organized protesters confronted outnumbered Seattle police who responded with tear gas and riot control tactics. Demonstrators grabbed world news headlines and successfully brought the darker side of globalization to the public's attention. At the time the event appeared so significant that one Chinese observer commented, "I think this is as significant for the west as Tiananmen square was for us. It is unprecedented. Governments will have to respond." Larry Elliott and John Vidal, "Battle of the Seattle streets," The Guardian, November 30th, 1999. https://www.theguardian.com/world/1999/dec/01/wto.johnvidal3. Accessed on-line December 11, 2018.

[4] Technically Saval wrote this one year after Brexit and eight months after Donald Trump was elected U.S. President, though it remains accurate a year later. Nikal Saval, "Globalisation: the Rise and Fall of an Idea that Swept the World," The Guardian, (July 14, 2017): https://www.theguardian.com/world/2017/jul/14/globalisation-the-rise-and-fall-of-an-idea-that-swept-the-world. Accessed on-line December 11, 2018.