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The Wisdom to Make Worlds

Strategic Reality & the Art of the Undercommons

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Walking through Vienna one night last November, I asked Konrad Becker what he meant when he used the word strategy. What indeed, for cultural politics, media arts and interventions, is strategy? To ask the question so bluntly is to walk into "elephant in the room" territory, for while the question of what is to be done, how to do it, and its effectiveness (or lack of it) is a constant obsession for those involved in arts and media politics, there is also a general taboo of these discussions openly occurring. Strategy: to use the word itself perhaps carries with it too many connotations of a moribund Leninism, of an enforced separation between conceptualization and the body of social antagonism in motion.[1] To speak of strategy carries the risk of falling back into an older style of hierarchical politics, although it is debatable whether this guilt by association is sensible. Perhaps this removal of strategic questions from open discussion itself does more harm than good to movement building and the prevention of ossified hierarchies.

But I digress, for this is not Konrad's style or his conceptualization of the political. If it were, there would be no need to discuss or

rethink it, just to implement the pre-given strategic project. But if there is somewhere to turn for a fresh perspective on what strategy is, then surely it would be found by asking Konrad, who has pursued this question through numerous publications and projects: the *Tactical Reality Dictionary* (2002), the *Strategic Reality Dictionary* (2009), and an edited collection-conversation based on a symposium in New York, *Critical Strategies in Art and Media* (2010). Having spent the earlier section of the evening in discussion around the power and limitations of the radical imagination, it was now time to cut through to the kernel of the meta-question: what is to be done with what is to be done? Konrad paused, and then answered that by strategy he means something closer to wisdom.

This was unexpected, to say the least. Discussions of wisdom within artistic-political milieus are encountered even less then of strategy. What could it mean that strategy was a question of wisdom? The more I thought about this since that night, the more sensible it seems, but why? Perhaps wisdom as strategy is a way to re-approach matters of understanding and discernment, distinguishing appearances from underlying situations, and how these relate to the ongoing shaping of the political. And it is through this recasting of these simple but important questions that the ongoing project of Konrad's interventions and thinking has the potential for intervening in the broader questions of the relation between art and knowledge production: the wisdom to make worlds from within an art of the undercommons.

The Avant-Garde Which is not One

> "The history of the relations between political parties and aesthetic movements is first of all a history of a

> confusion [...] between these two ideas of the avant-garde, which are in fact two different ideas of political subjectivity [...] [T]he very idea of a political avant-garde is divided between the strategic conception and the aesthetic conception of the avant-garde."[2]

Gazing back on the history of the avant-garde, as angels on mounting wreckage, what we find is the refuse of ruptures and manifestos. From bravado-filled declarations on the detached and depotentialized status of the arts that call for a merging of art with everyday life, to equally irate denunciations of when this merging takes less than ideal forms (advertising techniques, culture-led gentrification, museum-based legitimation for dodgy petro producers, etc.) From the first Futurist manifestos, the avant-garde style of provocation has centered on brazen interventions into the politics conjoining art and knowledge production. To use Rancière's wording, the avant-garde manifesto takes the form of announcing a new distribution of the sensible, the task of which the practices of the announced movement will embody (even if this is assumed to already have occurred). And thus there is a history of practices, from social sculpture to the crafting of unitary ambiances, through which these declarations about the reshaping of art-knowledge-politics proliferated. There is such a strong connection developed between the avant-garde and these public declarations that it becomes difficult to conceive of it without them. What would that mean? An artistic movement dedicated to the reshaping of art, life, and politics that did not announce this to as many who would listen, but rather went about affecting its method of transformation on a minor scale?[3]

The problem is that by declaring openly intents and methods to reshape art, life, and the relations of production, the avant-garde has tended to give away too much, to let its hand be shown too

early. In other words, to leave it open to processes of decomposition and recuperation, where radical ideas are put to service within forms of social control and domination. If the tradition of autonomist politics and analysis shows us that it is working class insubordination and resistance to capital that is the driving factor shaping economic and social development, then an autonomist understanding of the history of the avant-garde would show us something else. What an autonomist conceptualization of these histories would uncover, rather than a disconnected series of movements and formal relations, is how the avant-garde opens up new possibilities for reshaping social relations that is then seized upon by mechanisms of control and capital accumulation. As Jacques Attali[4] argues, music, rather than being a superstructural reflection of underlying conditions, precedes and prophesizes these broader changes in social and economic relations. Thus the avant-garde is the canary in the mineshaft of history: its death signaling coming transformations, when submerged veins of creativity are brought to the surface.

It is this history that Konrad's work has persistently gestured towards and explored: the techniques of reality engineering, libidinal bonding, consensus construction, and infopolitical subterfuge. This is a history that is perhaps the psychogeographic equivalent of the Tyburn gallows, where drifts of history are marked by the bodies of dead ideas. And as Konrad observes, it was the moment before execution at Tyburn where the condemned was granted the freedom to speak whatever was on his mind, for what was there to lose?[5] But this would not be the question of strategy, for there is always something to lose. The moment of freedom that appears before the condemned is only possible because of the structure of unfreedom, a literal thanatocracy, which underpins it, whether in the form of the gallows or the integration

of mechanisms of death, desire, and manipulation within practices of statecraft.[6]

The Situationist International was quite fond of arguing that looking back on this appropriation of the avant-garde, its rendering into corpses and fodder for the spectacular mechanisms of domination, you could detect two different methods of execution: Dada tried to negate the status of art without realizing it, while Surrealism wanted to realize art without negating it. Therefore the task of the Situationists, in a supremely Hegelian manner, would be to create tactical means for the simultaneous realization and negation of art, expressed as the "communication of incommunicable" and crafting situations for the realization of the insurgent desires and ideas they alleged were already in everyone's heads. One might suspect that behind such paradoxical sounding and typically cavalier phrasing this is more of a triumphalist declaration (all the failures of previous avant-gardes will be solved by our intervention!) than anything else.

However, this pairing together of the necessity of everyone knowing and not knowing at the same time, of communication (of the incommunicable) as the key dynamic, runs through all the work of the SI. It brings together all the strands constituting their politics of communication, of the spectacle as condition one is immersed in and struggles through. And it is at this juncture that the framing of strategy as wisdom comes to make the most sense. For if it is true, as Debord comments on the gypsies, that they "rightly contend that one is never compelled to speak the truth except in one's language; in the enemy's language, the lie must reign,"[7] what is this other than a very direct question of strategy-as-wisdom? And in that sense it is also a fundamental question about the relation between art and knowledge production for subversive currents. When language and media politics become

sites of informational warfare, having the wisdom to know whether one should be expressing one's goals openly, in a language of lies, or an encoded and partially concealed manner... this becomes a central, if not the central question of strategy.

This is what thinking about strategy as a question of wisdom opens up, and this is precisely the line of thought that Konrad has pursued through his work. Take for instance the way he describes the process of rendering dead movements and subversion into material for renewed capital accumulation:

> "The process of cooptation, typical of art-market logic, exploits the visual alphabet and cultural codes of autonomous positions and infiltrates its agents into the parallel worlds of hidden cultural practice. Debates on strategies regarding this takeover and the mirroring of symbolic language of opposition movements have continued for generations, but concepts of authenticity do not seem to offer valid options of cultural self-defense."[8]

This reframes recuperation through a materialist politics of communication. It is recuperation through exploiting the visual codes of autonomous practices, and through that to work into the underground, submerged realm of communication and relations. Too much given away too openly. As Konrad argues, the accelerating co-optation of cultural expression creates both a market around it and "strategies dealing with this phenomenon of ever-faster appropriation of artistic expression by corporate business involve tactical invisibility and an immersion in the age of biocybernetic self-reproduction."[9] This is precisely why that returning to a notion of authenticity, of the collapse between the said and what is really meant, is not a valid strategy for working

through, in, or against this dynamic. What is needed instead is a discerning sense of the strategic, the wisdom of someone like Debord, of the gypsies, of infrapolitical communication and subterfuge: the tools to develop an art of the undercommons. What tools does a text like *Strategic Reality Dictionary* and Konrad's work more generally offer us for such a task?

The Place of Strategy, the Strategy of Place

> "The artist as a reality hacker is a cultural intelligence and counterintelligence operator for what should more appropriately be considered parallel or hidden cultures instead of the common terms 'underground' or 'marginal' [...] Pre-existing elements in society can be used to evoke a meaning that was not originally intended in these elements and by transformation bring about an entirely new message that reveals the underlying absurdity of the spectacle."[10]

To the degree that there has been any sustained strategic discussion within autonomous artistic-political milieus, it generally has taken a large degree of inspiration from the work of Michel de Certeau. De Certeau takes up a line of inquiry coming out of post-68 French political thinkers. His distinction between strategy and tactics in everyday life has become particularly influential, attaining an almost ubiquitous status. It is the sort of insight that informs and enriches research done within cultural studies and beyond: to take seriously these everyday interactions as sites of political contestation and tactical maneuvering.[11] Ironically enough it is de Certeau's distinction that makes it difficult to discuss strategy precisely because of how he identifies strategy with mechanisms of power and tactics with resistance. For de Certeau "a

tactic is determined by the *absence of power* just as a strategy is organized by the postulation of power."[12]

The problem is that in this framework social movement politics are precluded from the formation of strategies and spaces of their own precisely because this does not fit the model. Oppositional politics, in so far as they are tactical, could not be understood to create spaces of their own or to operate on a strategic level. There are no strategies of resistance, only domination. This overstates the operations of strategic fields of power and underestimates the ability of oppositional politics and tactics to congeal a level of strategic interaction precisely because they *do* create strategic spaces and orientations, even if not within the sense understood by de Certeau. This framing leads to an uncritical valorization of micropolitical subversion, but one that is without any means to articulate connections between antagonisms without that articulation being viewed as an act of domination. And that is why there is very little discussion of strategy. But this does not seem at all like an orientation to strategic questions founded upon wisdom. How does Konrad's work approach take us somewhere else?

To return to the autonomist tradition, if resistance comes first, and is a prior and determining factor of social development, then it operates precisely on a strategic field. In the 'Copernican turn' of understanding resistance as the prior and primary factor, the autonomist tradition recasts the strategy and tactics distinction. [13] The approach Konrad develops brings together different insights from these approaches while discarding some of their more questionable excesses. While on one hand it is ridiculous to work from a notion of strategy where resistance is only tactical, operating from a shifting no-place never of its own, from somewhere that cannot formulate a tactical theater of operations without coalescing into a transcendent-hierarchical form of strategy as domination,

the alternative of seeing all forms of social resistance as strategic likewise neglects the specificity of how these strategic operations are composed. To grasp these specificities what is needed is not reified conceptions of statecraft or assumptions of the inherently strategic nature of autonomous political-artistic activity. Konrad moves back toward a more classically oriented approach to strategy, but with a number of critical differences, perhaps akin to the way that Debord revisits the history of military strategy and thinking precisely in order to learn from it and apply it differently.

Strategy becomes not the planning of operations and tactical maneuvers based on rational, abstract calculation, elaborated from a disembodied transcendent perspective.[14] Rather it is contextual and process-based, formed around how particular strategic plans fit with and respond to their environment. Translated politically, this is a process of constantly adapting and transforming strategic planning and tactical operations in relation to changing compositions of forces, antagonisms, and subjectivities in motion at a given time, according to the shifting grounds of the situation. This adaption to and from the environment is traditionally a question of intelligence, of the military variety, an intelligence that is "necessarily incomplete and depends upon simplified descriptions of complexity."[15] Strategic models leave out some elements, as all models do, but the question is which elements and what effects their absence has. Or to reframe that, what are the benefits of basing an analysis from what is included? Take for instance the notion of psychogeography, which omits many aspects integral to most understandings of territory and strategic operations. What it does include, however, is closely attuned analysis of emotional and affective dynamics, which is precisely the terrain of cultural politics and infowar in cognitive capitalism. Psychogeography then, in one sense, is nothing more than adapting the methods and approaches

of military strategy and cartography to the changing situation of spectral commodity production and state power. It is the wisdom to formulate this re-adaption, or how strategy "applies situational intelligence with available tactics and their expected effects."[16]

Strategic frameworks and tactical maneuvers, connected through logistical webs, find themselves bound up in what Konrad aptly describes as an "infinite spiral of reciprocal anticipation."[17] Or to put in autonomist terms, capital and the state work to anticipate new forms of subversion so that their energies may be rendered into new mechanisms for capital accumulation and governance. Those who would sabotage that very process must likewise anticipate the coming process of decomposition and recuperation to divert and prevent it. This shielding and obfuscating of deductive decision-making, the layering and encoding of strategic operations and appearances, is the development of an art of the undercommons. It is an art that does not give away all the subversive knowledge it holds through public declaration, or declare a new regime of the sensible, as in the history of avant-garde declarations. Thus, when Brian Holmes says that when someone is talking about politics in an artistic frame they're lying, [18] that is in some sense not a critique, but also an admission to the potential of an artistic politics formed around those dynamics of deception.

Under the Commons

> "The first act of self-organization in the undercommons is a refusal of subjectivation through, and only through, self-organization. This disidentification through self-organization is also, for us, not a prerequisite to what Toni Negri calls the common management (*gestione*) of

> the commons, but the potential of that organization."[19]

It is this strategic necessity to obfuscate and encode the intentions, knowledges, and understanding of subversive activity that approaching strategy as a wisdom gestures towards. It is a necessity in particular for artistic-political-media interventions, which as we have learned all too well and paradoxically not well enough, are prime arenas for the decomposition and recuperation of subversive energies. This would be not an art of the public, of an assumed or pre-given audience, but an art of the undercommons: a strategic reframing of artistic-political interventions around taking very seriously the question of with whom and why one is communicating. One might think of it as a relational aesthetics that rather being confined to the gallery space operates through an infrapolitical and everyday realm, forming immanent points of strategic convergence through the shaping of relations in that space. Or better yet, it is the formation of the space itself.

The notion of the undercommons comes out of the writing of Fred Moten and Stefano Harney, who take up the theorizing of figures such as Robin DG Kelley and James Scott on the layers of encoding, deception and evasion embedded within forms of resistance employed by peasants, escaped slaves, and other populations who cannot afford the risks associated with saying openly their intents or ideas.[20] While this is indeed quite a different position then from where many political artists and media producers work (although not all), there is still something to be learned from this approach. If the problem of autonomous cultural and artistic production is that it gives away too much, inadvertently opening itself up to the process of recuperation-decomposition, then perhaps a strategic orientation to address this dynamic would learn from the encoding and obfuscating dynamics of infrapolitical

intervention and the shaping of the undercommons. And while the undercommons are from capital's perspective the unacknowledged self-organization of the despised, discounted, and anti-social, from an autonomous perspective they are something else entirely: the self-organization of the incommensurate. They embody a process of self-organized dis-identification where the knowledge of subversion is kept within the parallel-submerged terrain, rather than becoming part of enforced state hallucinatory patterns.

Konrad's approach to strategy works through, in, and against this direction, offering a few dead saints of his own crisscrossing the paths of the present European wasteland. This analysis itself is dispersed across the unfolding stream of his prose, but clearly marked at moments, for instance when he quotes the Prussian soldier and military strategist Dietrich Heinrich von Bülow when he says "a strategy is the science of military movements outside of the enemy's field of vision; tactics is within it." Indeed, and this makes the question of strategy reappear, literally, not as one where tactics are component parts of the formation of overarching strategy (which they in some ways are), or component parts inherently linked to dynamics of domination or resistance (whichever direction is the dominant characteristic), but a distinction rather based on fields of visibility and apprehension. A strategic approach defined through a logic of (in)visibility, of becoming imperceptible, is the condition of wisdom when, as Konrad argues, power, bound by its very visibility, provides tactical advantages to the conditions of the capacity to remain unseen. It is, as Roger Farr has explored through its manifestations in anarchist poetics, a strategy of concealment.[21]

Strategy then is not necessarily directly concerned with the use of force, but rather an understanding of the force dynamics in motion, the movement of becoming and unbecoming at play, and

the application of these dynamics in the immanent composition of political possibility. What Konrad's work shows is that the strategic operation of the infrapolitical is also at work in the heart of the state and within the logic of governance, in the continued attempts to shore up the infopolitical and media spectacular mechanisms holding together continued forms of domination. But these strategic forms of statecraft are themselves ephemeral and precarious, and in need of constant maintenance and shoring up through cultural engineering. Statecraft and governance constantly need to recreate their own space (and perhaps in this sense de Certeau is correct about the relation between strategy and space). And thus governance is in constant need of a new fix for this problem, whether through learning from Giordano Bruno's techniques of libidinal bonding and information modulation, from antagonistic social movements and energies, or through the conjuring up around new conspiracy panics against those who abide within the undercommons.[22]

The Critical Art Ensemble, in their post-script to *Strategic Reality Dictionary*, point to this contradiction: the class of reality engineers are caught between the powers of the measurable and physical and the techniques of modulating imagination, desire, and creativity that need to be continuously controlled for apparatuses of governance to continue functioning. Today in cognitive capitalism, the disease for which it pretends to be the cure (surely the most apt characterization ever given), these mechanisms urgently desire us to give away all that we know, whether through having 'fun at work,' through participatory work teams, in cultural quarters, through the former radicals who have become 'reasonable' and given up the ghost of their former subversion, through the rendering of antagonism into imaginal capital. An art of the undercommons reorients strategies of media and cultural

intervention around the wisdom to not give too much away or to open up these knowledges to harvest. The art of the undercommons is the wisdom to make worlds while obfuscating subversive knowledges from recuperation. For subversive movements to retain their potential, we can only hope that they do not fall into rituals of resistance and un-thought through gestures which "transform ambiguous streams of social continua into discrete and processable categories."[23] We can only hope to develop the wisdom to know the difference.

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[1] For more on this see Dave Eden (2005) "Treasonous Minds: Capital & Universities, the Ideology of the Intellectual and the Desire for Mutiny," *ephemera* Volume 5 Number 4: 580-594.

[2] Rancière, Jacques (2004) *The Politics of Aesthetics: The Distribution of the Sensible*. London: Continuum: 30.

[3] Perhaps the most well developed notion of an avant-garde not based on this desire for publicness is Hakim Bey's conception of immediatism. For more on that see Bey, Hakim (1994) *Immediatism*. San Francisco: AK Press.

[4] Attali, Jacques (1985) *Noise: The Political Economy of Music*. Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press.

[5] Becker, Konrad (2009) *Strategic Reality Dictionary: Deep Infopolitics and Cultural Intelligence*. Brooklyn: Autonomedia: 34.

[6] For more on this see Peter Linebaugh (1992) *The London Hanged: Crime & Civil Society in the Eighteenth Century.*

[7] Debord, Guy (1991) *Panegyric*. New York: Verso: 10. See also Alice Becker-Ho's important study of gypsy argot and slang, which further develops these themes (2004) *The Princes of Jargon*. New York: Edwin Mellen.

[8] Becker (2009), 64.

[9] Becker, Konrad (2002) *Tactical Reality Dictionary: Cultural Intelligence and Social Control*. Vienna: Edition Selene, 115.

[10] Ibid., 36.

[11] For more on this history see Jeremy Gilbert (2008) *Anticapitalism and Culture: Radical Theory and Popular Politics*. New York: Berg.

[12] de Certeau, Michel (1984) *The Practice of Everyday Life*. Berkeley: University of California Press, 38.

[13] This reformulation is made within an essay by Mario Tronti, "The Strategy of Refusal," (1980) first published in 1964. Tronti's approach is to understand wildcat strikes, refusal to work, and abandonment of recognized unions and political parties not as something that is distinct from questions of strategy and space formation, but precisely the basis of a different conception of strategy itself. For Tronti the history of class struggle is not the reactions of workers to changing forms of domination, but these diffuse forms of resistance and escape from domination that precipitate crises capital must respond to in maintaining its domination.

[14] For an interesting exploration of some of the tensions and problems in the dichotomy between immanence and transcendence in relation to the political see Mandarini, Matteo (2010) "Critical

Thoughts on the Politics of Immanence," *Historical Materialism* Volume 18 Number 4.

[15] Becker (2009), 88.

[16] Ibid., 134.

[17] Ibid., 134.

[18] Brian Holmes (2007) *Unleashing the Collective Phantoms: Essays in Reverse Imagineering*. Brooklyn: Autonomedia, 81.

[19] Stefano Harney & Fred Moten (2008) "Governance and the Undercommons." Available at http://info.interactivist.net/node/10926. April 7th, 2008. For more on the undercommons, see Stefano Harney and Fred Moten (2004) "The University and the Undercommons: Seven Theses," *Social Text* 22; and Stevphen Shukaitis (2009) "Infrapolitics and the Nomadic Educational Machine," *Contemporary Anarchist Studies: An Introduction to Anarchy in the Academy*. Ed. Randall Amster et al. New York: Routledge, 166-174.

[20] See in particular Robin D.G. Kelley (2002) *Freedom Dreams: The Black Radical Imagination*. Boston: Beacon Press; and James C. Scott (1990) *Domination and the Arts of Resistance: Hidden Transcripts*. New Haven: Yale University Press.

[21] Roger Farr (2007) "The Strategy of Concealment: Towards an Anarchist Critique of Communication," *Fifth Estate* 374. Also available at http://anarchistnews.org/?q=node/3942.

[22] For more on conspiracy panics as technologies of governance, see Jack Z. Bratich (2008) *Conspiracy Panics: Political Rationality and Popular Culture*. Binghamton: SUNY Press.

[23] Becker (2009), 49.