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Fidelity, Betrayal, Autonomy

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Certainty, fidelity
On the stroke of midnight pass
Like vibrations of a bell
W. H. Auden (*Lullaby*, 1937)

Cut the power and storm the museum. Barricade its entrance with Richard Serra's sculpture. Cover its windows with Gerhard Richter paintings. Transform the sculpture garden into an organic produce cooperative; refurbish the boardroom to serve as a day care facility; place the cafeteria under the supervision of homeless people. Yet, in spite of this hypothetical uprising it is apparent that institutional power persists. Like gravity issuing from a collapsed star it draws us into the very orbit of what we once sought to escape because despite our protestations we continue to love it - or at least the unselfish image it projects--more than it could ever love itself. For no matter how imperfectly actually existing museums fulfill their social obligations, the symbolic position of the museum remains inseparable from notions of public space, democratic culture, and citizenship itself. That is the scandal my essay seeks to comprehend. Nevertheless, exploring what a liberated, post-revolutionary museum might look like, how it would function, and what its revitalized role within the local community might actually

be is an approach often taken up today by younger, socially committed artists who have grown apprehensive of the virtually conventional form of institutional critique. This is encouraging. Yet when coupled with an absolute rejection of institutional power it can devolve into a fantasy in which a simple us versus them mentality replaces the critical opportunities opened by the allure of the *other*.

Today, the socially committed artist, writer, curator, or administrator must face one very unpalatable fact - how and why large, basically conservative institutions, including museums and universities, eventually charm even their most defiant critics and radical apostates. If the end of the Cold War (and of modernism) has brought a new level of cultural inclusiveness to these cultural institutions, what can we say has become of the once defiant notion of a counterculture? Perhaps it is heretical to propose this, yet if we agree that institutional power is no phantom let me suggest that by equal measure the *institutional function* --to rework a term borrowed from Foucault is seldom precisely directed nor primarily even repressive towards its *other*. In this sense are not museums, universities, corporations, and perhaps even the armed forces not rife with administrative malfunctions, redundancies, and even occasionally destabilizing internal conflicts? And is not their intermittent effectiveness in the field of battle, either cultural or military, often more the result of a magnitude of scale than of organizational efficiency? Naturally, when faced with conflict, administrators, managers and curators will, in the last instance, always side with the institutional function. But at any point prior to that critical juncture, there arise intrigues, affairs, and infidelities of great potential to political activists, interventionists and cultural radicals.

Today, even the most formal art claims social relevancy. It has become almost *de rigueur* to make explicit reference to issues of politics, cultural diversity, gender, and sexual identity (although, I must add, seldom to class or economic inequality). Indeed, such routines can be lamentable for political as well as artistic reasons. Yet, from the perspective of a politically engaged activist artist or organizer this kind of intra-institutional, liberal ambition can indeed be useful, if frustrating. Useful, because a certain amount of actual political work can be "leveraged" through it and frustrating because curators, artists, museum administrators, and academics carelessly confuse the kind of symbolic transgression that takes place inside the museum with a direct, political activism that occurs at the judicial, penal, even global levels of society.

The reflex to make art socially relevant appears to have accelerated following the demise of the Soviet Union and the end of the Cold War. Perhaps this is because in the US at least, artists no longer needed to display to the world an uncompromising fidelity to individuality such as that exemplified by abstract expressionism in the 1950s. At the same time, however, new grounds for justifying culture were needed after the "fall of the wall." One mode that fit the bill turned out to be community-based art practices. Thus, in the past fifteen years or so, we find the National Endowment of the Arts (NEA) increasingly supporting art as an educational and even therapeutic profession. By contrast, in the late 1970s and early 1980s, art involved directly in concrete, social issues was dismissed as utilitarian and not sufficiently abstract to be taken seriously. As difficult as it is to imagine today, in 1975 resistance to any sullying of high cultural standards through politics actually toppled the short-lived editorial team of John Coplans and Max Kozloff at *Artforum*. Coplans and Kozloff brought to the influential trade magazine a raft of radical art historians and essayists, including

Carol Duncan, Allen Sekula, Lawrence Alloway, Alan Wallach, Eva Cockcroft, and Patricia Hills. These writers dared to suggest that art was not an autonomous expression of transcendental truth, but an integral part of the social world. Hilton Kramer, then the principal art critic for the *New York Times* as well as an ardent cold warrior, openly called for art dealers to boycott the magazine. In what might be considered a virtual *coup d' état,* both Coplans and Kozloff were soon dislodged from their positions.[1]

By the late 1970s, politically engaged artists were becoming increasingly sophisticated in mixing the symbolic realm of art making with the practical needs of political activism. Unlike an earlier generation, exemplified by Donald Judd or Carl Andre, who both strongly opposed the Vietnam War and supported the Civil Rights Movement and yet remained devout minimalists, many post-formalist artists collaborated with one another as well as with environmentalists, anti-nuclear and housing activists, and community workers, producing a heterogeneous range of artistic forms and styles that directly addressed social causes. An incomplete list of organizations that operated in the New York area between 1979 and 1982 include PAD/D or Political Art Documentation and Distribution and Group Material; anti-nuclear organizations such as Artists for Survival and Artists for Nuclear Disarmament; the community-based Asian American group Basement Workshop; media activists including Deep Dish and Paper Tiger Television; and the feminist art collectives No More Nice Girls, Heresies, and Carnival Knowledge. And this list could be re-sorted by highlighting specific projects including *The Women's Pentagon Action* and *The Anti-WW III Show; The Real Estate Show,* an anti-gentrification exhibition, organized by a splinter group from Colab, that was staged in a squat space on the Lower East Side; *Bazaar Conceptions,* a pro-choice "street fair"

organized by Carnival Knowledge; and an art auction to help fund a women's centre in Zimbabwe organized by the ultra-left Madame Binh Graphics Collective, some of whose members later served time at Rikers Island in connection with the infamous Brinks robbery in upstate New York.[2]

Therefore, when one speaks about political activism taking place *inside* the museum, as a prominent Chicago curator of contemporary art pronounced several years ago, it's important to contrast the sort of critical and material engagement I've described above with attempts to "subvert the institutional frame" or to "transgress" conventions of representation or modes of display.

To briefly summarize then, from the perspective of a politically engaged art practice, whatever the motive is for the post-Cold War art world's alliance with social content, it must be read as a potential site for rendezvous. To think otherwise, to remain opposed to all institutional intercourse, is to assume the most ideologically accommodating position possible. It leaves the institution in the hands of those administrators and intellectuals who dismiss the impulse for economic and political justice as impractical, turning instead to a melancholy exploration of personal meaning or an unreflective indulgence in popular culture.

Therefore the current fashion for Political Correctness (to use a term I despise but one that makes perfect sense in this context) is useful if for no other reason than that it provides *leverage* for a certain measure of engaged, political work.[3]

Perhaps the clearest way to frame this dilemma then is in the form of a question. How can artists learn to siphon off a portion of institutional power while maintaining a safe distance and margin of autonomy from the institution? At the same time, we need to ask what ethical questions this raises - not only for artists but also for sympathetic curators and arts administrators working on the

"inside." In other words, what is the nature of the contradiction such potentially dangerous liaisons can produce?

Speaking from my own experience, those artists working out of abandoned warehouses and in basement workshops, cooperative centres, and urban squats believe that large institutional structures operate with a militarylike precision to strategically defuse grassroots and resistant practices. In response, any viable counter-practice is compelled to constantly re-establish itself at an ever-greater perimeter from the institution's expanding hegemonic zone. Yet even within this outermost post, at a safe distance from the discourse and economy of the museum, there is a form of unspoken fidelity to the museum's institutional marrow. There is a vague recognition as well that the passion that drives and sustains opposition is motivated just as much by an affinity for the failed ideals of such institutions as by any overt hostility to institutional power. For even the most fleeting and decentralized collective, art group, or political collaboration requires some form of operating structure, some kind of institutional arrangement, and an organizational mission regardless if it is stated or is ad hoc and informal. To think otherwise is to naturalize and mystify what is a specific type of contractual relationship among individuals with common concerns (among them is often the actual or perceived threat of being crushed by institutional hegemony)! And certainly, at some level, both the museum and its *other* - those resistant, residual, and informal cultural organizations recognize that the centralized institution *proper* does not exist. Instead, it is constructed within a field of ideas as well as economic variables that are jointly, if unequally, shared by the centre and the margins. This means that activists must develop the cunning to see the museum, as well as the university or corporation, as virtually predicated upon the collective productivity of those whom it

regulates. In the case of the museum, this naturally includes artists, but also the museum staff and the public that patronizes it. To paraphrase the philosopher Gilles Deleuze, the institution is an apparatus of capture. But what does it seize? The answer is the enthusiasm of artists that, at least for a brief moment, it manages to entrap. (*Yet, one must also ask, what dangerous, even treasonous ideas now spread within the institution as a result of this abduction that is also an infection?)*

Finally, in order to describe oneself as both artist and political being, or what Pier Paolo Pasolini termed a "citizen-poet," one must remain ill at ease with the neo-liberalism of post-cold war institutions, especially those that seem all too willing to embrace a prudent form of political dissent, including the unstated demand that curators be culturally inclusive and socially progressive. Despite this uncertainty, and regardless of one's divided loyalties, we might now seriously consider re-approaching the idea of critical autonomy that groups such as PAD/D attempted to establish more than twenty years ago. I'm not referring here to the modernist notion of autonomy in which the art object is celebrated as something solely in and for itself, transcending everyday life. Rather, I want to propose re-introducing the concept of a self-validating mode of cultural production and distribution that is situated at least partially outside the confines of the contemporary art matrix as well as global markets. In other words, a self-conscious autonomous activism in which artists produce and distribute an independent political culture that uses institutional structures as resources rather than points of termination. As the theoreticians Michael Hardt and Antonio Negri argue, capitalism may be evolving into a circulating phantom in the global arena but

... around it move radically autonomous processes of self-valorization that not only constitute an alternative basis of potential

development but also actually represent a new constituent foundation.[4]

Naturally, such critical autonomy could not exist in close proximity to voracious institutions like art museums, *kunsthalles,* or international biennials for very long. That lesson was learned from the 1980s all too well, when a select group of artists were chosen to represent "political art" within the mainstream culture industry.[5] No, what is required is a program of theft and long-term sedition aimed at rupturing and re-appropriating institutional power for specifically political purposes. Once more, the work of autonomous collaborations, including PAD/D, as well groups such as REPOhistory, RTMark, Sans Papiers, Temporary Services, UltraRed, or Ne Pas Plier, Colectivo Cambalache to mention a few now active in the United States and Europe, can serve as provisional models.
But what of us? Us faithless intellectuals, artists, curators, and administrators - myself included? We need to *actively* forget the convoluted nature of our predicament. We need to break with the guarded routines of fidelity and betrayal that circulate both inside and outside the museum and move toward recognition of the radical potential already present in collective action. As Pasolini mused

Corporeal collective presence:
you feel the lack of any true
religion: not life but survival[6]

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[1] A decade later, Lucy R. Lippard was herself ousted from her post at the *Village Voice,* ostensibly because her political enthusiasm prevented her from writing "objective" art criticism.

[2] My list is compiled from the first and second issues of *1st Issue,* the newsletter of Political Art Documentation and Distribution, both 1981.

[3] An example of leveraging is the series of exhibitions entitled *Mumia 911* that took place across the United States in the Fall of 1999 not only called attention to, but provided material support for confronting police brutality and institutionalised racism. *Mumia 911* was made up of dozens of exhibitions, installations, and concerts and help garner signatures and public support for an impartial retrial of the outspoken African-American activist Mumia Abu Jamal who has been on Pennsylvania's death row the last 17 years accused of murdering a Philadelphia police officer. International human rights groups have condemned his conviction as legally flawed even politically motivated by a vindictive police department known for its widespread racism and corruption. Along with building support for a new trial the coalition focused public attention on the disproportionate number of non-white people incarcerated and on death row across the United States.

[4] Michael Hardt and Antonio Negri, *Labor of Dionysus: A Critique of State Form* (University of Minneapolis Press: 1994), 281.

[5] for more on this history see my essay: "News from Nowhere: Activist Art & After: Report from New York" , Third Text, (Winter #45, 1998-99.) P 45-62. and at: http://slash.interactivist.net/analysis/03/04/01/1532234.shtml
And For more on the structural nature of collectivity, see my essay "Counting on Your Collective Silence: Notes on Activist Art as Collaborative Practice," *Afterimage* 27, no.3 (November/December 1999): 18–20 also at: http://www.artic.edu/~gshole/pages/WritingSamples/CollectiveSilence.htm

[6] "The Ashes of Gramsci," in Pier Paolo Pasolini, *Poems,* trans. Norman MacAfee with Luciano Martinengo (New York: Noonday Press, 1982). 19.