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CLOWNS BELONG TO THE CIRCUS?  
A REVIEW OF TWO BOOKS ON ART AND ACTIVISM

Review of: Begüm Özden Firat and Aylin Kuryel (Eds.) (2011) *Cultural Activism. Practices, Dilemmas, and Possibilities*. Series: *Thamyris/Intersecting: Place, Sex, Race*, Amsterdam/New York: Rodopi, 261 pp.

Lieven de Cauter, Ruben de Roo, Karel Vanhaesbrouck (Eds.) (2011) *Art and Activism in the Age of Globalisation*. Series: *Reflect*. Rotterdam: NAI Publishers, 334 pp.

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An incidental invitation to write reviews of two large collections of essays on art and activism turned out to be one of the hardest tasks I have undertaken recently. If it was hard to read them, it is even harder to write about them. Why? Was the problem the fact of having to struggle with almost six hundred pages of different voices that sometimes felt like nothing new was being said, most of the time just repeating the same sources, examples and symptoms over and over again? Was the problem in the reviewer's inability to judge other people's illusions after being disillusioned herself? Or perhaps the problem lay in the dilemma of what I was supposed to judge – the quality of the essays and theoretical positions, or the efficiency of the struggle and activism described? The rich experience of being part of some prior political struggles myself left me feeling not too optimistic

about the success of proposed solutions, but I did find the optimism in another place however. As long as we are able to write, sell and read books about art and activism, we inhabit a luxurious place of reflective passivity, we still have a choice of criticizing instead of fighting, and things (for us) are not yet as bad as they could be.

## Case 1: Cultural Activism

The first book I had the pleasure to read was a collection of texts entitled 'Cultural Activism. Practices, Dilemmas, and Possibilities.' which aims, we could say, to bring activism and its problems under the scope of academic discourse, as the choice of contributors clearly shows. The position of the authors is diverse, ranging from (young) academics to long-term activists who, as becomes clear in the end, share the same sources and inspirations. Although not clearly stated, we are able to find the definition of cultural activism through the description of the focus of the book given by Begüm Özden Firat and Aylin Kuryel in the introduction: 'This volume (...) focuses on such contemporary activist practices directed toward disturbing and reorienting the cultural and political sphere by attacking the narratives of truth in society by way of diverse tactics' (10). However, we have to note that this explanation also incorporates a split between the cultural and the political, as well as a distinction between cultural and non-cultural activism. This way, the book about activism seems to take a clear critical stance of questioning the activism itself, but nevertheless still wants us to believe in the efficiency of something the authors themselves seem to undermine. On the other hand, although wanting from us as readers to unify in the reflection and fight against one common enemy – capitalism (13) – this split only reinforces the divisions already existing between described groups and forms of struggle. It feels as if we are suddenly placed in an elitist, cultural-activist position in comparison to a common activist who does not have the same theoretical toolkit to understand her or his position. Further on, we discover that 'this form of activism' insists on 'creative interventions based on the notions of humor, playfulness, and confusion' (10). By introducing the notion of communication guerrillas, whose aim is 'to detourn and subvert' the messages transported (11), the

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editors also offer us a critique of radicalism, showing a preference for the creative carnivalesque styles of struggle, as compared to the radicalism of ‘stone meets shop window’ (11) which, we must note, seems to be a slightly limited understanding of radical fight.

One of the most quoted examples in the texts presented here is certainly that of the Situationists International, whose suggested forms of struggle are copy-pasted by numerous cultural activists of the past few decades. What both the activists and the authors seem to miss is the radicalism of Situationists themselves, as well as an attempt to define and understand it. SI were clear about defining the enemy, while the practices analyzed here seem to fail to. Radicalism understands the world as ‘us’ against ‘them’, and the aim is to destroy the enemy, no matter how we call the strategies, tactics, or weapons used. The proposed means to fight will remain as only forms and empty shells if there is no true understanding of the context, the enemy, and the aim of the fight. By subversion and diversion, a much weaker entity can use the power of the enemy against itself; as in the old-school partisan diversions, the communication and energy supply channels that feed the system of the enemy are being disrupted and reconnected in such a way as to produce the destruction of the initial system. The mouse can still trap the cat. What all these new practices of cheerful protests seem to forget is that in the moment of the battle, there is no multiplicity of ‘us’. As long as this is not so, it might be interpreted as signalling that there is no real fight taking place (yet) and that the stakes involved are not high enough. In the moment of battle, there is no distinction between personal and political, artistic or human, cultural or non-cultural. Radicalism means stubbornness and fight to the end, and not a reduction to the simple ‘throwing the stone into the shop window’.

Nevertheless, the editors seem to be aware of the shortcomings of these practices as ‘they tend to become repetitive and lose their political efficacy when they do not create tactical confrontation’ (13), but surprisingly they still give us the example of the Lufthansa case as something that proves the efficiency of the struggle:

‘The aviation campaign by the German Kein Mensch ist illegal (No One Is Illegal) network against the complicity of Lufthansa Airlines in helping the German state deport refugees is a sophisticated example of such interaction. As an image-polluting operation, the campaign started by promoting Lufthansa’s new campaign, “deportation class,” offering new lower-priced fares for the reduced level of comfort passengers might experience sitting next to people in handcuffs with tape over their mouths. (...) Through the collaboration of political activists, theoreticians, media activists, fine artists, musicians, and designers, the campaign employed an amalgamation of street theater, tactical media, subvertisement, and electronic disturbance, and finally managed to force Lufthansa to give up deportation.’ (12)

As stated in the introduction, ‘the Lufthansa actions demonstrate the efficiency of direct actions that prank and subvert the system through cultural means’ (13), taking this corrective behavior on behalf of Lufthansa as a main aim, while remaining blind to the real political problem of Germany continuing to deport refugees now ‘using mostly charter airline companies’ (12). As long as this is taken as an example of success, there seems to be nothing for capitalism and its rulers to be afraid of.

After the detailed introduction, which presents the main positions and short summaries of the texts included, we are confronted with nine essays that combine different generations and experiences, but which all share the same sources, as noticed by the editors. Revolving around several critical thinkers (Guy Debord, Henri Lefebvre, Bertolt Brecht, Gilles Deleuze, Félix Guattari, Frederick Nietzsche, Mikhail Bakhtin, Michel de Certeau, and Jacques Rancière), it seems hard to achieve the dialogue and confrontation the editors had hoped for. Instead, we encounter a more internal discussion of different groups and thinkers that, in the end, seem to think similarly. With authors of differing experience in academic writing, the texts have, as a consequence, a various quality as well, with the theoretical ones perhaps overly theoretical, and the activists’ ones with demonstrating too little reflection. Nevertheless, there are two exceptions that seem to show a good balance of theory and praxis, giving us also a reflection which has the potential to be productive in the future.

A. K. Thompson, in his essay entitled ‘The Resonance of Romanticism: Activist Art and the Bourgeois Horizon,’ takes a strong position on some of the recent anti-globalization movements through the analysis of the artworks by Erok Drooker and Banksy, two artists who have become essential in the visual representation and imaginary vision of these movements. Taking their works as symptoms, the author searches for the answer to why is ‘the movement against corporate globalization oriented toward works that seemed to draw upon and helped to reiterate major themes from the nineteenth-century romantic tradition’ (36)? For him, this seems to be the kernel of their demise, and the transformation of resistance into ‘the image of resistance’:

‘Though it may yield cathartic respite, the image of resistance cannot escape the expansionist logic of the commodity form, the logic that transposes everything into the register of a universal abstraction so that it might be exchanged with every other thing. (...) The distance between being enchanted by Banksy and changing the world could not be greater. It is the distance between the rebel and the revolutionary, between negation and “the negation of the negation,” between romanticism and a world where the bourgeoisie have become impossible.’ (57)

On the other hand, in his essay ‘A Proposal for Grounded Cultural Activism: Communication Strategies, Adbusters and Social Change’, Emrah Irzik draws attention to the necessity of being aware of the context in which one wishes to bring change. By criticizing contemporary cultural activism, such as adbusting and cultural jamming, he pinpoints the fact that it has been ‘largely parasitic on the means of the system it opposes’ which ‘locks it into a permanently defensive position’ (149). Rather than motivating people into engaged political subjects, these activities run the risk of turning them into the cynical ones. Instead, ‘cultural activism should concentrate on moments of political antagonism where actual differences in outcome are at stake because, after all, activism should not be for the sake of activism itself’ (154).

The majority of the other essays share the same interests between either analysis or promotion of the carnival as an efficient form of cultural activism in confronting the existing power relations. They all stress the subver-

sive interpretation of this form, failing however to see it in a larger context, that of society. In this context, a carnival has a normalizing function, being a temporary inversion of roles and positions, releasing the tensions and frustrations inherent in those strong hierarchical structures. Carnival is thus nothing more than a necessary transgression after which things go back to ‘normal’ the next morning. From his perspective, every wise ruler should therefore have his own jester, his own clown. With him on his side, every criticism is immediately incorporated into the system and cannot destabilize it.

In the Appendix entitled ‘Inventory of Practices’ we find short descriptions of more than a dozen of currently active artists and activists groups, some of them extending, or even going beyond, the label of cultural activism. In this inventory, most of the divisions have become obsolete and unnecessary, making it clear that all those groups indeed fight the same enemy. After reading it, one might even regret the failed opportunity to turn the Appendix into the main scope of this edition. In this way, the dissemination of the information regarding the current practices in the form of encyclopedic entries might have served both the academia and the activists better.

## Case 2: Art and Activism in the Age of Globalization

The second book I had the pleasure to read has a clearly more ambitious aim, confronting us with more than thirty essays, more than thirty voices of individuals coming from different generations in different disciplines who are supposed to help us reflect on the situation in this field today. In ten sub-chapters, we read about the historical and more recent examples of activism in theater, cinema, and the visual arts. Here, we become aware of the shadows of previous generations and the failure of their ‘revolutions’: indeed, the current generation seems to have to deal with the past as much as with the present. What becomes immediately clear is that in the last few decades the arts have been turned into a system, a Western political and economic enterprise, which serves and reflects the dominant traits of the global consumerist society, its values and ethical principles.

What strikes me the most is that all contributions offer a quite pessimistic picture of today's world, especially in the arts. Neoliberalism has managed to smash everything, step by step, from education, health, housing, to what we call culture. Proclaiming the activism dead, Karel Vanhaesebrouck blames political correctness and consumerism for their part in this, calling for a new definition of the place and role of art. In his contribution, Richard Schechner addresses the situation in the avant-garde theater, seeing it as 'circulating stasis' (33) and 'a period of high excellence and low innovation' (34). In other words, the conservatism and recycling are hidden behind the rhetorics of the new. He reminds us of the fact that, on one side, former 1960s people 'bought into what became corporate America and then globalization' (37) and, on the other, that 'action shifted from the streets to theory' after 1968 (37). We might add that, following this, now might be the right moment for these same people to leave the academic shelter and join the streets again, at least in defending the threatened academic shelter itself.

The hypocrisy of the art world is addressed in an honest testimony by Thomas Bellinck who reacted to being nominated to participate in the leading Flemish theater festival with the improvised platform he created to support the hunger strike of illegal immigrants, and which was never meant to be a 'theater piece'. These same theater officials kept a perverse distance when the immigrants needed real help and support, a distance that was now supposed to be erased by the recognition of this 'artistic act'. A similar perversion in the visual arts is addressed by Dieter Lesage in his comment on Documenta 11, considered to be one of the most critical and political editions of this art manifestation. Its main idea was to destabilize the Western discourse by organizing different editions at the 'periphery' of the art world around the globe. Instead, what happened was 'a workshop on creolization at a luxurious beach resort' (67) where 'behind the post-colonial paradigm we discover a transatlantic pleasure trip – arts business as usual' (68). The visual arts have a prominent place in our 'super-market' society, according to Pierre-Olivier Rollin, being a 'super-market of signs' and 'reinforcing the established (economic) order' (78). On the level of labor politics, the art scene has become an ultimate control machine and has introduced a total biopolitical power, according to Pascal Gielen, becoming a place where now 'Freiheit macht Arbeit' - Freedom

makes work (88). If flexibility, underpayment, and enthusiasm has indeed been tested and developed first among the art creative force in the 1990s and 2000s, the patent is now ready to be spread all over society. For Dieter Roelstraete, we can only confirm the new brand of capitalism that transforms 'everything we do into work' (96), with great assistance from the art-entertainment industry.

One of the most controversial recent events in the Dutch art scene was surely Renzo Martens' documentary 'Enjoy Poverty' (2008) and it too has been given a prominent place in this collection through the contribution by Ruben De Roo. Unfortunately, a deeper analysis of the problematic aspects of this account and the work itself requires much more space than I am allowed, so I will hence restrain myself from analyzing its true impact. According to De Roo, 'with this film Martens demonstrates his faith in the potential power of art' (142). Although this statement might be true, we should nevertheless be careful in considering it a positive example as there is little evidence that this pornography of African poverty has made an average Dutch citizen any more sensitive to the perpetual crimes taking place outside of their country or to their implicit role in it. Being one of the most visited exhibitions in Amsterdam that year, there was no visible change either in the public discourse, or in the functioning of the governmental and non-governmental organizations criticized by this work. One thing is certain - the audience had enjoyed 'their' poverty thanks to Martens. The second example of a problematic account of the situation outside the usual Western domain is that of a failed contemporary art project in Syria, as presented by Jan Ackenhausen. It failed due to the fact that there is almost no 'contemporary art scene', as well as because of artists' fear to participate in the events he organized. Ackenhausen accuses the artists who 'generally seem to lack any objection to society, conventions and establishment' (197), himself failing to understand that the practice of art he promotes is essentially a Western invention, and therefore perceived as a potential threat in the Syrian context. On the other hand, this same accusation could easily be leveled at the Western art scene as well, where self-censorship has managed to find very subtle ways of operating.

We have to notice that many of the texts give a prominent place to the activities of the Yes Men. While most interpretations of their activities come from the artistic context, hence interpreting their practice in a limited art vocabulary with its own views on social impact, we are also given a valuable interpretation in a different key by Marco Deseriis. According to him, the practice of correcting corporative identities and the ‘prank’ revelations of their mechanisms of exploitation should be seen from within the context of Internet activism, from where they actually originated. What Yes Men managed to achieve by using different media and communication channels is to design narratives and stories that are ‘simultaneously enticing, participatory, and ethical’ (261); a translation of the open source model of software building where ‘to execute in the world of code means to turn the potential power of instruction into the actual power of behavior’ (258), as well as the transformation of the ‘spectators into a network of collaborators’ (254). Therefore, the correct way to understand the practice and impact of the Yes Men should be outside of the art context, dominated by its enslavement to authorship and copyrights, and all in strong opposition to the open source codex. In his piece, Brian Holmes reminds us that ‘anything transgressive or symbolic can easily fall into the category of the prank, oiling the wheels of commerce with self-reflective humour’ (275) and we must help the creativity today ‘escape from the protocols of capitalist control’ (281). The recent generation of socially engaged artists promoted in the Netherlands is criticized by BAVO, blaming them to be, in comparison to traditional activists, ‘not interested in initiating long-term processes in which ‘the impossible is demanded’ (291).

It might be important to note that what some of the texts in this collection lack is a reflection on the ‘solutions’ offered to fix this seemingly complicated situation in the arts and society. In several places we find the example of the practice of ‘overidentification’ offered as a solution, but one should be very careful in taking this as a remedy in itself. The term was used by Slavoj Žižek to describe post-script the practice of Neue Slovenische Kunst and its role in the ‘break up’ of Yugoslavia. In 1987 NSK had won the open call for the poster design for the Youth Day, TITO’s birthday and one of the biggest celebrations in Yugoslavia; the scandal was caused by the revelation that they had appropriated and adapted a paint-

ing by a Nazi artist, hence linking on the level of aesthetics the ruling regime with the past enemy they wanted to distance themselves from. This caused a public debate about the true nature of the ruling regime, eroding little by little the desired projected image. Nevertheless, one should bear in mind the difference between the dispersed nature of power distribution in neoliberal societies today and that of a Yugoslav system with a different logic of power. A simple reapplication of this strategy as an aesthetic form could completely undermine it, as it was never intended to be a copy-paste solution.

As a possible conclusion, what both collections of essays show is the diagnosis of disorientation in both arts and politics today, to use Alain Badiou’s term. Following the recent global-scale events named Arabic Spring and the Occupy movement, it seems that the minds of many are rejecting the proposed neoliberal constellations. Nevertheless, the problem might reside in the fact that our bodies have become too addicted to their consumerist pleasures for this revolution to effectively take place. From its perspective, the role of art should not be to petrify the political through aesthetic forms, but to offer new guidelines on how to orientate and activate oneself today. Both academia and the arts have a long road ahead in challenging and changing their current path of commodification and imposed market games. Perhaps the most important question today is how to regain the lost public domain, and we should hope that these two editions might offer a first step towards accomplishing this.

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