

GREGORY SHOLETTE

“What do we do now?” writes Egyptian artist Doa Aly, pointing out that ever since the 2011 Tahrir Square revolution, artists are running about like “headless chickens.” (“No Time for Art”?: moabdallah.wordpress.com/2011/06/15/no-time-for-art) Less terminal bouts of self-questioning also spread in the wake of OWS. Some artists abandoned their studios to create ephemeral street art, others engaged in direct action. Do such departures from “professional” practices amount to a momentary lacuna, similar to the way a baker might throw a brick at invading soldiers, or a seamstress smuggle food to demonstrators (since sooner or later both return to bread and needles)? Or is the artist’s venture into social militancy different? When taking up positions along the proverbial barricades, is the artist there and not elsewhere because she really has nowhere else to go, other than perform for the enemy, so to speak? Or is this departure an inevitable phase of artistic investigation in the modern era; a detour from notions of detached, contemplative aesthetics so as to more effectively confront historical circumstances? Inspired by the editors of *October*, my own subset of questions was emailed to friends and colleagues in New York City, upstate New York, Wisconsin, Beirut, and Moscow. Despite their geopolitical differences, several significant threads are present involving issues of art and labor, history and repetition, the body and resistance, and always an urgent desire to seek autonomy from neoliberal capitalism. But above all, we need to ask just how far a headless anything will travel, or does new technology make this question irrelevant?

With gratitude I thank both the responders for helping me with my assignment and *October*’s editors for giving me the time and space to share our collective response.

I first emailed art historian Andrew Hemingway in NYC about artists and organized labor, pointing out that in 1968 the traditional French left described student rebels as “extreme leftist ‘groupuscules’ who want only to harm the democratic process drowning it in talk” (*L’Humanité*, May 3, 1968). Workers were called upon to not only avoid listening to these extremists, but to help unmask them as bourgeois provocateurs. Only after workers joined striking students did unions endorse the ’68 protests. By contrast, occupiers at Zuccotti Park and elsewhere received early endorsement from several trade unions, including striking art handlers locked out by Sotheby’s auction house. The successful end of their strike is partly credited to pressure from OWS, including many art-activists who were directly involved, not unlike the way the Situationists were in the Paris strikes some thirty-three years earlier. But how does one begin to interpret these alliances

and differences in broader, more historical terms? “The differences between then and now seem so overwhelming,” he immediately wrote back, adding,

In the U.K. in 1972 and 1974, miners’ strikes (supported by actions in other industries) caused the Heath government to call a state of emergency. The second strike actually led to the government’s downfall. Such a thing seems unimaginable these days. Today, the extent to which organized workers once felt entitled to a voice in politics has been almost completely forgotten. However, one of the big lessons of “1968”—to go back to your question—is that so many organized workers really represented only the sectional interests of particular groupings and had no larger political or cultural vision; there was precious little tie-up with the social democratic political parties to advance an agenda that would speak to the whole working class, organized and unorganized, employed and unemployed. This was even more the case here in the United States. There was a brief moment during the early years of the CIO when union leaders such as Sidney Hillman and Walter Reuther articulated a larger social vision, but for the most part unions have been content to tie themselves to the Democratic Party, which doesn’t even reach the level of “social democratic.” The admirable instances of labor solidarity with OWS you mention suggest that what needs to be cultivated is a rank-and-file consciousness of common struggle. As for the arts, I think the great exemplar there is provided by the Wobblies. It’s their globalizing vision, anti-militarism, courageous defense of free speech, loathing for the capitalist class, humor, and cultural inventiveness we should take as inspiration.

My second question, for artist Todd Ayoung, focused on his unique perspective as a socially engaged cultural practitioner, teacher, and theorist who left Brooklyn years ago in order to live in Ecovillage, an intentional community in Ithaca, New York. Would he comment on the evolving tactics of OWS, which forgo 1930s factory “sit-ins,” and also the temporary university occupations of the 1960s, in an attempt to manifest direct democratic forms of political sovereignty from the bottom up? Is this a new way of “dropping out,” or is it more like an “aesthetics of resistance” within the post-Fordist economy? He agreed that one of the directions OWS took was a desire for self-governance, evident in such practices as general assemblies, facilitated meetings, focus groups, and the use of stacked questions and “consensus” to clarify questions and concerns with voting stand-asides to prevent a few individuals from blocking agreements. Ayoung added that these organizational models did not emerge with OWS:

They came from many years of experience within the environmental and social-justice left. The collective lessons of past generations, in other

words, did not fall on deaf ears, but became a useful toolbox when the time came to contest the dominant political system. Likewise, the “dropping out” phenomena in OWS seems significantly different from the 1960s and ’70s, in which people really did seek to exit the system. The problem today is there is nowhere else to drop out to. Hence Deleuze’s “society of control” becomes global control. My impression is that people are dropping out and back as needed based on necessity while the OWS process unfolds. This equivocation could be due to uncertainty about what kind of politics OWS is trying to create—a leaderless, decentralized governance opposed to the patriarchal power found in previous left movements. At the same time, this new “dropping out” is not unlike some neoliberal version of multitasking within the flexible demand economy. Perhaps it is both? But what I think OWS discovered the hard way is that with momentum and increasing numbers the “consensus model” develops serious limits, especially when thinking the bigger picture of where one goes as a political process.

To bring what I mean closer to my home of Ecovillage, we also embrace consensus, meaning we include everyone’s voice while recognizing what it means to live in an “intentional” and “sustainable” middle-class co-housing community. In real terms this amounts to frequent long meetings, *work* parties, group meals, community building events, and an overall voluntarist culture keeping Ecovillage running, and for some, including my family and me, descending income levels. But there is an “out,” as some leave this experiment altogether. Admittedly, such cooperative living outside mainstream society may not even be purely rational, and even consensus decision-making may be symptomatic of the “creative class.” Perhaps it is this unconscious and ideological aspect inherited from the environmental-justice activists that the Occupy movement is having difficulty coming to terms with?

Four dispersed people received the final question (and the one closest to what *October* initially posed). First I noted that in the 1960s the U.S. civil-rights, feminist, gay-liberation, and student antiwar movements compelled many artists to form temporary activist alliances protesting, for example, the Metropolitan Museum of Art’s controversial 1969 *Harlem on My Mind* exhibition, while others including Art Workers Coalition and Guerrilla Art Action Group demanded greater social responsibility from cultural institutions. A decade later, Guerrilla Girls rejected discrimination as Gran Fury assisted ACT UP in direct-action AIDS-

awareness campaigns. Even though some artists were socially active solely *outside* their studios, others drew upon the ideas and energy of political movements to change the methods of their practice. Is something similar taking place today in the aftermath of revolts in Wisconsin, Russia, Syria, and New York City?

Artist and activist Dan S. Wang wrote from Madison that the Wisconsin uprising of February 2011

quickly became an image-making factory with political ambition. The capitol and locations all over the state were dispersed sites of round-the-clock insurgent cultural activity absent of management. Collectively the Uprising generated branded products without authorship. The movement was a creative performance staged as a massive incursion into the regressive political space imposed by Governor Scott Walker's assault on all things public. Ordinary people were interpellated as artists and vice versa, as the extra-legal occupation of the capitol rotunda reshaped the social and spatial processes of cultural agency. Movement partisans produced images, objects, and performances, and some, like the Overpass Light Brigade action documents, have become instantly recognizable. After the crushing defeat in the June 5th gubernatorial recall election, the problem facing artists identified with the Uprising is that of rehabilitating and/or revising the symbolic and pictorial representations of an historic movement threatened by a depressive somnolence. The concern now for artists in Wisconsin is not simply that the movement changed a studio practice here or there, but how to understand the way artistic practices helped to generate a functionally, conceptually, and stylistically diverse mass-movement culture in an age of plutocratic media control and conservative activism. Post-recall, conventional art-world spectacles appear more obviously than ever as consolations to defeat. But are the people of the Uprising content to be consoled?

Poet Paul Arsenyev informed me that since 2008 he has been taking part in a movement called the St. Petersburg Street University, whose main idea is

to recognize that the most ordinary discussion or lecture when manifest in public space becomes both a form of alternative education and the production of bodily experience—a type of corporeal knowledge gained only through expanded boundaries of everyday social rituals. Four years later, these ideas spread across Russia via the Occupy movement.

Previously incubating inside digital networks, this civil self-organization spilled out on streets. As Judith Butler puts it, this combination of street plus media presents the most contemporary version of a viable public sphere. What OccupyAbai Moscow makes new is that those who drop in learn everything about it not simply during but also before and after their visit thanks to the Internet. Curiously, this is not unlike an expanded version of Soviet-dissident circles in the 1970s and '80s insofar as they created sloganless graphics immune to censorship and wholly sufficient for communication within their own circumscribed movement. Today we can again embody such silent public dissent because our message is grasped without overt representation, except unlike the 1970s, competence with the Internet today allows us to cut across all segments of society.

Curator Rasha Salti, writing from Beirut, insists she does not believe history repeats itself, but

there is a knowledge that accumulates and disseminates outside conventional realms of production and transmission. It constitutes something like an alternative memory bank of anecdotes, iconic images, verse, songs, slogans—a poetics of the political imaginary. In Syria, artists have directly assisted the nonviolent insurgency. They have dyed Damascus fountains red to evoke “rivers of blood”; played audio recordings in Damascus of protests in Hama and Homs to underscore the breadth of resistance; and they have inscribed insurgent slogans on hundreds of ping-pong balls released from the top of a hill down onto the residential neighborhoods of the military’s *état-major*. Using cutouts and drawings, they make short videos explicating how a general strike can help the uprising, or how to deliver first aid for various wounds. Such is the language of resistance that is emerging and yet not entirely new.

Returning to New York City, artist Blithe Riley of Occupy Wall Street’s Arts and Labor Working Group argues that it is useless to compare art made in studios with art in the streets, because the real question is

how our movements are represented and packaged by artists and institutions. I believe it’s crucial to be cautious and vigilant about the politics of representation. OWS is in a critical moment. We must achieve

long-term sustainability and grow, while keeping our commitment to the reality we want to live in. This means taking responsibility for the representational frames we work within, as well as challenge our framing from the outside. Many of us know that the most exciting creative moments in the public-square occupations are not representable. They have been spontaneous, collective, performative, authorless, and temporary. We must resist the call to re-create these moments for the benefit of cultural institutions that will erase and replace direct experience with symbols. After all, perhaps the most spectacular outcome of the past year is the rejection of cynicism and a renewed belief in the necessity of imagination that pulls ideas out of the sky and creates realities in content and form using whatever medium is necessary.

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