//Janna Graham //Nicolas Vass

Intervention / Art

Artistic interventions have been turned into something of a fetish in artistic circles and institutions. Even the best intentions from artists, organizers, and curators often end up absorbing the radical histories and potentials of past actions and interventions within and outside the sphere of culture. By virtue of the “artistic” moniker, institutions and organizations often neutralize the idea of an intervention, extricating it from its situated environment in politically informed civil life. The idea that an intervention can be performed within the boundaries of the art industries as an action exogenous to the space, people, or conflict intervened in is thus normalized. In these circumstances the political itself is sanitized and the action appropriated for nothing more than a cynically calculated move to be used in an artistic, curatorial or institutional CV.

Separations

What makes them cynical, what divorces the intervention from its potency, is related to a number of factors. One, interventions are often staged within cultural organizations that make use of the energetics of political rhetoric but do not engage in self-questioning of the material reality in which they are embedded: the art industries and its markets. This is ironic if we take into account to what extent different Marxist approaches are used to justify the necessity of a so-called socially and politically engaged art that criticizes a capitalist mode of production in the field.

For example, an exhibition that proposes to look at the ideas communism in an institution that employs young people as interns without pay. *(1)
If the intention for facilitating spaces for intervention is informed by a desire to engage in social critique and transformation this cannot happen disengaged from the critique of injustices that take place in the field of art itself: a field based on the appropriation and capitalization of work and ideas.

Two, interventions as they are showcased in exhibitions and conversations in the cultural sector, are often instigated by those affiliated within the privatized space of the creative class, in contexts in which they have no long-term affiliation (or even interest) with the struggles that are presented. For example, an exhibition or talk about interventions in the environmental industry that is shown for a very short time in an institution that has no interest or involvement with the environmental movement before or after that project. Or, in cases where these struggles are a part of institutional life, they are so at the hands of education or engagement officers—who in the enactment of institutional hierarchies—are often left out of these more spectacular moments. Beyond disengagement or sheer disinterest, such institutions and event attendees are complicit in a diversity of actions that actually harm communities. Examples of this can be found in the gentrification produced by artists, art students and recent graduates and the degree to which “socially engaged” art can be complicit in city policies of displacement and policing. See, for example, the London group Southwalk notes for their work on the role of art in the gentrification of a London neighborhood. While discussions of this complicity are common in cultural institutions, discussions of what these same institutions could do otherwise are less so.

A third way in which culturally staged interventions can have a neutralizing effect is through the mode of subjectivation produced by the arts, which valorizes individuality, signature, and competition, which often run counter to the projects of

social justice in whose name interventions are staged. The fact that there is a feeling of stale inevitability to all of this is a ubiquitous excuse for not acting against the flow and the impulse to compete and prevail in this atomized and eroding cultural environment.

What We Learned in Art School

Of course there are many art school programs that address these issues. However, few have altered micro-political modes of learning to orient artists toward work in direct solidarity with projects of social justice. Much of this is related to art education's individuating ideology and obsessions with both novelty and ambivalence. Artists are not often taught to build solidarities amongst themselves, let alone those within in the social context in which they may be operating.

What artists learn about critique of the conditions of the art world is often that they are a motif, to be settled neatly into a consumptive cultural platform. Take Andrea Fraser's "Museum Highlights" from 1989, for example, an "artistic intervention" into the mode of production of the gallery tour. While performatively illustrating the enthusiasm and expectation of entry level cultural workers, neither the artist nor the presenting institutions address the actual conditions of tour guides themselves, many of whom are recent graduates who have not begun to think of themselves as workers. The issues have been presented by virtue of an address but not in terms of the materiality of labor practices, or at least not for any others than the artist who herself performs. While Fraser's performance and the era of institutional critique of which it was a part were important in raising a number of issues, they also became, as many have suggested (Holmes 2007),[1] (*1) isolated excuses for institutions to carry on with the status quo. Cultural organizations felt that they had been open to dissenting opinions, offered "platforms" for their discussion and symbolic actions, but spent far less time engaging in the uncomfortable processes of institutional change that might be provoked by taking critique seriously. Economies of artistic production in the form of short-term performances and commissions structurally disable follow-up on the consequences of their actions, if the organizations that commissioned them were even inclined to do so. Further, they position critique as that which was hermetically directed within the processes of the arts without finding grounds of solidarity between these issues and those outside of the "world" of cultural production.

Such is the case that two decades later the great artist interventionist Marina Abramovic could stage a performance at a MOCA gala fundraiser, making use of the heads of minimally paid young performers as dramatic table dressings. In her open letter to the director of the institution and the artist, Yvonne Rainer compared this idea to a scene from the movie SALO, in which young teenagers are abused and sodomized by members of a powerful elite in a palace outside of the city. It is only recently at the hands of Rainer, WAGE, Precarious Workers Brigade, Art Leaks and others that questions around labor rights and the perpetual precarity of the cultural industry are being flagged and acted upon by collectives in and outside of the art school context.

As this conversation begins, the question of the artist's role vis à vis the social lags. With much discussion of the relationality of the artist vis à vis other social agents, and much cursory critique of capitalism, little has been done in art school pedagogy to address the modes of social relationship building that are common to artistic practice and the degree to which they uphold capitalist and neo-liberal values. Though extremely cognizant of terms such as instrumentalization, young artists are often interpellated into acts of symbolic social action that in fact perpetuate projects of social deception. Without the tools to understand and act upon social

contradiction (and with the blinders that come from overly self-oriented practices) they are often made use of in assuaging social conflict.

Take, for example, the work of Shephard Fairey, made famous for the Obama poster HOPE, who was later commissioned to create a mural on the location of the Youth House eviction in Copenhagen. A site of major struggle in which young people fought for weeks to preserve a central organizing site in the city, Fairey's monument "Peace" (2011) was met with graffiti including the words "No Peace!" and "Go Home Yuppie Scum" by those who refused to forget the degree of police violence by which Youth House occupants were evicted. Fairey went on to alter his depiction only after these issues were highlighted by Youth House activists: turning a public sculpture commission into an ad hoc art school in unpacking the artists' role as agent of social neutralization.

by Henrik Haven – http://www.urbanartcore.eu/shepard-fairey-mural-copenhagen/

http://respect-mag.com/graffiti-shepard-fairey-defends-his-art-in-copenhagen

As in the case with Fairey, and due to the paucity of the kind of educational context in which an artist might engage in solidarity work with activists from the onset, artists' education in social contradiction is often left to social agents. Take, for example, the recent proposal by artist Mike Nelson, presented by the public commissioning agency Artangel. *(2) This project cynically sought to build a pyramid out of the empty former social housing units from the Heygate Estate in London. This estate in South London has been the site of a multi-year struggle of

residents and local supporters against the eviction of thousands of tenants and the gentrification of Elephant and Castle, a prominent working class area of the city. Again, social activists, including artists, mobilized through the organization Southwark Notes, in order to stop the proposal from proceeding at a city planning hearing… and won. This, after several appeals to the commissioning agency and the artist, to explain the history of struggle on the site and suggest their withdrawal of the proposal. *(3) Here, it is up to activists to become the “teachers” of an artist and commissioning organization, enlightening them to the consequences of a failure to sufficiently understand the histories of struggle into which artistic intervention is proposed.

The lack of clarity of terms around the difference between liberal social agendas that position art as a neutral mediating entity and those that align firmly with projects of decolonization and social justice lead to a great deal of confusion in the arts. This became clear in the response to the summer of dissent in London in 2011 (referred to as the London Riots) through which a group of artists proposed to “sweep up the streets;” erasing the evidence and indeed the cause of conflict in the streets. Others, aligned with local anti-racism movements, used cultural media to investigate; and years later, produced films in conversation with young people who had engaged in acts of critical resistance. *(4)

That the social education of the artist be reliant on activists in the artistic and social field is problematic, as, for each of these moments in which social agents are able to fight back, there are many unaccounted for examples in which artistic work supports the gentrifying efforts of local governments and corporations or performs the soft-side of aggressive policing. What is called an artistic intervention can then be the site of a social regression and the social intervention the site of the cancellation of an artist’s mark.

From these small examples we can concur the following about what an artist learns about the artist’s intervention in and outside of the art school:

The artist confirms the bubble of art.
The artist converses only in such a way that comes back to art.
The artist is too preoccupied with their own ideas and in many cases their survival to question how things are run (or how they are made to run tirelessly).
The artist is not accountable for producing consequence in the political field to which they refer in their Art.
The artist is meant to perform a simulation of political, cultural and or institutional critique but not engage in the sustained work of intervention.
The artist works alone and must defend their work against all odds. Their signature and bio are more important than anything else.
The artist is not accountable to others, only to Art. The ethical standards set by other groups (like trade unions) are moralistic and petty.
The artist takes creative risks but is often afraid of taking social risks.
The artists’ real social education often takes place at the hands of activists in the social realm, if they are fortunate to encounter them.

What We Didn’t Learn in Art School: The Politics of Solidarity

What we didn’t learn in art school is that ideas, practice, and consequence go hand in hand. We did not learn that we must mean what we say, that the words of social justice we quote in artistic statements about injustice and unfairness should refer directly to the social interventions that we make, that we should fight against these injustices and the racism and misogyny and class privilege that accompanies a bourgeois education. As much as the history of art we should then look at the history of struggles for social justice, and feel accountable to them as much or more

than those of the histories of art. Indeed, there are histories of art to be told from the position of social struggle, often obscured by the obsessive over-emphasis on the roles of individual creators over those of the collective processes artists find themselves in.

That is, we should look to the history of solidarity between cultural workers and social activists, or between the work of culture and the work of social intervention to understand the grounds upon which to stage social-artistic interventions that occur in alignment with projects of social justice. Where the concept of solidarity can be associated with a moral obligation on the one hand, or with an idea of meeting on the grounds of sameness on the other, here we use it as Rubén Gaztambide-Fernandez does in his proposition for a decolonizing pedagogy, as a coming together that hinges on radical differences and yet insists on relationships of incommensurable interdependency. (*2)

Solidarity I – Solidarity with One Another, Intervening from Within

As has been previously mentioned, the first grounds for solidarity often occur within the field of cultural production itself. Of late, a number of interventions have occurred that link the struggles of cultural workers and from there, link them to other fields.

Examples of these include WAGE, who have advocated for fair pay for artists, naming and shaming cultural institutions for underpayment of artists but also aligning themselves with boycotts including that of the recent withdrawal of artists from the Israeli iteration *(5) of Creative Time's Living As Form exhibition. Others include Artleaks, which has created a platform for information sharing as the grounds for interventions in the cultural field. The Gulf boycott Labour also aligns the struggles of cultural workers with those of construction workers in the Gulf region, threatening withdrawal of cultural labor if fair conditions are not reached in the construction of new galleries and educational institutions.

Equally the recent withdrawal of the artistic collective YAMS from the Whitney Biennial to highlight its practices of institutional racism staged an intervention on the basis of the conditions of white supremacy experienced in the art world, and its alignment with practices in the broader social milieu. (*3)

This first kind of solidarity sees its first stage of intervention in the cultural field and seeks to work from there, for social justice in other fields.

Solidarity II – Working within Social Movements but Visible to the World of Art

Other kinds of cultural solidarity base themselves within social movements, but remain visible to the art world. These are the more widely known examples, such as the protests of Art Not Oil or Liberate Tate, through which artists linked to the environmental movements intervene into cultural institutions to demand the severing of the link between art and the oil industry. Actions such as the spreading of oil in the Turbine Hall at the Tate or the presentation of the wing of a giant wind turbine, which, as a gift, by law must be accessioned into the Tate's collection, make the link between wider social movement aims and the arts.

Others, such as Pussy Riot in Russia, emerge from feminist movement politics but use cultural means to stage protest events.

Others still have emerged in the recent uprisings in the Middle East, including media collectives such as Mosireen in Egypt, who are in conversation with artistic circles

but place themselves largely in the service of the Tahrir Square movement, archiving and screening footage to dispel propaganda spread by popular media.

Similarly, mapping and counter-mapping collectives such as “Iconoclasistas” in Argentina, supply specific tools and info-graphics for their movements’ counterparts.

Historical examples of this kind of work can be seen in the histories of Gran Fury, which produced graphics for the movements around HIV/AIDS, or Park Fiction, a community campaign developed to save a park in Hamburg that gained visibility in the art world through its exhibition at Documenta XI.

Solidarity III – working in the context of social movements with no or little visibility in the sphere of cultural production

A perhaps lesser-known area of work engaged is perhaps the greatest degree of solidarity activity, placing cultural labor, tools, and processes directly into social movement with little visibility for the artists involved. The London-based group Southwark Notes, is exemplary of this kind of solidarity, in which artists work alongside residents in campaigns to develop interventions against the gentrification of the Elephant and Castle neighborhood, with little distinction made between artists and other activists.

What Happens When We Really Intervene?

Recent interventions in the art field have revealed the stakes in art’s so-called neutrality.

The response to a contentious workshop by Laboratory of Insurrectionary Imagination (LABOFII) at Tate, for its direct critical engagement with Tate’s BP sponsorship, was as follows, “Ultimately, it is also important to be aware that we cannot host any activism directed against Tate and its sponsors, however we very much welcome and encourage a debate and reflection on the relationship between art and activism.” (*4)

The encouragement of debate in the place of action is what education theorist Paulo Freire describes as anti-dialogue or an “alienating blah, blah, blah,” as it actively severs the connection between dialogue and action.

If not dialogue, it is for the preservation of art that intervention should not occur, as is the case with the justification for the continuation of Manifesta 10 after the state’s declaration of a ban on “gay propaganda,” its involvement in waging war upon its neighbors, and the withdrawal of a number of artists. Curator Kaspar Konig warns of the potential misuse of the exhibition “…by political actors as a platform for their own self-righteous representation…” with little clarity as to whether it is the artists themselves or politicians who may be engaging in such “self-righteous” activity. This criticism of artists who engage in direct political messaging as “moralistic,” “worthy,” or “self-righteous” is related directly to the notion that art and artists if not neutral should be ambivalent in their desire for change, representing the complexity of situations rather than direct political positioning. *(6)

This was recently made clear again in the protests surrounding the Istanbul Biennial whose theme “Public Alchemy” was taken up as an invitation by local activists to protest Biennial sponsors who are directly involved in the city’s gentrification program that has led to thousands of evictions and was the subject of major protests in Gezi Park in 2012. Their action, titled “Public Capital” on May 10, 2013 involved a group of artists and activists wearing T-shirts printed with the names of

forcibly gentrified neighborhoods in Istanbul. Throughout the event, members of the group stood up from the crowd and draped him/ herself on the floor in the middle of the room using a piece of cloth printed with the logos of related companies. According to activists and bystanders, the performance was put to an end by the Biennial's organizing team who roughly picked up protesters and carried them away from the venue. The police were called and an activist arrested for video recording the proceedings and, in particular, focusing on the Biennial's curator. It was clear that the Biennial's goals to "activate social engagement and public fora to generate a possibility for rethinking the concept of publicness" did not include unsolicited critique. Instead, in their terms, the aim of the Biennial and Public Program was to "…open up the idea of a real public sphere to all kinds of different voices, even conflicting ideas, in which people can talk without fear and without obstructing one another." Additionally, they stated that "…impeding such platforms only reproduces the methods that obstruct freedom of expression…" and that such platforms entail "…talking, listening and trying to understand each other…" as the way to engage in change. Such a liberal notion of public discourse, however, bars conflictual relationships and suggests that art world spaces can provide an otherwise empty meeting ground, obscuring the many entanglements and complicities of the arts in that one might debate (or protest) in such a public forum.

While the circumstances of biennial curators and employees is clearly complex, given that the target of the protest was their direct employers, recourse to liberal platforms of politely staged discussion orchestrated and controlled by the arts is a recurring response to the staging of interventions that target the contradictions of the art world. Beyond accusations of "self-righteousness" here, we see that such ruptures are also the cause for accusations of one-sidedness, as though the arts sector has a general or neutral character rather than a series of positions deeply embedded in social conflict. Here the claim to enact the public sphere also obscures any setting of the stage for a discussion of the conflicts as they were experienced by employees, as grounds for solidarity, thereby shutting down the kind of platform it professed to provide.

A final example of the response to artistic interventions is telling in this regard. The recent artistic boycott of Transfield Corporation's sponsorship of the Sydney Biennale for its role in the management of Manus Island and Nauru immigration detention centers, where those incarcerated have an ongoing protest against conditions and the death of Reza Berati, reveals the degree to which claims of the neutrality of the arts are a mere mask for the very tight relationships between arts organizations and socially regressive forces. In response to the artistic boycott, Australian Communications Minister Malcolm Turnbull denounced the "vicious ingratitude" of the artists who forced the withdrawal of the company as a sponsor of the Biennale suggesting that by responding to the boycott, the Sydney Biennale would threaten its access to cultural funding. *(7)

Behind the call for neutrality, ambivalence is the state that threats the role of organized culture to uphold and not question the status quo.

As the Sydney Biennale boycott and other protests and actions mentioned seem to suggest, there are indeed multiple attempts forming currently to understand where the line between implication and complicity is drawn for many different agents working within arts and culture under capitalism.

What Is Left to Learn (and Unlearn)

In this moment in which the hegemonic structuring of the cultural field is revealing itself in response to interventions located at the juncture of art and social activism, the work that is left to be done is to conceptualize the interventionist labor of

cultural workers as that which both breaks from this hegemony and extends itself to solidarity work with those in other fields. It is important, as the activists of Manus Island protests point out, that boycotts in the name of artists do not obscure the social actions of those whose risks have far greater consequences: that boycotts and other interventions do not become signature events, but go beyond the moment of withdrawal to that of support. This support must begin with active phases of listening, reflecting on the problematic of one's arts education, and opening up to learn, to become aware of other ways of making, doing, analyzing, and acting politically.

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Janna Graham

Originally trained in Geography, Janna Graham has developed radical research and pedagogical projects in and outside of the arts for many years. Graham is a member of the international sound and political art collective Ultra-red, works with the Precarious Workers Brigade in London and is currently Projects Curator at the Serpentine Gallery. There she and others have created the Centre for Possible Studies, a research space and artistic residency in which artists and local people create 'studies of the possible' that expose and respond to social inequities in the Edgware Road neighbourhood of London.

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Nicolas Vass

Nicolas Vass works with a number of London-based collectives in response to injustices in education, arts and culture as well as UK migration policy. As an artist he has developed *Re-constructing Hasil*, a performance based on the work and music of depression era one-man band Hasil Adkins. With this project, he looks at issues of contemporary artistic and cultural labour, austerity and performativity. He is currently a Phd candidate at the University of Leicester, where he is doing research on micro-politics and value production in the contemporary art industry.

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*4 *Hickey, Amber, "Beyond Reflection. Radical Pedagogy and the Ethics of Art Sponsorship," http://www.amberhickey.com/docs/Article_AH_final_c.pdf*

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* 3 *https://southwarknotes.wordpress.com/tag/mike-nelson/*

* 4 *See http://futureartists.co.uk/2013/07/31/help-distribute-riot-from-wrong-and-earn-2-50-per-download-now/ and http://riotsreframed.com/*

* 5 *For information about the boycott, see http://hyperallergic.com/131497/over-100-artists-and-intellectuals-call-for-withdrawal-from-creative-time-exhibition/.*

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