



Oliver Ressler, *We Have a Situation Here*. 2011. photo series

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[1] Michael Hardt and Antonio Negri, *Empire*, (Cambridge: Harvard University Press. 2000), 61.

[2] Ariella Azoulay, *The Civil Contract of Photography*, (New York: Zone Books, 2008) 11.

[3] *ibid.*, 25

[4] *ibid.*, 25

[5] *ibid.*, 27

[6] Diarmuid Costello and Dominic Willsden, *The Life and Death of Images, Ethics and Aesthetics* (London: Tate Publishing. 2008), 12.

[7] *Biotech* Critical Art Ensemble: Free Range Grain Critical Art Ensemble with Beatriz da Costa and Shyh-shiun Shyu. (Accessed June 2012) <http://www.critical-art.net/Biotech.html>

## Political Activism and Art: A Consideration of the Implications of New Developments in Practice

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By way of clarification, there are contested views of what constitutes citizenship. Some argue that it is implicitly bounded by the nation-state and therefore is meaningless without a legislative and juridical system that polices an individual's status within a geopolitical space. This view focuses on the rights of an individual in terms of the benefits they accrue under a state's protection. Conflicts arise between state and citizen due to the reality of migration, dual identities, resident aliens, minorities within a population where governments, particularly in the United States, struggle to justify democratic commitments and values (articulated in the Constitution) while exploiting those who are not recognised as citizens but who contribute to a nation's economy, its labor force and social fabric.

Others argue that citizenship is a psycho-social set of behaviors that extend beyond a formal system of legal protections and instead captures a dimension of belonging that promotes our democratic aspirations such as liberty, equity and fraternity. Membership in this sense involves 'participation'. And participation is a technique (or a 'technology') through which members form, and can potentially reform, the democratic state.

Understanding the manner in which social and political life is structured is therefore germane to this discussion, albeit limited in scope for the purposes of this paper. However, to offer more context, intellectuals such as Paolo Virno, Antonio Negri, Franco "Bifo" Berardi, Maurizio Lazzarato et al, outline the character of our 'postmodernist', 'post-Fordist' past and have addressed the ever widening gap that has emerged between internationalized political elites and the increasingly degraded social and economic conditions of those who are governed within 'democratic' states.

To take a specific example, Michael Hardt and Antonio Negri's book *Empire*, published over ten years ago, helped to set the tone for proactively rethinking politics and had contributed to discourses within activist networks due in part to their characterization of society, in particular, their reviving the idea of 'multitude' that fitted with contemporary sensibilities and experience. This new notion of multitude is a key concept within the autonomist intellectual network and authors such as Virno and Lazzarato lend their own refinements to its meaning.

However, to continue with Hardt and Negri's analysis of the problem: they suggest that under the banner of an empire (loosely understood as a political domain) society can no longer be understood as a cohesive whole. Instead, the social space is constructed of a "plural multitude of productive, creative subjectivities". The multitude is nomadic, de-territorialized, and "in perpetual motion". In short, the multitude is a boundless mass of networks of people who "express, nourish, and develop positively their own constituent projects"[1]. Hardt and Negri have characterized a world that is peopled by active autonomous networks. They argue that these vying networks and associations are vital to the development of democracy. Why? Because the presupposition is that democracy only thrives under a social and political discourse that embodies difference. Difference, intellectual conflict, debates, etc. inherently constitute the power of the sovereign. The point is not new and has its origins primarily in the work of Machiavelli and they lean on Machiavelli's understanding of the constitutive elements of a democratic state as agonistic. Being combative then,

is necessary for a democratic state to succeed in first, being democratic, and secondly, to expand beyond its own borders.

Hardt and Negri also identify the conceptual barrenness of society understood as a collective mass. There is no doubt that there has been a shift in the social imaginary in the recent decade, which their notion of the multitude beautifully captures. It encapsulates our engagement and habituation to new communication technology that not only extends the limits of our body but also psychologically amplifies the atomization of society. Such atomization must be seen in conjunction with persistent neoliberal strategies reducing every aspect of human life to the marketplace, which ultimately has configured the world differently and infused our collective imagination with the sentiment of perpetual precariousness. And this has a deep bearing on how we understand and act out our relationships to one another as members of a political community and as citizens of the state.

Where Hardt and Negri are wrong is in their assumption that the multitude is deliberative and participatory in ways that allow for democratic ideals to flourish. The networks could equally be understood as indifferent, or worse. The multitude is constituted of amorphous and nebulous groupings, subjective, yes certainly, but ultimately self-selecting, temporal alliances based on emotional need, shared beliefs, and ambitions and/or lifestyles. Nor are the networks analytical or objective. The networks are, for the most part, family, friends, and fans. In political instances that extend to single issue direct-action groups, unions, etc. the public landscape is increasingly a space where no one entity moves very far from its own satellite of associations and the lines of communication—the means of public discourse—have dissipated. This environment, this networked subjectivity, is not a precondition for a thriving democracy. It instead points to a kind of materialistic feudalism, which conflicts with the view that we have of ourselves as citizens of a society allegedly striving for equity and freedom.

However, this is the environment in which activists and art-activists have an important role to play in the push to examine, articulate, and address our political needs and relations. There is real potential for a new form of politics to emerge that dispenses with the false concept of ‘mainstream’ society under the management of, allegedly representative but actually self-serving, elites. One that has embedded in it a criticality where art-activists draw together disparate networks through embodied discourse and help to create a new sense of the commons.

Ariella Azoulay's *Civil Contract of Photography* offers us a theoretical instance for understanding how art practice can actualize political dialogue and reshape politics from the ground up. She argues that the set of relations that transpire through the act of photography are constitutive of a civic contract. Where the classical explanation of the nature of photography has pivoted on a triad of relations characterized by the photographer as agent, sitter as victim, viewer as voyeur, her suggestion is that the photographic act is in fact a collective participation where its members cannot “determine how this meeting will be inscribed in the resulting image.”[2] Photographs are just images and not records of factual events. However, she continues, “the photographed person, the photographer, and the spectator are not mediated through a sovereign power and are not limited to the bounds of a nation-state or an economic contract...Photography...deterritorializes citizenship, reaching beyond its conventional boundaries and plotting out a political space in which the plurality of speech and action...is actualized permanently by the eventual participation of all the governed.”[3]

What Azoulay presents us with is in essence another formulation of direct democracy. Her notion of citizenship is indeed idealistic, even impractical in its assumption that one can dissolve its implicit exclusiveness and this causes problems for the logic of her argument which pivots on her formulation of the spectator's reading of the image. For example, the image has ‘traces’ of the set of relations between photographed person, photographer, and spectator and that “all of them know what is expected of them and what to expect from the others” [4]The photograph apparently does not contain anything veridical. We cannot point to the ‘traces’ as evidence. Instead, the photograph has a “unique status as a product of the encounter between a photographer, a photographed person and a tool, in the course of which none of these three [including the viewer] can treat the other as sovereign”[5]



Critical Art Ensemble, *Free Range Grain*, 2009

Apart from an inconsistency in her argument which assumes that the photograph has traces of  $x$  ( $x$  = visible signs of the set of relations within the contract) all the while dismissing the discourse on denotation, Azoulay opens up possibilities for exploring how a form of art practice can be integral to political dialogue filling the vacuum left behind by the limitations of representative democracies and their inability to respond to those who are dispossessed. The sentiment of her civil contract aims to extend the idea of citizenship beyond state boundaries, remapping a notion of citizenship within current shifts in social imagination in which we are already habituated to the borderless and stateless space of the Web. Her theory also allows for the artwork not to be regarded as an artefact as such but within a set of relations. The art is embedded in the relation between participants and hence, is a condition for citizenship.

This sensibility, this conceptual shift from object to relation is central in the work of activist artists in general. However, it is not simply a matter of, say, the relational aesthetics that Nicolas Bourriaud outlines. Social relations are not so easily reducible and repackaged as a 'creative medium'. Relationships cannot be manipulated in the way that one works with mediums, and indeed, there is something grotesque about conflating the two. However, the point is not that there is a new kind of artistic medium in play called 'relational'. The artists I have in mind set out to occupy political discourse itself and to directly engage at 'points of political fracture'. Activist artists pick-up where governments leave off and we, the viewer, do not observe 'artworks', but instead partake in an analysis of politics itself. We become participants in a political dialogue rather than an audience gazing at a display of aesthetic gestures.

This form of enactment is at the heart of activist-art practice and what the authors Diarmuid Costello and Dominic Willsden have identified as a 'new' tendency in *art*. The 'new' tendency points towards an approach to art amongst those who, "seek to document, reflect, supplement or intervene in representations of conflicts worldwide.... What is primary...is the possibility of representation and counter-representation of points of political fracture."<sup>[6]</sup> What has taken shape is that a growing number of artists are producing artwork that reaches past their own aesthetic objectives through to the political subject. Activist artists have dislodged themselves from the concerns of the modernists and indeed, postmodernists and instead embed their interventions in public discourse in such a way that is distinct from previous eras.

Examples can be seen in the work of numerous artists but the following discussion will focus on Oliver Ressler, Critical Art Ensemble, and Beatriz da Costa for no particular reason other than to draw out some sub-themes that fit with the overall argument about citizenship.

Oliver Ressler's series of films titled *What is Democracy* is a documentary style set of interviews where various activists and political analysts in fifteen different cities are asked to respond to the title's question. The film presents us with a sequence of talking heads. However, unlike a standard documentary film, the speakers seem to talk for as long as they need, and Ressler himself does not interfere in the role of an interviewer.

What is interesting for us as viewers is that Ressler does not obfuscate the content by decorating the speeches or the visuals with extraneous artistic or aesthetic gestures. The work is not reflexive in this sense, it is instead indexically linked to the political subject. The result is that one enters into a dense forest of differing perspectives and understandings of democracy. Ressler has succeeded in, as he says, "(re)present[ing] a kind of global analysis about the deep political crises of the Western democratic model." His grounding assumption is not particularly insightful or new: that the 'crisis' of democracy is one in which the state no longer 'represents' its citizens and instead acts on behalf of corporations and capitalist entities. But, that is not the point. We 'learn' and grasp the fluidity of the concept of democracy not just through what the interviewees say, but via the juxtaposition of differing explanandum. We are drawn into the extended monologues and are left reflecting on the absurdity of the range of conflicting views. We see how idealized the notion of Democracy is and how easily reducible it is to a vague and nebulous concept. In troubling the word 'democracy', we find a necessary rethinking of democracy as not only a term but as contradictory terms of engagement. .

By contrast, Critical Art Ensemble have focused on the social and political implications of biotechnology, and as they say, 'tactical' media (meaning activist in intent). Their projects have been aimed at facilitating a 'public science' where the investigation unpacks underlying assumptions that drive the actions and applications of those working within and profiting from the biotechnology industry. In one example, the group organized a mobile laboratory for their project called 'Free Range Grain' where they tested samples of food for genetically modified organisms brought to them by members of the public. As they say, they wanted "to demonstrate how the 'smooth space' of global trade enables the very 'contaminations' that the authorities say it guards against."<sup>[7]</sup> In doing this, they not only drew attention to the real impact of the corporate biotech industry, but also presented participants with an evidential basis for a critique. This strategy of direct engagement mobilizes people's involvement with the issue at hand by pointing out the daily reality of corporate interests and operations. Equally, there is no hierarchy of expertise here. That is, by identifying evidential information about the products that consumers purchase for their own consumption, the very stuff one needs to support life, all involved are then in a position to analyze the implications of the evidence. The evidence is, then, a foundation upon which dialogue begins. It activates political participation and empowers people in the discussion about who wields power and how power is wielded over our choices and efforts to sustain our lives.

Beatriz da Costa has similarly developed numerous art-research projects that raise awareness for environmental issues and new applications of technology. Recent work has focused on biotechnology, one particular project called *Swipe* (2002-2004) is pertinent here. It highlights the collection of personal data in the United States, widely adopted by seemingly benign venues such as bars and shops, prompting examination of how technology operates as a technique of power. *Swipe* was a performance staged at venues where alcohol was served (art openings, etc.). Customers were asked to produce their drivers licence, which was then swiped, as proof of their identity (age, etc.). In return, customers received a till receipt that itemized all the data embedded in their license in addition to information acquired through 'computer matching', that is, from other sources of digital information acquired from consumer profiles, voter registration, and online public records.



Beatriz da Costa, *Swipe*, 2002-04

Da Costa's project neatly addresses the problems of data collection and, although commonly accepted as harmlessly policing consumers (in this case determining who is entitled to drink alcohol), demonstrates that data collection easily morphs into exploitation and surveillance. Not only does the trail of data build virtual profiles of individuals (a kind of data-avatar is formed), but the data that has been assembled by anyone at any one point becomes 'information' and acquires a status, which trumps that of the human being. When used commercially, despite what is said about data being benign, there is always human intention behind how one is tracked and then targeted. How this is achieved is not necessarily by any one person, but algorithmically. The implications are deep and wide: how commercial enterprises, governments and their agents assemble and use data present real problems. Not only is one's virtual identity open to manipulation and misrepresentation, but we are also presented with a paradox: in diminishing the idea of a citizen to that of a consumer, the notion of liberty and governance is subverted in virtue of commercial exploitation, control and coercion of the individual. The state no longer protects citizens from harm, but instead is complicit in distorting what is taken to be our freedom, the range of real choices, even within the realm of the marketplace.

These artists not only direct our attention to the discursive character of their projects, but their work also positions us within the heart of politics. That is, politics as it should be: active, participative, dialogic analysis of the operations of the state, corporations and the commercial and economic forces that impact upon our lives. What is different from previous eras (Dada, Situationist, etc.) is that these artists occupy an intellectual space previously filled by a political class. Political elites today fail to expose their 'thinking' to examination. They do not publicly engage in a critique of the assumptions upon which their policies rest. In dispensing with their civic responsibilities (slashing funding for education, the national health service, welfare, etc.) while holding onto power through privilege, they in essence contravene the social contract that was entered into upon. These realities undermine the interests of citizens and the purpose of a democratic state.

While the artists discussed above may not have much reach, i.e., they are, for the most part, only talking to other artists through arts institutions and in many cases rely on museums to promote their work, they are, in principle, agents of change. These artists and others like them facilitate a critical examination of the assumptions and behaviours in play within our social, political, and cultural life. Assumptions that are considered normative by state agencies, such as the primacy of the marketplace, the need to survey a citizen's behaviour as a way of 'protecting' the state, etc. are met with tangible resistance through creative projects. In doing so, these artists represent the widely felt disillusionment toward corrupt neoliberal enterprises. They construct creative, interactive strategies that promote a citizen's autonomy, rearming us with the informational tools needed to help us understand and decide what it means to be equal, free and, most importantly, to resist the debasement of human relations, identity, and sense of belonging to the commons.

