

New Esthetiks of Resistance – Forms of civil Disobedience

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Juliane Stiegele

The concept of a counter public sphere, appearing and disappearing over the past decades, has advanced greatly its possibilities via the achievements of the media society. The concept will in the near future, play an important function in the attempt to save what still can be saved on our planet and in our public spheres. It's a biotope and source platform for the creative, which in turn help to provide new means of expression.

The election of US President Barack Obama was, for sure, one of the most impressive achievements of this counter public sphere. His presidency is in large parts owed to the strategic use of social media like Facebook, YouTube, Email, Twitter and several websites and portals. A precondition was the invention of the Internet that makes distances and national borderlines effortlessly negotiable obstacles.

Also the "Arab Spring", a series of revolutions and protests against recent dictatorial political systems in various countries of the Arab world, was influenced to a considerable degree by the application of modern fast, cheap and easy-to-use communication technologies.

Computer critic and cultural scientist David Golumbia of VCU [Virginia Commonwealth University] in the United States however is concerned with the ambivalence of the Internet. "It was an illusion at the beginning, that the use of the internet would only aid good people. Rather, it helps everybody, Goldman Sachs as well as Obama. The good websites like Indymedia did not bring on the revolution; they are a revolution for all, the good and the bad. That's often overlooked. It didn't really ever change the power structures."¹ Further to that effect, he adds "The great danger of our time is also that we talk about and hang out at the media at all times ... and meanwhile neglect – also together with others – to think about social change and politics". We chase after information online – in safe distance to reality, and we spend more time hoarding information up than reflecting upon it or creating new concepts and visions. That's how we snooze over increasingly uncontrollable and hard to bear circumstances. "It" still is rather happening to us than us making it happen.

On the other hand, more and more effective if scattered particles are emerging from the creative efforts of different spheres of life, from "art" defined in a far wider sense. These multiply in the hopes of gaining change by accretion; to make, in the face of global political and economical power constellations, what initially seems small and insignificant into an important part of an ever-changing global transformation.

1 | Analogously in an interview with the Bayerischer Rundfunk [Bavarian Broadcasting], 2009
Compare also in that context: *The Cultural Logic of Computation*, Harvard University Press, 2009

Ever new art forms are emerging as swift reactions to changing realities, partly overlapping with new forms of political protest: art out of necessity that shows little or no interest in the official 'art machine', where art functions indiscriminately according to laws borrowed from neo liberalism intertwined as cogwheels of museums, curators, gallery owners alike, and the manufacturing of final products with long shelf lives, inside fenced and moderately effective social niches.

The process is, on the contrary, its favorite form. Even the individual authorship of the work doesn't have exclusive authority. The collective as a possible work form and collective authorship are gaining ground and influence. The work can take on some of the most glittering manifestations: from the Fake-Office and the Mimicry-Institute, a simulationed company, via the Critical Art Ensemble and an ironic Terrorist Training School to the artist group Beobachter der Benutzer von Maschinen [Observers of Machine Operators] and the Center for Tactical Magic, to only name a few. The projects frequently join in cooperation with the public. They are situated directly and laterally amongst people and are immediately effective – with all the consequences of direct feedback.

The intense and powerful creativity of such art forms often arise under counter pressure, which can have, in the face of deficit or the lack of something – a catalytic effect. Present day media play a decisive role here, regarding form and content.

As first I would like to assemble three very different examples of the aesthetic element in projects of resistance that also display a dependence on the conditions of their originating form.

For years, we needed to see in European media ad nauseam repetitive protest forms of the unions criticizing the impending loss of social standards and any reform achievements by frequently dragging a black dummy coffin with white inscription behind them. This habitual image – one that people had come to expect time after time – almost prevented concern for the contents of the message. One is drawn to the conclusion that there is a direct correlation between the lack of originality of the protest and the lack of vision accompanying the message. The coffin is the end in any instance, and down here below, nothing more is to be expected.

The second example took place in a much more unsettling sphere: from a series of unusual protest forms of civil society during the Kosovo war, when 'illegal actions' could carry severe personal consequences such as indefinite incarceration with definite consequences—such as torture. The ban on public assembly – and insofar a de facto ban on protests – would be bypassed in this case by a crowd of people who assembled at a designated meeting point on a given street with their cars. They would turn off their engines, lift the car's hood and pretend to be busy repairing an engine defect. The street was then entirely blocked by cars, with no chance that tow trucks could arrive on the scene to move the cars or dissolve the protest. The individual could feel safe in the security of the group for at least a short time. This way, people were able to show their collective presence inspite of the ban, and, at the same time, could be confident that the situation would

2 | A similar approach – though under much more benign circumstances – is employed by Critical Mass, an initiative that first emerged in 1992 in San Francisco, spread from there throughout North America and Europe. A so called “critical mass” of up to 80,000 cyclists gather and ride through the streets, which are left temporarily impassable to cars. Critical Mass promotes streets for people not cars with their actions bicycle friendly cities.
www.critical-mass.info

ban, and, at the same time, could be confident that the situation would baffle those in power enough to gain a small but decisive step ahead of an official response. An example of the political imagination. This manifestation required a high level of courage and a disciplined organization. Starting and ending times had to be coordinated precisely, or the project might have turned against the participants.²

The protagonist of Aristophanes’ comedy “Lysestrata” on the other hand, was a piece activist who agitated entirely “unplugged”, but her concept of action appears as relevant today as it did 2400 years ago. Feeling sapped and despairing of the then habits of Athenian men to resolve their conflicts by warfare, Lysestrata concocted a scheme to throw them off balance at their weakest point and to try to force them to end the wars and make peace. She convinces the women of Athens to assemble on the Acropolis and call out an unlimited sex strike. The project succeeds despite numerous imponderables. Worn down by the women’s withdrawal the men give in, and the true power balance is exposed...

The idea seems to be as simple as it is radical, and its impacts are seen as effective today. In 2003 the women of Liberia – at this point connected to one another by cell phone – succeeded in pushing for peace-talks involving sex strikes as the decisive sanction. The then 14 year old civil war in Liberia came to an end. Leymah Gbowee, the strike’s initiator, was awarded the Nobel Peace Prize in 2011 for her engagement of women’s rights.

The degree of civil courage needed in protest forms that intervene in society vary vastly dependent on the surrounding social framework. Activists in contemporary Switzerland, for instance, find a different situation than those in present day China. The contents of their actions are concerned with extremely different deficits, alongside globally relevant subjects.

Now a few thoughts on the art form of intervention and its interference into existing situations, social systems and the context of the public sector: The point here is to bring public attention to social, cultural, civil, political, economical, functional or material grievances through specific interventions and to inspire public discourse. Compared to ‘Tactical Media’ – we will focus on that later – this form of activism makes more use of physical space and matter. The focus is, however, on action and not on a final aesthetic object. If there is an object, it usually serves as a vehicle for the transport of an idea or concept.

Attractive hybrid forms emerge from the free interchange of the art forms of installation, performance, concept art and Tactical Media alongside classical art forms. Depending on the “collision impact force” the interventions might, at times, demonstrate subversive characteristics. On the other hand they may take place with the approval or even under the auspices of institutions or individuals that have the power to protect the process. Dependencies of that kind, however, need to and should be reevaluated from project to project.

Euro stripes - Crosswalk
 Department for public appearances
 Intervention
 Traunstein, Germany, 2008



www.department-online.de

The relationship between destruction and what can be understood as sculptural expression through demonstrative activity, between passive consumption and creation of art works, the boundary between an established institution and the public was highlighted by MONA (Museum of New Art) Detroit in an exhibition entitled 'kaBOOM!' a couple of years ago. The exhibit was arranged for the sole purpose of destruction by the public over the course of several weeks. 'Don't touch the artwork' policies did not apply here. In this case the intervention of the public occurred with the approval of the institution. What the curators didn't expect to happen was, that after just a single day, the exhibit contents had already been reduced to rubble. Not only had the artifacts been shattered to pieces, the audience did not shy away from the premises. The critical part of this courageous project to me seems to be that this kind of pure destruction does not necessarily lead to any substantial progress. It was, for the time being, merely a forceful demonstration of the hidden potential of violence that is apparently still high in Detroit – a once failed city, with dramatic social conditions despite pockets of encouraging reconstruction efforts.

Alfredo Jaar, a critical protagonist of intervention art in public spaces in his RWANDA-project created a poster intervention against the genocide of the Tutsi by the Hutu in Rwanda, implanting this murderous conflict into awareness in the public sphere on the European continent. The posters – a converted medium of communication from the world of advertising – in the shopping districts between cigarette and Coca-Cola ads were a call to global responsibility.

www.alfredojaar.net

The Reverend Bill Talen [aka, Reverend Billy] of “The Church of Stop Shopping” [also renamed as the “Church of Life after Shopping”] in New York works with Flash-Mob-actions against the excesses of consumer society. He uses communication tools that are capable of gathering a large crowd quickly, cheaply and effectively.

www.revilly.com

Mimicking a religious community, Talen plays the role of a Reverend, leading a gospel choir and many “followers”. The “Church” for example, invaded one Starbucks shop after another by mustering a crowd that would fill the stores to capacity. The Reverend chanted his sermons on site: “Fuck Starbucks, you are exploiting the workmen in the coffee fields by drinking Starbucks fucking coffee” and so on – all supported by the rousing chants of the present choir. The police, when summoned, usually put a stop to the action and the reverend was lead away, to be released a little later. Meanwhile, Reverend Bill is barred from Starbucks worldwide.

Bill Talen’s efforts look back to his own political intermezzo: In a serious attempt to challenge constricting structures from the inside, he ran once as a Green Party candidate for mayor of New York City.

www.carotmob.com

Promoting sustained mass shopping, on the other hand, is the preferred form of action for “Carrotmob.” Following Californian Brent Schulkin’s concept, the idea is to shop strategically at one specifically chosen store, which has a “positive” – for example, its responsible use of energy. Notified by text messages a crowd of people gathers on a specific day to shop the store bare. “Carrotmob” explicitly operates by rewarding, not by antagonism, conceptually proximate to Tactical Media.

<http://clanduneon-over-blog.com>

The French group “Le Clan du Néon” [The Neon Clan] deals with the wasted energy of nocturnal neon advertisements. The group wanders Paris at night and clips neon signs, still intent on exposing their message even though a vast majority of the population is asleep. Their work has spread to followers of the practice in other French cities. Meanwhile “Le Clan du Néon”, is demanding a law to compel businesses to switch off neon lights ads at night.

www.tvbgone.com

tv-b-gone
Mitch Altman



Californian geek Mich Altman is a solo activist who has developed a cheap pocket remote control with infrared base marketed online as: “tv-b gone”. It can be used to switch off distracting TV monitors in bars or shopping malls and stop pointless background noise and visual pollution. Communication between people is encouraged again with this gadget for do-it-yourself interventions.

www.greencity.de

The mobile “Wanderbaumallee” [“wandering tree alley”] from the “Green City” initiative [Munich, Germany] shows up in unexpected visits on streets that show a lack of greenery. Trees appear in rolling flowerpots and are distributed to illustrate the differences between a green and a bleak streetscape by real-object simulation. As a consequence, 150 new trees have been planted and traffic-calming measures were taken in Munich.

“Guerilla Gardening” is a loose, worldwide community of anarchic gardeners that creates, among other projects, wild gardens in traffic islands, green spaces in the no man’s land between multi lane roads and gardens in a ran-

ge of asphalt and hardscaped urban places, planting flowers, trees and vegetables and dispersing seeds. The movement has its origins in NYC in the 1970's and been active ever since in its 40 plus years.

www.guerillagardening.org

Imaginative resistance of the present employs "Tactical Media", encompassing projects on many sides of a blurred outline. These emerged in 1990's, utilizing diverse art forms and political strategies side by side, forging a new type of activism. Tactical Media uses social political elements in unusual and artistic way.

The critique of Tactical Media activists on prevailing conditions results from their intense participation in social processes and subsequent extra-parliamentary resistance. The current power balance and the distribution of wealth – as in the systems of public information – are often questioned proactively recognizing a need to involve the public more in the control of its affairs. It is characteristic for these types of resistance to employ the easily accessible mass media as an artistic medium.

Tactical Media are a reservoir for political activists, artists, video artists and media geeks, hackers, cell phone activists, grass roots activists and others. Their representatives operate with a high degree of flexibility and mobility in terms of appearance and coalition building, shifting between different forms of media and its combinations. They emphasize synthesis, less specialization and if so, only technological. Differentiation between professionals and amateurs is of little to no interest. Identifiable authorship is likewise not of primary importance, rather an efficient working team to get messages out on the street.

Tactical Media activists principally live and act in the present and for the present with the situation and tools on site, locally and globally. Their projects may take place in physical spaces and involve people, but frequently take place virtually, where they – if necessary – can travel around the globe within the shortest intervals of time. In the occupied virtual space, possibilities arise to tap into hierarchies and expose power structures. Thus, interferences do not occur physically or by personal confrontation, but rather may occur in a space where those in power have – or have temporarily – no possibility of access. The art projects and media campaigns are often spontaneous and of very short duration. They mirror a reality that is ever changing at a rapid pace.

By entering systems and converting them for own needs, activists occupy and control the public media space by the artistic use of freely accessible technologies of the mass media: "Don't hate the media, become the media" [Jello Biafra]. This media critique is happening very practically. It is about infiltrating a system in order to expose and question its *modus operandi*. This typically involves systems of power with differing scales and purposes. In contrast to alternative media that operate outside the mass media and establish their own structures [independent radio stations for example] Tactical Media are not concerned with appropriating the targetted systems permanently for their own purposes. It is widely assumed that the systems which are immanently dysfunctional, might turn against Tactical Media ac-





The YES MEN
and their „Survivaballs“
on occasion of the Climate Week
New York, 2009

tivists in the same way in the foreseeable future.

Therefore it is at the core of Tactical Media that it can not pursue perfection, but must preserve its spontaneity and independence, to be able to operate incorruptibly, also within its own systems.

3 | Berlin 1988.

Original: L'Invention du Quotidien. Vol. 1, Arts de Faire, Paris 1980

Tactical Media often refer theoretically to the French philosopher Michel de Certeau and his 1980 essay "The Practice of Everyday Life"³. Because of the lack of physical space, he distinguishes the term "tactic" from "strategy" as time dependent: in continual search of opportunities that must be embraced, and of incidents that can be converted to opportunities.

"De Certeau described the process of consumption as a set of tactics by which the weak make use of the strong. He characterized the rebellious user [a term he preferred to consumer] as tactical and the presumptuous producer [in which he included authors, educators, curators and revolutionaries] as strategic. This dichotomy allowed him to produce a vocabulary of tactics, rich and complex enough to amount to a distinctive and recognizable, existential aesthetic. An aesthetic of poaching, tricking, reading, speaking, strolling, shopping, desiring, clever tricks, the hunter's cunning, maneuvers, polymorphic situations, joyful discoveries: poetic as well as warlike."⁴

4 | David Garcia and Geert Lovink, "the abc of tactical media" www.waag.org

A risk of Tactical Media is – as suggested before – that the agitating groups can possibly abuse their platforms for their own ends, or that it can lapse into some kind of artistically and visually elaborate propaganda. That claim, however, is frequently disputed by several groups of activists with differing opinions.

www.theyesmen.org

As counterpoint to ideologies with absolutist aspirations – The YES MEN, two communication guerillas from New York, took on the task several years ago with impressive tenacity and consistency, repeatedly putting their individual social and economic existences in peril. Mike Bonnano and Andy Bichlbaum challenge our perceptions and reflections with their – precisely planned as well as hilarious and refreshing politically incorrect – attacks on the weak spots of our global economic and political spheres.

One project of the last years that gained worldwide attention: Shortly after the election of Barack Obama, a fake issue of the New York Times with a print run of several hundred thousand copies appeared on and was distributed in the usual way on the streets of New York City. It was containing several utopian ideas that the YES MEN – and many others – hoped would materialize during Obama's time in office according to his campaign promises. These however, were presented as already accomplished, including a first-hand – and faked – report on the alleged high treason lawsuit filed against former president George W. Bush.

A series of projects by the YES MEN centered around the infiltration of the World Trade Organization (WTO) by a man named Andy Bichlbaum, who showed up as a fake speaker. Undetected repeatedly, he shared facts and action plans that radically contradicted the commercial and frequently destructive interests and agendas of the WTO as well as the corporations associated with it. With their principle of "Identity Correction" the YESMEN att-

empt to reveal and expose the true face of these multinational organizations. In a fake interview with the BBC, Andy Bichlbaum appeared as an “official” spokesman of Dow Chemical – the accountable parent corporation of Union Carbide (responsible for the 1984 chemical disaster in Bhopal, India) and announced, that, at last, the sum of 12 billion US dollars would be provided as compensation to the victims of the chemical catastrophe. Tactics like these offer immediate exposures that are major deviations from the ‘official’ portrayal of the same events. In the course of this project the YES MEN simultaneously infiltrated two global entities – Dow Chemical and the BBC.

During the implementation of their projects the YES MEN collaborate with an enormous number of supporters worldwide, with whom they stay in constant and direct contact. They refrain from any hierarchical structure or attitude in these processes, which underscores their integrity and authenticity. Their candor and encouragement for utopian dreams is apparent in their projects “to fix the world” and in a contagious, bold indefatigability at a time when those qualities are not at all commonplace.

The YES MEN are courageous enough to keep their dream of a better world alive and to offer their own perception of globalization next to the predominant commercial and informational interests.

On September 17, 2011 a group of activists occupied New York City’s Zucotti Park in close proximity to Wall Street and the financial district. The Canadian magazine “Adbusters”, alongside the activist collective “Anonymous”, launched an online appeal to supporters to gather with tents in lower Manhattan and offered the slogan “Occupy Wall Street”. The site-specific project was provoked by the living conditions of the country that many US citizens found unbearable. According to Joseph E. Stiglitz, a Nobel Prize for Economics laureate, the “upper” 1% of the United States draws a quarter of the entire national income and control about 40 % of the strategic and reserve assets. During the past decades, the income of this group increased steadily while the income of the middle classes dropped continuously in the same years, so that overall economic growth of the period was effectively skimmed off by the top. US senators and members of the House of Representatives who themselves are, with few exceptions, part of that top 1%, and so the interrelationships of big money and power works efficiently out of self-interest. Stiglitz writes in one of his essays⁵: “Similar conditions are only to be found in the Russia of the oligarchs and in Iran.” He talks in this context about the erosion of the American identity where fairness, equal opportunities and community spirit are important parameters. The mass impoverishment of the middle class, a rampant and uncontrollable finance system, with youth unemployment around 20 %, the lack of an adequate health insurance system for all, an educational system that releases a great number of university-graduates into the work force with an enormous debt load – those are facts of the 21st century society in the US.

5 | “Of the 1%,
by the 1%, for the 1%”
by Joseph E Stiglitz

[www.vanityfair.com/
society/features/2011
/05/top-one-per-
cent-201105](http://www.vanityfair.com/society/features/2011/05/top-one-percent-201105)

www.adbusters.org
[http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/
Anonymous_\(group\)](http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Anonymous_(group))

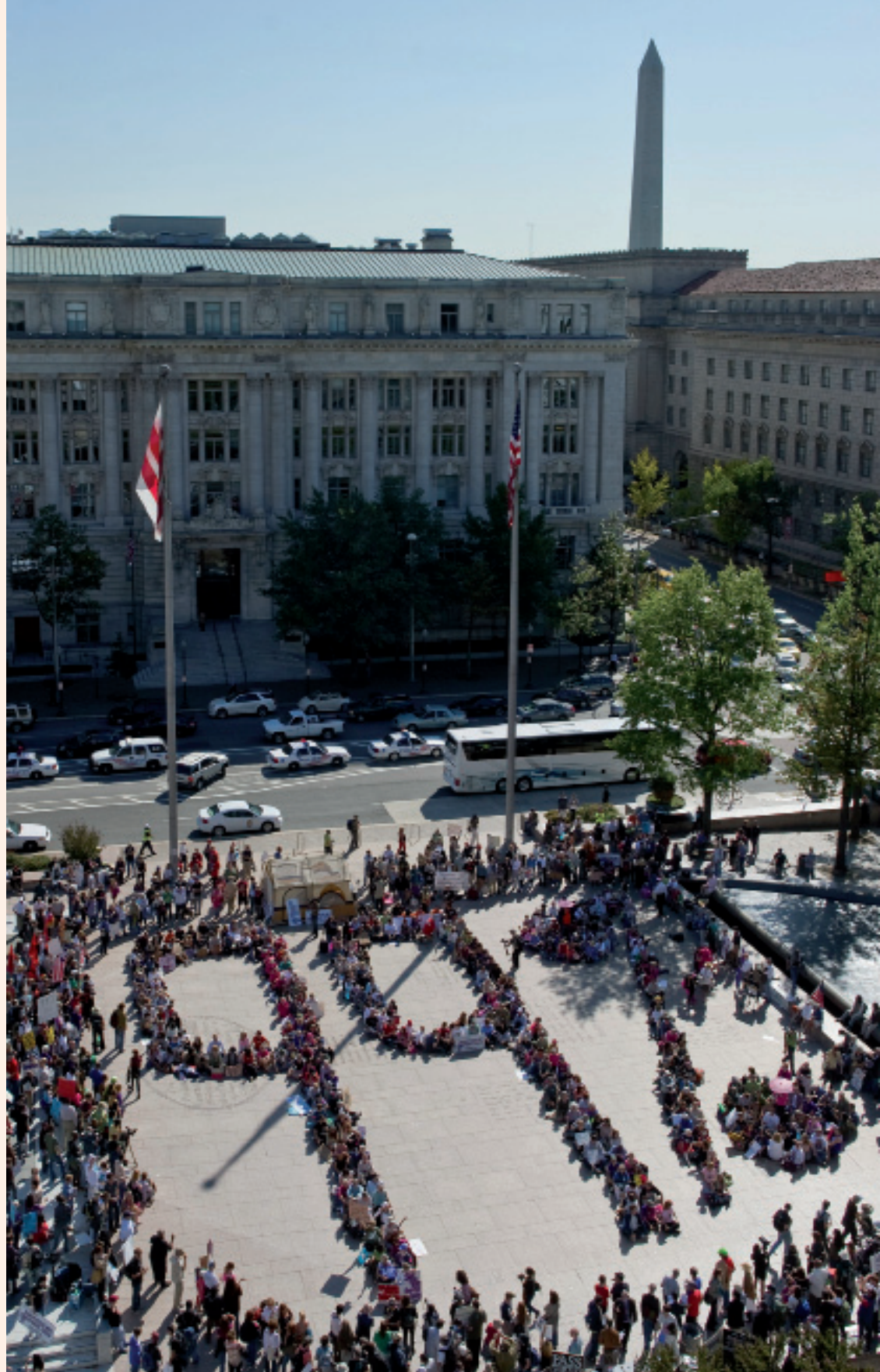


Occupy Wall Street
Camp in Zuccotti
Park, Financial district,
New York, 10|21, 2011

Occupy Wall Street [OWS] grew in force by channeling and exposing existing discontent with these conditions. At the same time the movement worked to bring the sorrow and stigma of poverty out of private lives to the streets, and to make these both visible as physical presences. “We are the 99%” were the audio-visual hallmarks of the movement.

In the weeks that followed, the numbers of the occupants in Zuccotti Park increased steadily, as the assembled started to create a structure between the motley protest groups. Several sub groups concerned with specific themes emerged, along with the practical organization of the protest and the questions of the political claims and demands, that possibly should come out of Occupy Wall Street. In an episodically proclaimed General Assembly – where, among others, guest speakers like Michael Moore got a chance to speak – announcements of the deliberations were made, and further activities coordinated. This was – according to participants and passers-by – a highly efficient structure reminiscent of a sketchy model of a true grass roots democrac

A further tool of Occupy Wall Street was the custom created, publicly accessible blog “we are the 99%”. In public self-portraits people of all ages and of all political and professional backgrounds talked about their personal experiences and hardships, collectively forming a powerful contemporary testimony in scale and impaOccupy Wall Street, from the beginning, had to contend with allegations and challenges of having no concrete singular political demands and the real potential of a mass movement evaporating with no clear resolution or visible change.



Civil disobedience | New aesthetics...



Occupy - London,
St. Paul's Cathedral,
Demonstration 10|19.

Occupy - Los Angeles
Demonstration [right]
11|17, 2011



Occupy
Demonstration against the financial system
New York, New York, 12|12, 2011

For the diverse interests that formed the constellation in Zucotti Park, there was a considerable step forward in terms of bringing those that no longer wanted to take it anymore out to the streets, buoyed by the unifying vision of the onset of a national movement. Shortly after the occupation of Zucotti Park – besides having spread to similar occupations across the country – satellite actions emerged in the cities of other countries and continents. Both prompted and supported by the media the media enabled people assembled in each of these locations to reach one another and communicate concerns with global resonance. With this strong base of popular sentiment, the movement could be successful in the long term, if it were able to re-collect this initial energy in different forms and formulate step-by-step clear political demands. It would not come as a huge surprise, if those demands would focus, for instance, on legislated guarantees of anti-poverty protection in the form of a basic income, independence from the interests of the 1%; equal access to higher education without a lifetime of debt, affordable health care for every citizen and efficient measures to domesticate the financial markets.

The refreshing and reflective seriousness of purpose along with the sobriety that emanated from most of the interviews with the occupants of Zucotti Park is impressive – especially what came from the younger participants, as was their quick-wittedness in the face of ever-new obstacles facing the assembly, and creative responses to the attacks by law enforcement.

Two specific examples: After the City of New York prohibited the use of megaphones or amplified speakers in Zucotti Park, people at the General Assembly came up with the “human megaphone” where the short declarative sentences of a speaker would be repeated by a choir in the assembly, reinforcing the words in order to be audible at greater and greater distances – in a smart adaption of an age-old practice from the stages of Greek tragedies. Further, the General Assembly – with preemptive obedience – ordered a cleaning orgy for Zucotti Park where protesters polished the place in anticipation of a threat to clear the park for a presumably fabricated need for private cleaning and sanitation service.

Despite all its achievements, the OWS movement trickled off after the first wave, with a diffusion of directions among the original organizers about how to continue. In any instance, the quest for a global civil society will be only temporary hindered in the process of awakening self-awareness.

As, among others, the “Occupy Wall Street” movement shows, many of these new fresh and as-of-yet unconsumed art forms are not only challenging, provocative, unsettling and demanding of courage, tenacity and work – they are also immersive and joyous for initiators and addressees. They have broadened the purview and actions of art enormously and people can make use of their structures and prompts in a wide variety of daily lives.

We could say, the YESMEN and their worldwide colleagues have made an impact. Let’s intervene.

More on the subject

The Interventionists. Users manual for the creative disruption of everyday life, Nato Thompson and Gregory Sholette, Cambridge, MassMoca, 2004

The Yes Men are revolting, DVD 2014
Movie and action platform

The Yes Men Fix the World, DVD 2009.
Dokumentary by Andy Bichlbaum, Mike Bonnano, Kurt Engfehr

The Yes Men.
The true story of the End of the World Trade Organization,
Mike Bonnano, Andy Bichlbaum, New York 2004

ARTE France/ARTICLE Z/Common Decency/Britdoc/Charny-Bachrach,
USA/GB/F 2009, 90 Min, Arte, 15.9.2009]

The Age of Stupid, movie by Franny Armstrong, GB 2009

The Democracy Project: A history, a Crisis, a Movement
David Graeber, Spiegel & Grau, 2013