Radical Art?

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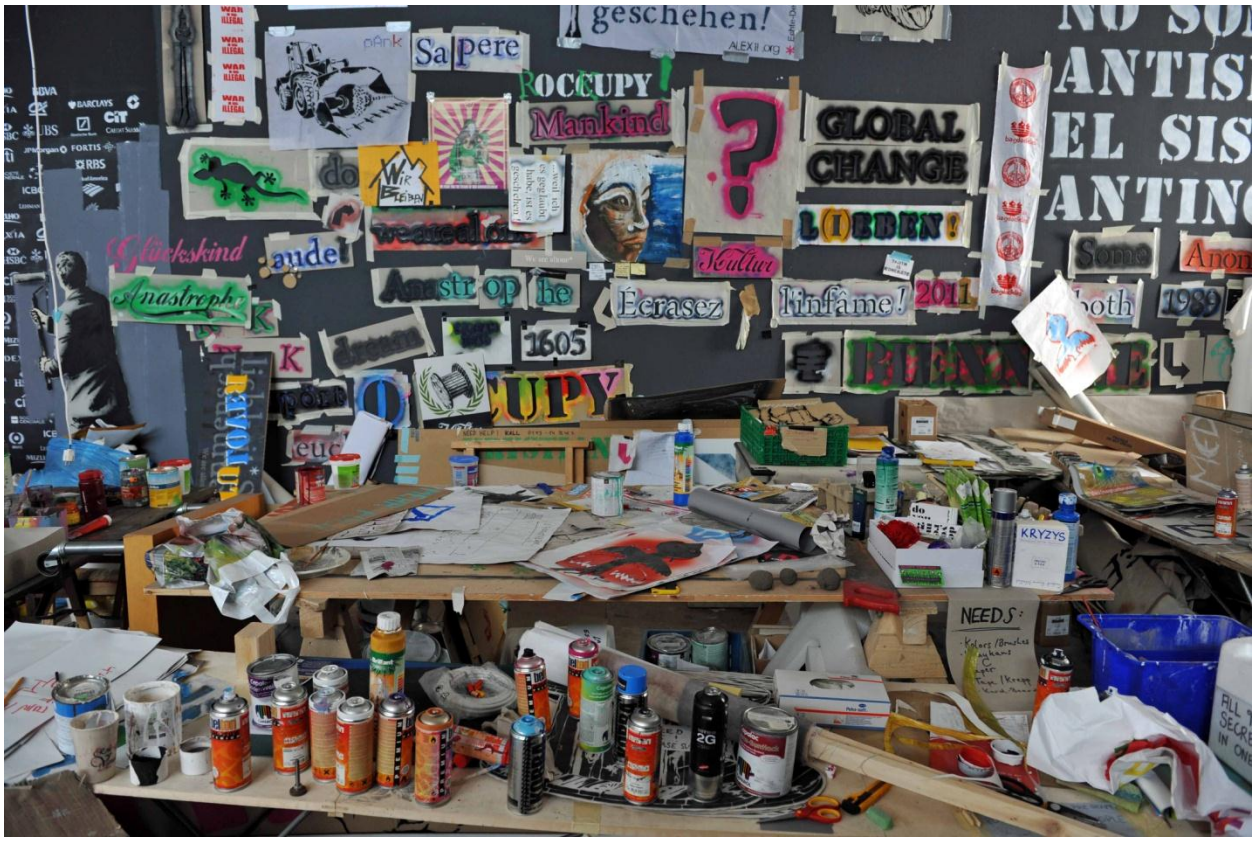
'Un art radical?/ Radical Art?', *Espace Sculpture* (Montreal), no. 99, Spring 2012.



Occupy at the KKW Institute, Berlin Biennial, 2012

Surveying the best-publicised parts of the contemporary art scene, any radical could be forgiven a touch of weary depression and cynicism. While the end of the dramatic boom of the mid 2000s dealt heavy blows to the prices and prestige of some of the most bankable and meretricious stars, many investors still use art (especially painting by well-established figures) as a hedge against the fall of other stocks, and the auction

houses still loudly trumpet the occasional record price. The museums still cosy up to banks and oil companies, weighing cash against loss of reputation. Artist-brands, who have long bored viewers with their robotic performances and standardised products, still hog the attention of the mass media.

Yet just beneath the surface of that sheen of publicity, extraordinary developments have been unfolding, which bear on radical concerns. First, there is the revival of documentary video and photography, after their long neglect in the art world through the 1980s and much of the 1990s. Some of it is slickly made with an eye on the market, but much more finds its destination on the biennial scene, where decorating the lives of billionaires is less of a concern. Old postmodern critiques of the 'politics of representation' have been fused with sophisticated thinking about the representation of politics to deliver complex works with a Brechtian aim. Pieces by Hito Steyerl, Omer Fast, Silvia Kolbowksi and many others combine their powerful politics with compelling staging and narrative drive.

Second, and equally prominent are the efforts to involve audiences actively in art works, from the range of practices captured by Nicolas Bourriaud's term 'relational aesthetics' onwards. Here, too, radical concerns are aired: that art should comment on and even try to ameliorate social alienation; that it be a response to treating things and people as nothing more than useful objects; that art may hold out positive ideals of conversation, collective action, equality and democracy. Much of this art holds irony in reserve, and with self-consciously utopian gestures, contrasts those ideals against the degraded reality of our social, political and economic environment, mocking radical aspirations with the vast distances yet to travel. Both the documentary work and the art that deals with social relations raise awareness of oppression and alienation, and gesture implicitly at the ideals by which we recognise them as oppressive and alienating, yet with little clear sense of how things could change.

So, for a quite a while, art tarried at that terminus—with the art world split between that which served the market with branded goods, and that which served other

audiences with documentaries and social experiments—yet over the last five years that stasis crumbled as two profound changes transformed the field against which art is set. The first is the rise of social media, which has brought millions of people to make and publicly exhibit their cultural products—many of them which look like art—to large audiences. Artists do the same, uploading versions of their (in any case digital) products, and eroding the exclusivity of white cube display. While artists' videos, for example, were once locked away in archives and limited-edition media in private collections and museums, a pretty decent history of video art can now be taught from YouTube. In this massive expansion of the production and publishing of culture, we can see a strange technological fulfilment of Walter Benjamin's hard demand of radical art: that it should be judged, not merely by its political content, but by the extent to which it changed the grounds on which audiences related to works of art, giving them the tools with which to act.

The second change is that, as governments imposed greater injustices in response to the financial crisis, political opposition gradually grew into a global movement. Some of the utopian tactics of relational aesthetics are now tried out in the street, particularly in the encampments of the occupations. The uses of documentary are everywhere apparent, in the viral propaganda of the protestors, and in the restraints that the presence of so many lenses puts on the actions of the state and the police, who are continually watched by networked cameras. The path to change may not yet be clear, but the monopoly that neoliberal orthodoxy had on imagination and thought has been shattered.

The art and culture that emerges from these movements will be made by collective and democratic forces interacting. Mainstream, marketised products of the art world, and the institutions that surround them, seek to convince viewers that they are individual, exceptional, above vulgar use, freely expressed and transcendent—and that these values inhere in treasured objects. Perhaps radical culture will stand apart from each of these qualities and their accompanying myths. Rather than be exceptional, radical works of art will be popular and typical; rather than individual, they will be collective (pressing down on the market value of art works which are reducible to name and brand); rather than pretending to the bourgeois ideal of the free, solitary individual,

they will be put to use and bound to the social; they will be open to public understanding, being unarmoured with the quasi-mystical ideology of much art language (liminal, abject, rhizomatic, sublime, ineffable, etc.). These works may be found less in objects conserved against change and protected from public reaction, than in the flow of data and temporary objects across public space which encourage dialogue, borrowing and improvement. So radicals may choose to make, share, talk, teach and respond to work collectively, and put their work to use. Out of collective action, dialogue and the exercise of direct democracy, we may see emerge—on a local and global scale—an unprecedented art which does not broadcast but converses.