

# Disobedience

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## FOREWORD

*Disobedience* presents the work of a number of local and overseas artists whose works register issues of social justice and protest against the brutal excesses of economic globalisation, both locally and internationally.

The exhibition is curated by Zanny Begg and David McNeill and supported by the *Centre for Contemporary Art and Politics*, a research centre of the University of New South Wales. The Centre was formed in 2003 to promote new forms of political intervention in both the theory and practice of art, and it runs a program of exhibitions, conferences and publications addressing diverse forms of political and social engagement.

*Disobedience* has been scheduled to follow the 2005 *Sydney Social Forum* ([www.sydneysocialforum.org](http://www.sydneysocialforum.org)), and the demonstrations against the *Forbes Global CEO Conference* ([www.30a.org](http://www.30a.org)) at the Sydney Opera House.

This catalogue contains essays by both the exhibition curators as well as by two leading researchers in the field of art and politics: Dr Ilaria Vanni (UTS) and Dr Anna Munster, a deputy director of the CCAP.

The curators wish to thank the participating artists and writers for their work, patience and friendly cooperation, Felicity Fenner and staff at the Ivan Dougherty Gallery, Sally Robinson for designing the catalogue, Su Ballard of the CCAP, Will Saunders for opening the exhibition, Squatspace for using the FAG press to print Kendell Geers' poster and Kate Carr, Adrienne Tasker and David Finch for assisting with accommodation for Dmitry Vilensky. The Gordon Bennett paintings are exhibited courtesy the artist and Sherman Galleries, Sydney.

Research leading to this exhibition was supported by a Discovery Grant from the *Australian Research Council*.

**David McNeill**  
**Zanny Begg**  
Exhibition curators

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(COVER IMAGE) Photo courtesy of Dmitry Vilensky

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(TOP) Gordon Bennett *Camouflage #9* 2003 acrylic on linen 182.5 X 152 cm  
Courtesy the artist and Sherman Galleries, Sydney

(CENTRE LEFT) Kendell Geers *After Love* 1996 two colour poster

(CENTRE RIGHT) Antonio Negri from Dmitry Vilensky *Negation of the Negation* 2005 installation

(BOTTOM) Squatspace *Wicked Problem: Redfern/Waterloo* 2005





(TOP) Beluchi Weavers *War Rug* 2003 wool 110 x 80 cm

(CENTRE) Shilpa Gupta *Blessed – Bandwidth.net* 2003 online interactive installation

(BOTTOM) Phil George *On Border Patrol* 2005 digitally manipulated photograph 80.x 180cm





# ART AND DISOBEDIENCE

David McNeill

*Since it is sure of its ability to control the entire domain of the visible and the audible via the laws governing commercial circulation and democratic communication, Empire no longer censures anything. All art, and all thought, is ruined when we accept this permission to consume, to communicate and to enjoy. We should become the pitiless censors of ourselves.*

Alain Badiou, "Theses on Contemporary Art" (Thesis 14)<sup>1</sup>

*The principal function of politics is the configuration of its proper space. It is to disclose the world of its subjects and its operations. The essence of politics is the manifestation of dissensus, as the presence of two worlds in one.*

Jacques Ranciere, "Ten Theses on Politics" (Thesis 8)<sup>2</sup>

The American minimalist Donald Judd was once questioned about the responsibility of artists to comment on such political issues as U.S. involvement in Nicaragua. He replied that the artist had this responsibility *just as dentists do*. The answer is a clever one, but it is also deeply unsatisfactory. It accepts, at least tacitly, the partitioning of professional and private lives in order to insulate artistic practice from the rigours of political accountability. It assumes that, just as the dentist will restrict any activism to a realm beyond the dental chair (in which disinterested science holds sway), so will the artist embed his or her political activism somewhere beyond the boundaries of a supposedly autonomous sphere of aesthetic experimentation.

The suggestion that political expression is properly confined to a world beyond work is even less tenable now than it was when Judd offered his smart *aperçu*. Apart from anything else, the entire thrust of first world labour policies in the era of "Empire" are toward an erosion of any distinction between the place of work and a private space of leisure.<sup>3</sup> I write and edit this essay at home on a laptop. When I wake in the morning the first thing I do is check my work email via my wireless broadband connection. I am a privileged worker, in that I have a satisfying and well paid job, but I know plenty of folk, many of my students included, who may receive calls at any time of the day summoning them to work in some poorly paid sector of the service industry. Increasingly, labour of every kind, from management to piecework, is extended beyond any specific workplace, traditionally construed.

At the same time, work practices are becoming purposely disorganised. Casualisation, homework, sweatshop labour, and the exploitation of "precarious" immigrant workers, all conspire to marginalise the traditional spaces in which labour represents itself, and to place downward pressure on wages and real living standards. The vestigial guarantees of security that some of us once enjoyed in the era of so-called "fordist" capitalism are disappearing under the impact of individual contracts, offshore tendering and large unemployed labour pools. This is all conducted under the neo-liberal euphemism "flexibilisation".

Labour struggles in this country and elsewhere have frequently focussed on just these developments, and it must seem tempting at times to join the calls for a return to sedentary and routinised working conditions. However, there are countervailing arguments. A number of political theorists and activists have suggested that the truly progressive stance might be to push for the recognition of all forms of immaterial and social labour and to reward these in the same manner as their more visible workplace counterparts. Home maintenance, child rearing, various forms of nurturing and caring, should all be appropriately compensated in this scenario. Thus, a struggle for the realisation of the total social ubiquity of productive labour in all of its varieties is opposed to the attempt to contain and confine labour within traditional spaces and boundaries. Such is the thinking behind the calls for global citizenship and justice, for a wealth tax, and for a minimum social wage, that

we hear expressed by so many of the newer activist groupings in Europe and in contexts such as the World Social Forum.

These calls are founded in the recognition of the impossibility of a return to previous conditions. They run parallel to broader arguments about the most effective ways in which to combat the corrosive effects of economic globalisation. Hence, right wing anti-globalisers will frequently advocate a return to the protective enclave of national identities and borders, whereas progressive campaigners are more likely (especially in the wake of 9/11) to argue for a species of hyper-globalisation of bodies and structures that might serve to check the distasteful excesses of neo-liberalism.

Antonio Negri and Michael Hardt are the best known proponents of the view that globalisation is, in essence, only the attempt by capital to follow labour power down its chosen path of *deterritorialisation* and away from traditional forms and structures of production. It is therefore necessary for new political subjects (the "multitude," or the "precariat")<sup>4</sup> to insist on the primacy of immaterial labour; that it is their right to think new thoughts and to create new things, against the concepts of mindless and repetitive work that were brought to such a high level of refinement in the assembly lines of late capitalism. That is to say, there can be no turning back; either to indentured labour with its promises of minimum financial security, or to an inclusive sense of national identity, with its promises of physical security against global terror. *Disobedience* asks how this tendency to *deterritorialisation* might be embodied in the process and in the presentation of art works.

Most attempts to characterise the relationship between art and politics run aground on the imprecision of both of the key terms. Historically, characterisations of art tend to confuse judgement with definition. The common expression "this is not art" is most often a disguised assessment of quality rather than status. That is to say, if we think something is a "bad" work we will tend to deny that it is art at all. This is as true for modern aestheticians such as Danto, or, less recently, Adorno, as it is for Kant or Baumgarten. We define art to conform to our own tastes and priorities. Solutions to this dilemma, such as the so-called "institutional" definition (art is what the art world acknowledges it to be) are either nominalist or circular, and therefore of limited help.

While the problems of establishing a working definition of art are considerable the difficulties are even greater in the case of "politics". The 'sixties slogan, "the personal is political", effectively opened the floodgates for subsuming every social interaction under this increasingly broad church. There is certainly a very real sense in which shopping, lawn bowls, and synchronised swimming are all pastimes that are inflected with considerations of a political kind, but this might not, in itself, justify the further step of defining them as political activities per se. This is what I take Jean-Luc Nancy to mean when he writes that,

*...Politics is far from being "everything" - even though everything passes through it and thereby comes across and encounters everything else. Politics becomes, precisely, a site of detotalisation.*<sup>5</sup>

The problem is, of course, that a term that means everything means nothing. As the word "politics" has become fatter it has also become lazier.

The French philosopher Jacques Ranciere has been particularly concerned with containing the meaning of the term politics.<sup>6</sup> He prefers to describe most of what is commonly accepted as political struggle as the performance of what he calls *The Police*. Accordingly:



*Politics is specifically opposed to the police. The police is a "partition of the sensible" [le partage du sensible] whose principle is the absence of a void and of a supplement.<sup>7</sup>*

For Ranciere the daily exercise and expression of power through institutions that are visible and acknowledged (either parliamentary or extra-parliamentary) is not best thought of as politics. Rather, because it is founded in a consensual understanding of the protocols of conflict and of its resolution, such exercise is confined, more or less, to the quotidian maintenance of existing forms of privilege. This is the case even when the conflicts are driven by ambitions that are progressive or disruptive. On his model, true politics results only when a challenge is issued against the totalizing claims of existing social discourse in the name of a hitherto silent or invisible social grouping.

To take an example: victims of domestic child abuse were invisible until quite recently, precisely because the juridical discourses and medical institutions necessary to their visibility had not yet been created. With the acknowledgement of their existence comes the recognition that they might be constituted from members that cross over boundaries between previously recognized social groupings founded in class, gender, ethnicity, age and so on. Thus a new *partition of the sensible* is imposed that refigures, if only marginally, all pre-existing assumptions about social agency. Ranciere calls this moment of political eruption *dissensus*, and he feels that it represents the moment of democracy, properly construed, insofar as it is the process through which new social "actors" announce their presence. Thus a true political intervention entails the reconfiguration of our inherited practices of perception and description. It manifests itself as a disturbance of accepted taxonomies, representations and understandings resulting in a reconfiguration of the social *partitioning of the sensible*.

Art may offer itself as a site for political practice in Ranciere's sense, but only to the extent that it presents a challenge to the *partitioning of the sensible* as it is constructed within the art world itself. That is to say, art should not posture as an autonomous site for the exploration of issues that are purely formal, and nor should it pretend to offer up a representation of some pre-existing and external reality. Instead, it should confuse our expectations in the (unstated) name of those who are excluded from the dominant policing of what can be seen and said. It should reveal the ways in which consensual agreements concerning the ground rules for dispute and engagement limit our ability to conceive what is truly possible.

The last fifteen years have seen an almost exponential increase in the institutional networks dedicated to selling, exhibiting and writing about contemporary art. The proliferation of biennales, the rise of independent cosmopolitan curators, and an ecumenical expansion of content have served to qualify the hegemony assumed by North Atlantic cultures during the reign of high modernism. However, it has also been noted often enough that the new borderless empire of contemporary art is still dependent on a range of legitimization protocols and logistical services controlled and orchestrated from these old North Atlantic centres. The embrace of art from the ex-Soviet Union, from the African continent, from China and, most recently, from the Middle East, has made for exciting times, even if this aesthetic globalisation has been haunted by certain disconcerting symptoms, such as (to take a seemingly trivial example) the number of times that the phrase *lives and works in New York* appears in a catalogue beside the name of some emerging artist.

Any attempt to address the relationship between art and politics (somehow construed) in our contemporary world therefore needs also to address the conditions under which art is presented, and the make up of its presumptive audiences. This will mean most pertinently, the relationship between the art world, as a specialised instance of trans-national communication, and other forms of global exchange, including the economic practices of trans- and multi- national corporations. If Negri and Hardt are correct in maintaining that under the sovereign form of new Empire all production increasingly tends towards 'affective

labour' (labour designed to produce feelings of 'ease, well-being, satisfaction excitement or passion'), then the traditional Marxist separation of the economic base from the cultural superstructure has a reduced explanatory power.<sup>8</sup> Under such a regimen there can be no prior or privileged realm of material production that is uninflected with ideological precepts from the moment of its origin. In such a world we can say, at least, that the absence of complicity between the contemporary art industry and economic globalisation cannot be taken as a given.

Further, it has become almost a truism that opposition to economic globalism, in art or in any other arena, cannot effectively resist in the name of pre-existing locale, region or nation. As Negri and Hardt put it:

*What needs to be addressed, instead, is precisely the 'production of locality', that is the social machines that create and recreate the identities and differences that are understood as the local... It is false...to claim that we can (re) establish local identities that are in some sense 'outside' and protected against the global flows of capital and Empire.<sup>9</sup>*

There have been a number of artists over the last decade that have chosen to deal with the implications of working within their extensive and finally nuanced industry. If we are to take seriously the injunction concerning the primacy of the global then we might expect a critical apparatus adequate to such work to reveal the *mobile and modulating circuits of differentiation and identification* that are organised by what Negri and Hardt call the *capitalist imperial machine*.<sup>10</sup> This is precisely what the artists in *Disobedience* attempt to do.

The Russian artist Alexander Brener was one of the first to make the newly emergent and visible global art market the object of his practice, and to then do violence to it. Further, he launched this attack from a position that was itself cosmopolitan; which is to say, he eschewed fighting from the position of an essential yet misunderstood sense of what it is to be Russian.

Although he is represented in *Disobedience* with two pencil drawings done collaboratively with his partner Barbara Schurz, he is probably best known for his activities as a vandal and provocateur. In 1996 he destroyed an elaborately woven hair tunnel by the artist Wenda Gu at the opening of an exhibition, *Interpol*, that was curated to show contemporary artists from Stockholm and Moscow together. Brener was annoyed by the presumption that artists selected for the *Interpol* show might act out or perform a sort of convivial community that transcends and obliterates the real differences between living in the poorest and the wealthiest cities in Europe. He objected to (in Adorno's terms) a 'spurious reconciliation' of real world differences within the sanctified space of an art gallery. His act drew a line in the sand, refusing a kind of art founded in fuzzy and affirmative humanist principles. It also registered a note of resistance to the too ready assimilation of Russia into a new and expanding 'democratic' Europe. One year later he sprayed a dollar sign over an abstract painting by Kasimir Malevich in the Stedelijk museum in Amsterdam, for which action he was arrested and imprisoned. Malevich's works symbolise the utopian hopes and dreams of the generation of 1917, and Brener, in his destructive act, was indicating that these hopes have been irrevocably betrayed and commodified.

Michael Goldberg has a long history of producing uncompromising and refined sculptural and installation art on two continents. While in South Africa he was deeply committed to the struggle against apartheid, and his work in Australia has evoked those who fall beyond the 'partitioning of the sensible' in mainstream accounts of Australian history. His online performance work, *Catching a Falling Knife.com*, was one of the most engaging and effective comments on the abstractions of global economics produced by any artist since the advent of the debates around globalisation.<sup>11</sup>

For *Disobedience* Goldberg has produced *Avatar*. By "disobediently" deploying *Microsoft Flight Simulator* software, he obliges us to confront the nature of the fears and anxieties that



have been so very much a part of all our lives since 9/11. Fear of loosing our jobs to offshore or migrant labour, fear of becoming innocent victims of the war on terror, all conspire to elicit a kind of perverse gratitude toward those (politicians) who offer us protection. It is no coincidence that “fear”, and its antidote, “security”, has become the great growth industry of the post 9/11 world. Populations will always surrender civil liberties and defer criticism if they can be persuaded that they are living through a time of crisis, and our post 9/11 culture has been reconstituted as one of crisis without visible end. Such are the quotidian forms of social control in societies such as ours. These fears are designed to distract us from the increasingly pronounced contradictions between the rhetoric of national autonomy on the one hand, and the truth of global dependence on the other. Currently, the most pervasive First World fear is death by terrorism, and Goldberg’s work simulates this fear as an endless repetition that serves to unmask its role in the expedient construction of a ‘state of emergency’ without end.

The eager suspension of democratic rights in order to protect democracy has been excellently documented and analysed by (among others) Giorgio Agamben.<sup>12</sup> He argues compellingly that such “states of exception” as the U.S. “Patriot Act” serve to disenfranchise increasingly larger populations, and that they therefore serve as the *reductio ad absurdum* of western democratic claims to some kind of ethical universality.

Kendell Geers is also an artist trained in South Africa. Like Brener he has a reputation as a troublemaker. He once phoned in a bomb threat to one of his own gallery openings. For *Disobedience* he offers his reworking of the iconic pop “love” poster by Robert Indiana. The simple work conjures the terrifying power that the term “bomb” has taken on in our modern world. It may also call to mind a generation of disgruntled ‘sixties students who have become the “neo-con” powerbrokers of our age. Recent events have shown yet again how expedient and belligerent foreign policy can result in entire populations being held to ransom, both in the homeland of the aggressor and in the target state.

The rural populations of Afghanistan have been used as pawns in global power struggles for most of their recent history, and it is interesting to note how Baluchi refugees have attempted to salvage something from their predicament by weaving the famous “war rugs”, which have become such a visible addition to the global souvenir trade. The rugs were originally woven at the time of the Russian occupation, and they show the rapid transformation of “abstract” tribal motifs into kalashnikovs, helicopters and other assorted ordnance. The Russian withdrawal was celebrated with an entire sub-genre of carpets showing the retreat of the occupiers. The presence of a new class of customers, American military personnel and NGO workers, has produced yet another species of weaving apparently applauding the “War on Terror” and commemorating the attack on the World Trade Centre. *Disobedience* includes a sampling of these rugs, representing about twenty years of manufacture. The strip across the centre of the 9/11 rug is copied from the bands on the “care packages” that the U.S. air force dropped in the countryside of Afghanistan prior to the campaign of blanket bombing. These care packages contained such sustaining staples as “wet wipes” and peanut butter, but it was also rumoured that some contained butterfly mines - no doubt to instruct local kids in the dangers of accepting gifts from strangers. While these rugs testify to the fact that no-one lives beyond the vengeful grasp of Empire, they also demonstrate the resilience and buoyant opportunism of some of the most set upon people on earth.

Suzann Victor honed her skills as an artist and curator in Singapore, a nation that harbours an abiding suspicion of non-conformity, and a willingness to prosecute those who offer public criticism. The government’s recent attempts to enlist the arts in fabricating a “top down” variant of regional cultural identity represents cynicism and tokenism of a high order, and Victor has long since chosen to live and work at some remove from this postmodern city-state. Nevertheless, she still retains strong connections to the art scene in Singapore (she represented the country at Venice in 2001) and she certainly doesn’t feel that her new home, Australia,

is a paradise of pluralism and democratic freedom. Victor’s cosmopolitan background has sensitised her to the ways in which seemingly laudable terms like multiculturalism, identity and hybridity can be used to insalubrious ends by those with both power and a commitment to keeping it. For Victor, identity politics is a landscape on which almost nothing is as it appears. More often than not she stakes her claims for an expansive and non-reductive understanding of identity in the poetic deployment of glass. Over the last decade she has systematically explored all the poetic potential of glass; its fragility, sound and luminosity, as well as its cultural connotation, from the microscope slide to the Murano-style chandelier. Her multi-sensory work was immersive well before the term became a kind of *sine qua non* of installation art. For *Disobedience* she reworks a traditional Chinese paper lamp to function as a magic lantern, casting shadowy images on the gallery walls of various human rights violations perpetrated by the PRC.

Phil George is a second-generation migrant who has a well-honed awareness of the stifling effects of deferential Anglo-*evolve* culture in our country. Anyone who lives here and is descended from immigrants (that is say, all of us who are not indigenous) might feel a sense of outrage and sadness at the manner in which a fear of ‘outsiders’ has been deployed in order to promote a simple-minded and desperate sense of national community. George is a well-credentialed new media artist, and as a sideline to his chosen profession has developed a refined knowledge of the manner in which new technologies are deployed in the service of surveillance. He has worked in outback communities in Australia and in the Middle East, and his enigmatic juxtapositions of the two make the point that in a globalised world the issues of dispossession and subjugation take on a “transnational” significance that the artist can usefully follow and document. In a world in which “Empire” knows no geographic boundary, committed art can no longer indulge in the assumption that political issues are resolutely local. The oppression of indigenous Australians, and of Palestinians, certainly have their own irreducible histories, but they are histories that overlap and colour each other like a Venn diagram. It is not possible in the modern world to care about the ongoing oppression of indigenous Australians and not to care about the persecution of the Kayapo, Tzeltziles or the Palestinians. George uses the power of digital manipulation to make precisely this point.

Gordon Bennett has a long history of working in a transcultural manner. He has consistently refused to accept a sphere of influence circumscribed by dictates of sedentary nationalist posturing. Instead, he has always (and long before it was fashionable) insisted on locating place and identity as nodal points in a global matrix. While his own practice is founded in appropriation, he has never indulged in the indiscriminate pastiche of ‘eighties postmodernism. Instead, he has always selected his sources strategically, informed by an understanding of colonial history and the racist assumptions with which it was accompanied. In his *Camouflage* series the decorative aesthetic of western abstract painting collides with the symbolic geometry of *shamsa* pattern. These works parody the tendency (described so long ago by Walter Benjamin) for fascism to aestheticise politics. Bennett’s work serves as the bad conscience of the obscene abstraction of CNN war coverage. After all, if anything can be made beautiful, then art itself is in danger of becoming merely an elegant form of camouflage.

As commodities and services (including political programs) are increasingly marketed on the strength of the feelings and status that they promise, it would be surprising if artists were not tempted into the growing worlds of affect production. As art education becomes increasingly vocational, the advertising, entertainment and fashion industries become major sources of employment. It suffices only to read the prospectus of any contemporary art school to understand the pressures to forge complicity between art and commercial manufacture. As art moves towards a new status as, in effect, a research laboratory for the development of new techniques and modes of persuasion, we are entitled to hope that some artists will decline the invitation to travel down this road and to explore, instead, thoughtful and strategic disobedience.<sup>13</sup>



The artists in *Disobedience* are a varied group. However, the one thing they do have in common is a commitment to making art that exposes contradictions in the practice and the ideology of empire. Their work echoes the appeal of Alain Badiou, whose ninth thesis on contemporary art states that; *the only maxim of contemporary art is: do not be imperial*.<sup>14</sup> They all produce work that invites us, for at least a moment, to look through the rhetorical camouflage produced for the benefit of empire by its vast media and affect industry, and to ponder the reality of the world which it attempts to shield from our view.

1. Alain Badiou, "Fifteen Theses on Contemporary Art" in *16 Beaver>Journalisms*, [www.16beavergroup.org/journalisms/archives](http://www.16beavergroup.org/journalisms/archives)
2. Jacques Ranciere, "Ten Theses on Politics" in *Theory and Event* 5:31, 2001.
3. The term "empire" is used here to evoke the kinds of post national economic flows and ideological currents that are described by Antonio Negri and Michael Hardt in the book, *Empire*, (Cambridge Mass.: Harvard, 2000).
4. See other essays in this catalogue by Zanny Begg, Ilaria Vanni and Anna Munster.
5. Jean-Luc Nancy, "Is Everything Political! (A Brief Remark)" *The New Centennial Review* 2.3 (2002). [http://muse.jhu.edu/journals/new\\_centennial\\_review/v002/2.3nancy02.html](http://muse.jhu.edu/journals/new_centennial_review/v002/2.3nancy02.html)
6. See, for example, Jacques Ranciere, *The Politics of Aesthetics* (London: Continuum, 2004).
7. Jacques Ranciere, "Ten Theses on Politics (Thesis Seven)" in *Theory and Event* 5:31, 2001, p.9.
8. Michael Hardt and Antonio Negri, *Empire*, (Cambridge Mass.: Harvard, 2000) p.293.
9. Hardt and Negri, *Empire* p.45.
10. Hardt and Negri, *Empire* p.45.
11. For a discussion of this work see David McNeill; "Heritage and Hauntology: the Installation Art of Michael Goldberg" in *'What is Installation? An Anthology of Writings on Australian Installation Art*, ed. A. Geczy and B. Genocchio (Sydney: Power Publications. 2001).
12. Giorgio Agamben, *State of Exception*, (Chicago: University of Chicago, 2005).
13. On the culture industry's complicity with empire see, Paolo Virno, "Labour, Action, Intellect" in his *A Grammar of the Multitude*, (Los Angeles: Semiotex(e), 2004).
14. Alain Badiou, "Fifteen Theses on Contemporary Art" in *16 Beaver>Journalisms*, <http://www.16beavergroup.org/journalisms/archives>

# CROWDED IN: THE MULTITUDE MAKES A COME BACK

Zanny Begg

Charles Baudelaire, in *Painter of Modern Life*, urged the artist to "set up house in the heart of the multitude, amid the ebb and flow of motion, in the midst of the figurative and the infinite." He urged the artist to "become one with the flesh of the crowd" and enter it as if it were an immense "reservoir of electrical energy".<sup>1</sup> In the *fin de siècle* malaise of post 1968 the electrical energy of the crowd, which in the 1860s so appealed to Baudelaire, appeared to have dimmed to the point where it was barely able to light the way into any serious discussion of mass participation in social life. The multitude ebbed away from sight; fractured, on the one hand, into the antagonistic single units of identity politics and overly homogenized, on the other, into the universal, and unifying, subject position of the working class. Between these two poles enthusiasm for the multitude languished in darkness.

In the late 1990s there was a perceptible recharge in electrical current. The Zapatista rebellion in Chiapas, the mass public sector strike in France, and then the riot and demonstrations at Seattle, shone a beam of light into the discourses surrounding the agency of the masses. All at once it seemed the crowd had swelled back into popular consciousness bringing with it a renewed sense of power and energy. The fullest acknowledgement of this change of fortunes for the multitude was, unexpectedly, made by a *New York Times* editorial which described the massive global anti-war demonstrations of 2002 as the alternative "super-power" to America.<sup>2</sup> By this time the global justice movement, and the concomitant anti-war movement, had clocked up an impressive number of mobilizations (Seattle, Genoa, Melbourne, Prague, the global February 15 demonstrations) and even some minor victories (the shut down of the WTO trade round in Seattle and Cancun and the scuttling of the MAI agreement).

As the crowd came back into focus, artists began again setting up house in its heart. As Katy Seigel points out in an article in *Artforum* in January 2005 the "specter of the many (and the ordinary) hovered over block-buster exhibitions" like *Documenta11*, the *Venice Biennale*, the *International Centre of Photography Triennial* and the *Whitney Biennial*.<sup>3</sup> Artists as diverse as Andres Gursky, Allan Sekula, Fabian Marcaccio and Aernout Mik have jostled with crowds of revelers, protestors and fans as the masses flooded into their work.

The crowd which was amassing in our collective imagination has been given a particular name by Antonio Negri and Michael Hardt – the multitude. In choosing this name they borrowed from Benedict de Spinoza, a seventeenth century Dutch philosopher, who used the term multitude to describe the constitutive power of society: "It is clear that the right of the State or Supreme Power is nothing else than natural right itself, determined by the power, not of every individual, but of the multitude."<sup>4</sup> Hardt argues, in his translator's forward to Negri's analysis of Spinoza *The Savage Anomaly*, that the multitude is the "protagonist of Spinoza's democratic vision."<sup>5</sup> He presents Negri's Spinoza as a philosopher of power, who, in a vein of inquiry also pursued by French thinkers such as Michel Foucault, Gilles Deleuze and Felix Guattari, analyses the myriad forms and mechanisms through which power permeates the social horizon.

What Hardt sees as distinct about Negri's interpretation of Spinoza is that he provides us with an effective "other" to power, "a radically distinct, sustainable and irrecoverable alternative for the organization of society."<sup>6</sup> A clue to this "other" to power lies in the translation of the word power itself. According to Hardt the English language only provides one word for power which whereas the Latin word used by Spinoza breaks down into two aspects *potestas* (the centralized, mediating, transcendental force of command) and *potentia* (local, immediate actual force of constitution). The antagonism between these two aspects of power unfolds in Negri's mind along Marxist lines – the *potestas*

of capitalist relations of production and the *potentia* of working class productive forces.

One of the more innovative aspects of the Italian autonomist Marxist current, within which Negri is a key intellectual, is the emphasis it places on the working class. In 1964 Mario Tronti published an essay as an editorial in *Classe Operaia*'s first edition which argued that Marxism needed to be "turned on its head". He explained

*We too have worked with a concept that puts capitalist development first, and worker's second. This is a mistake. And now we have to turn the problem on its head... and start from the beginning: and the beginning is the class struggle of the working class.*<sup>8</sup>

Tronti was suggesting that capitalist restructuring could only be understood as a response to successful *potentia* of the working class. The power to drive forward social change lay not in the capitalist's hands, but the workers. Whilst a seemingly benign shift in point of view – looking at the same outcome but from a different angle – the theoretical power of this different emphasis is revealed in Hardt and Negri's *Empire*. Following in the footsteps of Tronti, Hardt and Negri see the construction of a globalised world as a response to the power of the working class. It is workers who have driven forward the desire to communicate which has laid the basis of the "network" society, it is worker's who have sought greater creativity in their labour and have thus spurred the growth of immaterial labour and facilitated the importance of communication flows and so forth.

Rather than the gloomy musings of Marxists such as Frederick Jameson, who see globalisation as a totalizing discourse which has been born in a time of defeats of global worker's struggles, particularly the defeat of "socialism" in the former Soviet countries, Hardt and Negri see globalisation as a desperate clash between capitalist *potestas* and the inventiveness and strength of worker's *potentia*.

A second distinctive feature of Italian Autonomist Marxism is the shift in its understanding of the composition of the working class. In 1967 a number of intellectuals associated with *operaismo* met at the University of Padua where Negri had assumed Chair of State Doctrine.<sup>9</sup> At this gathering it was concluded that the working class had changed, the growth in production lines had created a "mass worker" who was still located at the heart of the immediate process of production but who was individually interchangeable and lacked the bonds which had previously tied skilled workers to production. According to Steve Wright, in his analysis of the history of Italian *operaismo*, *Storming Heaven*, these features meant that the new mass worker "personified the subsumption of concrete to abstract labour characteristic of modern capitalist society."<sup>10</sup>

In the mid 1970s, after an explosion of social struggles which spread out from the point of production, such as the self-reduction campaigns by working class communities (in 1974 bus-fare reduction campaign by FIAT worker's in Turin spread across Northern Italy<sup>11</sup>) Negri would return to this discussion of the mass worker. He argued that capital's attempt to control the mass worker's struggles, by socializing the wage and restructuring giant plants like FIAT, had backfired and that although the mass worker had been devastated (in the two years leading up to 1975 the FIAT labour force had been cut by 13%<sup>12</sup>) it had also entailed a greater socialization of capital with a related "further massification of abstract labour, and therefore [the generation] of socially diffused labour predisposed to struggle". While the category of working class had "gone into crisis," Negri explained, "it continues to produce all its own effects on the entire social terrain as proletariat".<sup>13</sup>



Negri thus shifted his analysis of class away from the site of production towards the "social factory" where layers of unemployed, house workers, students and the poor fell under the category of core sectors of the working class. As British Marxist Alex Callinicos points out this shift from the mass worker to social worker turns one of the key early tenants of *operaismo* into the opposite of its former self.<sup>14</sup> Rather than concentrating hopes for revolutionary action in the core of industrial "mass workers" Negri and others within the Italian Marxist tradition began looking to broader social layers for their revolutionary potential.

This shift becomes progressively more marked in Negri's most recent collaboration with Michael Hardt. In *Multitude* they argue that there has been a transformation in the basis of capitalist production from the early industrial capitalism of Marx's time through to Empire. Whilst Marx saw the industrial labour as a hegemonic in the time that he wrote *Capital* (by this he meant it imposed a tendency on all other forms of labour and society) today this role has been replaced by immaterial labour. As they explain

*in the final decades of the twentieth century industrial labour lost its hegemony and in its stead emerged 'immaterial labour', that is labour which creates immaterial products such as knowledge, information, communication, a relationship, or an emotional response.*<sup>15</sup>

Hardt and Negri go on to explain that whilst industrial labour imposed its own imprint on society – the discipline of the factory, the regimentation of school, the structure of the military – immaterial labour also imposes its own values of communication, networks and affect: immaterial labour "transforms the linear relationships of the assembly line into distributed networks" of collaboration.<sup>16</sup> According to Negri "if we pose the multitude as a class concept, the notion of exploitation will be defined as exploitation of cooperation."<sup>17</sup>

For Hardt and Negri the multitude is a whole of singularities irreducible to an individual unit or collective entity reminiscent of Baudelaire's call for the artist to concern themselves with both the "figurative and the infinite". The multitude is distinguished from other descriptions of the crowd – particularly the "mob" and "the masses" – by its self reflecting and self organising character. The mob is a frenzied collective of people which can be manipulated or lead from the outside. The people, a la Hobbes, is an identifiable mass of people whose needs and wants can be reflected by a higher sovereign power. The multitude, in contrast, is constitutive: it exists on the plane of immanence. As Negri explains the multitude is an "active social agent, a multiplicity that acts."<sup>18</sup>

Negri's creative reappraisal of the working class/multitude has not, however, gone unchallenged. Alex Callinicos describes Negri's perspective as a "voluntaristic re-writing of Marxism". He accuses Negri of transforming Marxism into a post-structuralist theory of power which reduces the dynamics of class struggle into a clash of "wills" between a nebulous multitude and a nefarious capitalist class leaving a "strategic vacuum" for any serious advocate of revolution.<sup>19</sup> Others have argued that the multitude is a romantic term which is too broad to provide a useful description of the relationship of the oppressed to the means of production.

Dmitry Vilensky engages with this discussion in his work *The Negation of the Negation*. Vilensky projects video footage from a debate between Alex Callinicos and Antonio Negri on "multitude or class" at the 2003 European Social Forum on a large constructed wall (complete with graffiti and stencils). In an apparent privileging of Negri's perspective Vilensky only includes footage of his speech (Callinicos remains an unseen challenger). Vilensky's camera pans the crowd of participants who form a sea of faces listening attentively to the debate. Rather than existing as a passive mass this crowd (like one would expect of a multitude) interjects, argues and challenges Negri's English translator (eventually replacing her) exhibiting all the attributes of "a whole of singularities" which cannot be reduced to a single collective unit. This is the multitude – a collection of worker's students, unemployed, migrants and refugees – who provide the "one no" and "many yeses" of the global justice movement.

But in a complicated and inconclusive gesture Vilensky also includes a second projection, on the rear of the screen, of Russian workers labouring on the factory assembly line. So whilst the viewer sees Negri explain to the crowd the growth and centrality of immaterial labour we also stare into the faces of those workers who still sweat it out as material labourers.<sup>20</sup> The weight of Callinicos's argument remains present.

In an honest attempt to come to grips with the legacy of totalitarian socialism Russian born Vilensky probes what it means today to "set up house in the heart of the multitude." He confronts head on some of the more rigid interpretations of Marxism, the staple diet of Soviet socialism, which privileged the universal subject position of the heroic and unchanging working class. But he also eschews any easy abandonment of the concept of the working class *tout court*. In a country which has undergone a deeply traumatic transition to capitalism, with an exponential growth in unemployment, corruption and capitalist exploitation of labour Vilensky remains alert to the experience of work for those, particularly in less developed economies, who remain caught in the cycle of old fashioned material labour.

*The Negation of the Negation* provides a complex and nuanced way into a discussion of the multitude. Vilensky, in challenging the viewer to think through how we understand the notion of working class, provides a uniquely critical response to globalization. In this sense he achieves his stated aim of creating art which "disrupts the established order, giving rise to creative chaos, from which utopian forms for a new society can emerge".<sup>21</sup>

The persistence of utopianism is also something which Sydney based artist Raquel Ormella explores in her work *Che*. Since finding a pair of Che underpants in the Spittfield's market in London in 1999 Ormella has begun a collection of photographs of the Cuban revolutionary Ernesto Che Guevara. Ormella photographs images of Che whenever she comes across them and her collection includes photographs of posters, stencils, T-shirts, banners, tattoos, books, placards, street signs and the more ludicrous lip balms, ice creams and cosmetics. To avoid any one image becoming *the* icon for Che, Ormella displays these images as a group in a small zine accompanied by text which describes the context of how she came across the images.

In the 1960s Che's face was the symbol of humanist socialism. In contrast to the grey suits of the Soviet bureaucracy's socialism in one country Che symbolized a more youthful, third worldist and utopian idea of global revolution. His face became the global symbol of 1968 – from Paris to Czechoslovakia his beard and beret graced the paraphernalia of rebellion. In the 1990s, after the ubiquitous *Rage Against the Machine* album cover Che's popularity spilled over from radical socialist circles into a more generalized symbol of cultural rebellion for young people around the world. Che became the symbol of broad anti-capitalist dissatisfaction as he adorned the clothing and cultural production of much larger pool of people than those who understood and supported the Cuban revolution he committed his life to.

In a strange way the global popularity of Che stands as a metaphor for an understanding of the multitude. At his ideological core Che was a committed Marxist, a revolutionary fighter who helped bring into being a socialist society in Cuba. He died attempting to spread this revolution to Bolivia and his legacy is understood by many as deeply connected to that socialist ideological project. But arching over this base is a superstructure of emotion and attitude. Che speaks to millions who have no deep understanding of this project but respond to his defiance, his rebelliousness and his humanism.

Similarly at its core the multitude is a revolutionary subject composed of people who possess revolutionary subjectivity. But Hardt and Negri sweep into this category a larger pool of people who respond more generally to anti-capitalist ideas and actions. Like Che (the man) the multitude can never be divorced entirely from socialism and revolution but also like Che (the symbol) the multitude encompasses a looser more inclusive anti-capitalist ideology.



Is the revolution just a Che t-shirt away? Clearly no. But Ormella's work draws our attention to how symbols of revolution have also been globalised. Whilst those, such as Thomas Freidman, may describe globalization as "wearing mickey mouse ears and eating a Big Mac" from an other perspective there has also been the globalization of Che, the Zapatistas and Seattle. The power of these symbols is so great even corporations have tried to capitalize on their "brand" – hence the Cherry Guevara ice creams. But these attempts only belie the ongoing power of the symbols itself.

The power of symbols and branding is something which Dean Sewell also explores in his work. Hovering between activist and photographer, documenter and instigator, Sewell's photographs of twilight culture jamming actions illustrate how the global justice movement can reverse the branding power of multinational corporations. In one work he documents how culture jammers subverted a Vodafone billboard on Kingsford Smith Drive, Sydney Airport. As he explains "The largest single advertising billboard in the Southern Hemisphere, the Vodafone billboard, became an anti-war statement". Naomi Klein, in her influential book *No Logo*, describes the process whereby multinational corporations have taken the street credibility and rebellion of urban youth culture and hung their logo back over it – "revolution bought to you by Nike". But artists like Sewell explore the ways in which activists have hit back and reclaimed street culture for the spirit of opposition.

The multitude's home is always the streets. The streets are collective gathering points which bring together the whole of singularities which constitute the multitude – the gathering point which over runs the separation of individual houses, cars and workplaces or the anonymity of the shopping mall, the airport or the lobby. When the multitude expresses itself politically it contests for ownership of public and communal spaces – it sets off a showdown between popular democracy and private and state control of space.

Squatspace are a Sydney based artist collective whose work has engaged with the contestation of space. Emerging out of a squat in an abandoned building in Broadway in 2000 Squatspace have been involved in a range of artistic projects which have raised issues about access and control of space. In 2002 they created an installation, *UnReal Estate*, for the "This Is Not Art Festival" in Newcastle where they constructed a shop front and advertised all the empties in the local area and their various attributes for potential squatters. An old jeweler shop in the city was advertised as a "rough diamond" but with excellent location.

For *Disobedience* Squatspace are embarking on a different project. They are looking at the contestation over public and private space in the Redfern/Waterloo area. This area has been describes as a "wicked problem" for urban planners: offering no solution which will satisfy those with a claim over the territory – residents of the Block, advocates of Aboriginal housing, squatters and artists, yuppies waiting for the rise of real estate values, business worried about crime rates and working people looking for somewhere cheap in the inner city to buy houses. Squatspace are not sure that their project will reach any form of outcome – "wicked problems" by their nature rarely have happy solutions – but they feel this is part of the point. Through posing an open ended research project which explores how decisions are made about public and private space Squatspace are probing into the decision making power of the multitude. How does a multiplicity act when its component singularities conflict?

This exhibition, by including a range of artists who have critically responded to globalisation, allows the viewer to take stock of the global justice movement at a crucial time. Almost a decade since Seattle, and in the wake of the Iraq war and September 11, the crowd may be back in focus but it remains to be seen exactly how its *potentia* will shape the world.

3. Katy Siegal, "All Together Now: Crowd Scenes in Contemporary Art" *Artforum*, January 2005, p.167.
4. Benedict de Spinoza, quoted in Antonio Negri, *The Savage Anomaly: The Power of Spinoza's Metaphysics and Politics* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1991), p.197.
5. Michael Hardt in Negri, *The Savage Anomaly*, p.xv.
6. Michael Hardt in Negri, *The Savage Anomaly*, p.xi.
7. Mario Tronti, *Storming Heaven*, trans. S. Wright, (London: Pluto Press, 2002), p.64.
8. Tronti, *Storming Heaven*, p.64.
9. Tronti, *Storming Heaven*, p.107.
10. Tronti, *Storming Heaven*, p.107.
11. Tronti, *Storming Heaven*, p.158.
12. Tronti, *Storming Heaven*, p.168.
13. Negri in Tronti, *Storming Heaven*, p.163.
14. A. Callinicos, "Antoni Negri in Perspective" in *Debating Empire*, ed. G. Balakrishnan, (London: Verso, 2003).
15. Michael Hardt and Antonio Negri, *Multitude. War and Democracy in the Age of Empire*, (New York: Penguin, 2004). p.108.
16. Hardt and Negri, *Multitude* p.111.
17. Negri, "Approximations." p.1.
18. Negri "Towards an Ontological Definition of the Multitude."
19. Callinicos, "Antoni Negri in Perspective", p.133.
20. Antonio Negri, *Multitude of Working Class?* Special edition of *What is to be done*, produced for the exhibition *Cycle Tracks will Abound in Utopia*, curated by D. Vilensky, Australian Centre for Contemporary Art, Melbourne, August 2004.
21. *Cycle Tracks will Abound in Utopia*, catalogue, (Melbourne: Australian Centre for Contemporary Art, 2004), p.23.

1. Charles Baudelaire, in *All that is Solid Melts into Air*, ed. M. Bergmen, (New York: Penguin Books, 1982), p.145.

2. Susan George, *Anti-Capitalism Where to Now*, (London: BookMarks, 2004), p.47.



# IMAGINING POLITICS, POLITICISING IMAGES

Ilaria Vanni

*A world picture does not mean a picture of the world but the world conceived and grasped as a picture... the world picture does not change from an earlier medieval one into a modern one, but rather the fact that the world becomes picture at all is what distinguishes the essence of the modern age.*

Martin Heidegger, *The Question Concerning Technology* (1977)<sup>1</sup>

During a recent seminar in Rome an Italian economist whose work I greatly value, shared fresh statistics according to which the proliferation of images is connected to the rise of dyslexia in young people. This piece of information intrigued me: it seemed to imply there is something fundamentally flawed in the relation between images and words, a competition almost, and that indeed we are at present observing an increase in the circulation of images to the detriment of verbal communication. The proliferation of images in postmodernity — usually associated with developments in digital technology — is an interesting trope, scented at times with a certain nostalgia for a past when intellectual realisation was achieved and measured through the spoken and written word and when the whole world was represented as *liber mundi*: a book to be read. The feeling is that in present times rather than a book to read the world has become a flow of images to watch. The dichotomy between the textual and the visual implied in this line of reasoning is in reality a false one. W. J. T. Mitchell investigated a similar concern in *Picture Theory* (1994), positing the question of what images are, and more crucially how images relate to language. He claimed that the Greenbergian reduction of each media to its essential traits has to be redressed and re-formulated as “all media are mixed media.”<sup>2</sup> Mitchell makes a case for the intertextuality of images as embodying “visuality, apparatus, institutions, discourse, bodies, and figurality.”<sup>3</sup> If the visual and the textual are indeed entangled what interests me here is to put in relation the “pictorial turn” to the “linguistic turn” that, in the form of centrality of communication, traverses post-fordist societies.<sup>4</sup> The entanglement and slippage between the visual and the linguistic, I believe, is also a good starting point for a reflection on what it is that makes, or does not make, an image political.

Nicholas Mirzoeff defines the “globalization of the visual” as the experience of “people in industrialized and post-industrialized societies [who] now live in visual cultures to an extent that seems to divide the present from the past.”<sup>5</sup> Mirzoeff fine-tunes the mainstream perception and argument that living in the visual is indeed simply a matter of quantity, as if the visual turn depended on the propagation of images brought about by digital technologies: “Visual culture does not depend on pictures but on the modern tendency to picture or visualize existence.”<sup>6</sup> Examples of the act of visualising can be drawn both from history and the everyday, from outside the “formally structured moments of looking,” like art galleries or cinemas.<sup>7</sup> Visual culture, in other words, is not confined in a particular place and within a particular, definite, timeframe, but is diffuse and permeates every aspect of the everyday. We can think for instance about road signage, icons on our computer screens, medical imagining, cityscapes, screens in buses and train stations, surveillance structures, biometric technologies, advertisements, food packaging, picture messages. We should also think about postmodern politics, and about another entanglement: between the modern Western representative system and representation. Ida Dominijanni has analyzed this entanglement, looking specifically at the Italian case:

*That there is a current slippage from politics to communication is a well-known fact. At the origin of this slippage we find social complexity and the dissolution in mass culture and mass media of the community languages at the core of political identities and of political parties' capacity to mobilize the symbolic level; the crisis of legitimacy and credibility of politics; the*

*exponential growth of mass media and their technological and financial development. Subsequently we find the already declining myth of “direct democracy” where the opaque mediation by parliamentary parties between those governed and those governing would be substituted by the transparency and immediacy of televisual visibility and by the rapidity of “real time” in the electronic agora.<sup>8</sup>*

In this entanglement between the representative system and representation Dominijanni identifies the common origins of both fields: “the communicative function of politics and political function of communication. Politics and language; social order and symbolic order.”<sup>9</sup> It is through the progressive loss by politics of its ability to mobilise the symbolic level both through metaphors (such as in grand narratives) and metonym (such as in linguistic and communicative practices and forms of direct political participation) that politics surrenders its symbolic and communicative function to media.<sup>10</sup> In “old” media, especially in television, this symbolic function is emptied out of its political content through a progressive slide towards technical templates: repetition of successful formats, of particular strings of words, of stereotypical terminology, of “representation that does not represent,” of a constant flow of disconnected images.<sup>11</sup> According to Dominijanni both politics and media suffer a common fate: a tendency towards dematerialisation, abstraction from both individual and social bodies and self-referentiality, or in brief a tendency towards a system based on hyper-metaphors.<sup>12</sup> And with metaphors “we theorize, conceptualize, abstract, substitute, represent. We put words in the place of things.” On the contrary with metonyms we “combine, associate, link, move from context to context, allude, narrate: things and words makes sense through references and associations accompanying them.”<sup>13</sup> To this I would add that in the crisis of the representative system, politics also surrenders to the hyper-metaphorical media its imaginary function, its ability to produce not only a common (political and metonymic) language, but also a common (political and metonymic) imaginary. Where does art stand in this crisis of signification? Can one talk indeed about political art when politics itself has dissolved in the hyper-metaphorical regime of communication? What is that it makes an image political? Is it possible that Brian Holmes is right in defining art as a field of extreme hypocrisy in the age of corporate patronage and the neoliberal state, thus directly reflecting the crisis of the representative democracies?<sup>14</sup>

Walter Benjamin in the 1934 essay “The Author as Producer” explored the role of art vis a vis production relations. In his text he theorises the necessary overlapping of aesthetics and politics in works of art that are politically viable. Benjamin’s text is based on a lecture delivered in Paris at The Institute for the Study of Fascism, an organisation close to the Popular Front, whose aesthetic tendency would have been in favor of Social Realism, the accepted “revolutionary” style.<sup>15</sup> Benjamin refuted, in a veiled form, this aesthetic assumption. In his text he implies that for an artwork to be politically correct it has to make use of innovative techniques. Benjamin tackled the dichotomy between commitment and quality which informed the contemporary debate around the role and place of artists, stating that rather than presenting an either/or scenario, political commitment or tendency and high quality had to go hand in hand.<sup>16</sup> To explain his position Benjamin refuted the relevance of the nexus between the work of art and the social production relations of its time. He believed that enquiring whether a work of art endorses the productive relations of its time, and is therefore reactionary, or if it challenges them, and is revolutionary, is to posit the wrong question. The question to ask should be, what is the position of the artwork within the production relations of its time?<sup>17</sup>



This shift in thinking — to shift the artwork from a relationship of either acceptance or critical response to the location within the context of production — is an important one. It gives the artist, and the artwork, an active role, rather than a passive one of critical response, or illustration or comment. Moving Benjamin's argument into our own period is useful for thinking how we can "do" things with images, in which context of production these images should be placed, and how we can liberate images from what is essentially a representational and metaphorical role. I want to argue, perhaps quite unfashionably, that in fact a whole category of images defined as political in virtue of their content are largely representations, pictures, illustrations, metaphors of a political concept, but are not political in their being in the world. Their being in the world is abstracted from the current productive structure, removed from the vicinity of social and political movements, and disconnected from their moods. These images operate through what has been termed a device of metaphorical substitution,<sup>18</sup> becoming simply signs that substitute

*words in place of things, a figurative meaning in the place of literal meaning; the universal in the place of the particular in an infinite progression, as language itself can become that of which language talks about, resulting in a meta-language, and so on.*<sup>19</sup>

In metonyms, we read in Luisa Muraro's ironically titled *maglia o uncinetto* (knitting or crochet):

*the relationship between the figurative and literal meaning coincides with a material link, either a spatial, or a temporal or causal link... The specificity of metonym ... consists in its shaping up through found, and not invented, links. These links can be of any kind provided that they are established not through pure thought, but that they come to us as already given (formed). While metaphor springs from an original idea, metonym makes its own way through lived experience. Thanks to metaphor existence is molded into an ideal representation, while with metonym it is articulated in its various parts.*<sup>20</sup>

The characteristics of metonym outlined by Muraro — materiality and proximity between the figurative and literal meaning — stress the importance of positioning, or with Donna Haraway, of "situatedness."<sup>21</sup> Images, including art, that are in the world politically, share many common traits with metonyms, starting exactly from their positioning. These images rather than being conceived "from an original idea" are characterised from being in a dialogic relationship: between themselves, with movements, with productive relations, with bodies, things and ideas. As Brian Holmes has pointed out:

*Right now, the greatest symbolic innovations are taking place in self-organization processes unfolding outside the artistic frame. And it is from the reference to such outside realms that the more concentrated, composed and self-reflective works in the museum take their meaning. The only way not to impoverish those works, or to reduce them to pure hypocrisy, is to let our highest admiration go out to the artists who call their own bluffs - and dissolve, at the crisis points, into the vortex of a social movement.*<sup>22</sup>

The works by Riot Generation Video/Global TV presented in these exhibitions are an example of this dialogic construction. At first sight similar to documentaries of protests, these videos are much more than the visual storytelling of events. The origins of Riot Generation Video (one of the many names and practices of a group of activists from Rome) are to be found in the complex milieu of social centers in the early 1990s, in particular in the *centro sociale Forte Prenestino* in Rome. Social centers, operating much like Temporary Autonomous Zones, offered the possibility not simply for artists to develop their own separate narratives, but also to experiment, appropriate and deconstruct technologies and question classic role divisions in video and theatre production. The skills, knowledge and practices developed during these years provide the basis to then traverse and contaminate the complexity of present times, when, Riot Generation Video maintains, it is no longer possible to refer to counter-information, as divisions between what is "official" and what is "counter" have been blurred, and it is impossible to think in purely antagonistic terms.<sup>23</sup> It is no longer possible to refer to media-activism either,

a term redolent with identity politics which fails not only to encapsulate the reality of activism as communication, but also as everyday participation in the construction of politics, and as ability "to be inside and traverse the complexity of politics."<sup>24</sup> The life cycle of these videos begins in a dialogic situation par excellence, that of *assemblee*, the meetings where politics are discussed, actions prepared, events organised. It continues from within these actions, following their development and resolution from a variety of angles and through a variety of lenses, since several people contribute footage, weaving in a polyphonic narrative a multiplicity of bodies, images and voices. Finally the video is edited. It is both a communal creation and creation of the common. The metonymic qualities of proximity, combination, association, connection, and movement from context to context, allusion, and narration are evident in the editing and rhythm of videos. The same spatial relationship of movement, association, and contamination could also be described, in Michael De Certeau's, terms as tactical:

*A tactic insinuates itself into the other's place, fragmentarily, without taking it over in its entirety, without being able to keep it at distance. A tactic is always on the watch for opportunities that must be seized 'on the wing'. Whatever it wins, it does not keep. It must constantly manipulate events in order to turn them into opportunities.*<sup>25</sup>

Hardt and Negri describe a similar tactical and metonymic dynamic in their reading of Mikhail Bakhtin's *Problems of Dostoyevsky's Poetics*, in particular in their analysis of the notions of polyphonic narrative and the carnivalesque.<sup>26</sup> Polyphonic narrative is "a dialogic structure that becomes an apparatus where several subjects interact and where each subject is based on its recognition of others."<sup>27</sup> It is strictly related to the sensual, choral and performative nature of the carnivalesque, in Bakhtin's words:

*The carnivalesque crowd in the marketplace or in the streets is not merely a crowd. It is the people as whole, but organized in their own way, the way of the people. It is outside of and contrary to all existing forms of coercive socioeconomic and political organization, which is suspended for the time of the festivity. This festive organization of the crowd must be first of all concrete and sensual. Even the pressing throng, the physical contact of bodies acquires a certain meaning. The individual feels that he [sic] is an indissoluble part of the collectivity, a member of the people's mass body. In this whole the individual body ceases to a certain extent to be itself; it is possible, so to say, to exchange bodies, to be renewed (through change of costume and mask). At the same time the people become aware of their sensual, material bodily unity and community.*<sup>28</sup>

Apart from the external aspects of protests, Hardt and Negri recognize the influence of the carnivalesque in the political organization of the multitude itself, as

*a constant dialogue among diverse, singular subjects, a polyphonic composition of them, and a general enrichment of each through this common constitution. The multitude in movement is a kind of narrations that produces new subjectivities and new languages.*<sup>29</sup>

It is in this generative movement that images can become, and be produced as, political. Here they can recover their metonymic power. They can intervene, queer, interrogate, contaminate and sabotage and perhaps more importantly they can do what political movements do best: be part of the production and narration of a political culture that creates new political subjectivities.

1. Martin Heidegger, *The Question Concerning Technology, and other essays*, trans. W. Lovitt (New York: Garland 1977), p.130.
2. W. T. J. Mitchell, *Picture Theory: Essays on Verbal and Visual Representation*, (Chicago: Chicago University Press 1994), p.5. See also: Clement Greenberg, "Modernist Painting" (1961) rpt. in *Art in Theory 1900-1990: An Anthology of Changing Ideas*, ed. C. Harrison and P. Wood, (Oxford, UK: Blackwell, 1992), p.754-760.
3. Mitchell, *Picture Theory*, p.16.
4. M. Lazzarato, "Immaterial Labor" in *Radical Thought in Italy*, ed. P. Virno and M. Hardt, (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press. 1996), p.133-147. M. Lazzarato, *Lavoro Immateriale*, (Verona: Ombre Corte. 1997). C. Marazzi, *Il posto dei calzini. La svolta linguistica dell'economia e*



- i suoi effetti sulla politica, (Torino: Bollati Boringhieri 1999). C. Marazzi, *Capitale e linguaggio. Dalla New Economy all'economia di Guerra*, (Roma: Derive Approdi 2002).
5. Nicolas Mirzoeff, "What is Visual Culture?" in *Visual Culture Reader*, (London: Routledge, 1998) p.4.
  6. Mirzoeff, "What is Visual Culture?" p.6.
  7. Mirzoeff, "What is Visual Culture?" p.7.
  8. Ida Dominijanni, "La Parola del Contatto," introduction to L. Muraro, *Maglia o Uncinetto*, (Roma: Manifestolibri 1998) p.34. See also: I. Dominijanni, "Media, politica, antipolitica", *Democrazia e Diritto*, 1. 1996.
  9. Dominijanni, "La Parola del Contatto" p.35.
  10. Dominijanni, "La Parola del Contatto" p.36.
  11. Dominijanni, "La Parola del Contatto" p.36.
  12. Dominijanni, "La Parola del Contatto" p.36.
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  24. Ferraro, Interview.
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  27. Hardt and Negri, *Multitude*, p.209.
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# OUTAGE, SEEPAGE, BLOCKAGE: ART AND CULTURAL PRAXIS IN THE NETWORK

Anna Munster

*The worker of the twenty first century, who has to survive in a market that places the utmost value on the making of signs, finds that her tools, her labour, her skills are all to do with varying degrees of creative, interpretative and performative agency. She makes brands shine, she sculpts data, she mines meaning, she hews code.*

Raqs Media Collective, "X notes on Practice," 2003.<sup>1</sup>

In the *Glossary of Telecommunications Terms*, developed for use as a federal standard mandatorily implemented across the American telecommunications industry, an "outage" is defined as any situation or condition in which a system completely divests a user of its service.<sup>2</sup> In the business of providing standards for an industry that is riven with non-uniformity and uneven development, this *Glossary* – otherwise known as *Federal Standard-1037C* – does its best to account for a global definition of what it means to utterly lose access to a communications service. In computer and communications systems, a global definition is one that applies beyond immediate circumstances and assumes that internal variables or variations do not affect the overall state of the system. If we take seriously the claims of many contemporary sociologists who argue that telecommunications have played a driving role in the "state" we now call globalisation, then we should also take seriously communications systems' conception of the global as a condition that holds over and above variation.<sup>3</sup> And yet the *Federal Standard-1037C* definition of "outage" provides an exception to the condition of complete deprivation of power, a telecommunications or computing service:

*Note: For a particular system or a given situation, an outage may be a service condition that is below a defined system operational threshold, i.e., below a threshold of acceptable performance.*<sup>4</sup>

This suggests that sub-systems or specific states of systems may in fact operate under conditions of considerable variation, operate in spite of the general or global non-functioning of a system. Under certain circumstances, then, a user might access a system, might even operate upon and through it even though overall the system is not functioning globally. In these specific circumstances, adequate access to a service or just enough power seepage allows a degree of operational capacity. How might a service be used, how might power flow, how would a system perform when its global standards are subjected to these fluctuating variations? The standards-driven definition of "outage" suggests that global systems are not hard and fast structures but are indeed produced through a processual dynamics in which local variation is at work, mining the systems' seepage, even blocking its flows and diverting them elsewhere.

All this talk of power stoppage, leakage and diversion also provides us with a vocabulary for articulating the flows of information through contemporary service economies in rather visceral terms. This reminds us that although the quintessential ground for contemporary production may indeed have become the terrain of signs and that immaterial labour has likewise become the primary form of productive work, nevertheless, as Paolo Virno argues, affective relations to information are indubitably coupled with materiality:

*The emotional situation of the multitude in the post-Ford era is characterized by the immediate connection between production and ethicality, "structure" and "superstructure," the revolutionizing of the work process and sentiments, technologies and the emotional tonalities, material development, and culture.*<sup>5</sup>

As much as aesthetics is concerned right now with sign production, this should not be located at the level of merely imbuing the sign with meaning or value. Instead, aesthetic work in information culture performs a kind of plumbing and

mining; the manual manoeuvres wrought upon the dynamics of information such that these mould or impair the creation of consumable signs. Could this unstable dynamics of flow, service, access, denial, leakage and deflection serve to elucidate art and cultural praxis in the network today?

During the 1990s, corporatisation rapidly ate into the interstitial networks of artists, thinkers and cultural producers operating in alternative online formations. Although the net lost its appearance of hosting the leftover dreams of the libertarian and utopian freedoms of the 1960s and 1970s, activism in the network became massively savvy to the redeployment of information protocols. Alex Galloway and Eugene Thacker have suggested that the concept of protocol can be used to identify the logic of control in networks and hence to locate both normative operations of the network and "counterprotocological" strategies.<sup>6</sup> During the 1990s, cyber-activism invented the mass "virtual sit-in" of corporate and state information infrastructure by organising thousands of reloads of these websites and by spamming their email servers and causing them to crash. Groups such as the Italian *Anonymous Digital Coalition* and US based *Electronic Disturbance Theatre* produced action and software that temporarily blocked access to financial institutions in Mexico and America and still continue to organise virtual and physical swarms, flooding and denial of service attacks on targeted servers.<sup>7</sup>

However, Galloway and Thacker also caution against rigidly distinguishing between protocol/control and a counter logic that can be located in the hypostatisation of "resistance". If a network is in part constituted through the technical protocols that govern the interrelationships of its nodes, then all networks – even those that overtly work against corporatisation or state regulation, even those that culturally and aesthetically "resist" – are governed to a degree by the technical modulations coursing through this immanent field of control. Some of the most aesthetically and politically engaged networked events in the last decade are, then, tactical manipulations of the logic of protocols, cybernetically feeding the network back into itself. Of course, cyber-activism has never been so naïve as to claim that its resistance lies outside the network. An important direction in much of the theorisation of this politics – for example, Hakim Bey's *T.A.Z. The Temporary Autonomous Zone, Ontological Anarchy, Poetic Terrorism* and Critical Art Ensemble's *Electronic Civil Disobedience* – has been to affirm that information warfare is waged in temporary, fluid and tactical modes, following the liquidity of information itself.<sup>8</sup> And yet, the tactical deployment of network services also threatens to scale down to mere tacit networking, forming just another node in the network.

If it is now broadly accepted that any network seepage used for aesthetic or cultural ends simultaneously engages network protocols, then a new issue emerges for information activism and indeed for evaluating the efficacy of politically engaged information aesthetics. How is it possible to transform these strategies of rerouting and blocking from mere feedback loops resonating with, and indeed multiplying the system's reach, to transformations in and of networks? As Stephan Wray already suggested in 1998, part of the problem with earlier calls to action under the guise of electronic civil disobedience lay in the distinction between cyberspace as the new sphere for political action on the one hand, and the street as a dead zone of non-action, on the other.<sup>9</sup>

But street and information highway have now become thoroughly imbricated. As the information service economy spreads its infrastructure across time zones and diverse geographical locations, its core system encounters places in which it has to operate in different conditions and where its centres of investment, growth and control – the U.S., Germany, Japan – start to shift and



drift towards, for example, India and China. It is not surprising, then, that the question of place is re-emerging as an indeterminate nexus of street and information flow and will increasingly become the arena for political and aesthetic negotiation.

We are already witnessing a massive recolonisation of place under the guise of the moniker of "locative media" and driven by the boom in mobile and wireless telecommunications. But here location is intricately bound up, again, with the logic of control. The locative – as manifested in the latest drive to insert GPS systems into any and all mobile and personal media devices – is primarily concerned with the tracking and positioning of data and bodies in information space. Locative media therefore embody the repurposing and massification of the "science" of militarisation – logistics. By keeping track of where data and personnel are in decentralised and globalised military zones, military command deploys logistical routines in order to retain a centralised command/control regime. It is not surprising that wireless technologies have suddenly boomed in the wake of 9/11 and even more so with the massive investment into GPS technologies leading up to and on from the US military invasion of Iraq in 2003. Artists are feeling the lure of a new field of info-capital investment in commercial locative media preceded by the initial military scoping out of its potential. Now the telco executives are calling out, as they have done before, for content to fill their empty consumer gadgets. At the same time and in spite of this military-info-capital alliance, it is vital *not* to refuse the possibilities thrown up for rethinking place now, even if the ground is exposed largely due to technological opportunism.

Much of the interesting negotiation around the virtuality and actuality of place in the network comes directly from new media theory and art practices in India, China and Korea. In particular, the use of skilled Indian programmers and developers as a cheaper source of labour for U.S. west coast software companies in the 1990s combined with the location of massive call centres – the logistical backbone of the current telecommunications boom – in the outlying satellites of Delhi and in Bangalore, have contributed to compounding and concatenating India as a site of global/situated, space/place tensions. What is exciting about this new media praxis is its simultaneous comprehension of both network and "situatedness".<sup>10</sup> Rather than declare "India" or its specificity to be points of external resistance and fundamental difference to informatic culture, the strategy is to hew – from a situated place that is nevertheless "translocally" connected to the global via informatic flows – the protocols that seamlessly attempt to integrate all places into becoming mere nodes in the smooth functioning of networked logic.

No matter where you log on, interact with, watch or encounter Shilpa Gupta's net, video, performance and installation work, this double occupation of the space of flows and situated place prevails. Working out of Mumbai but exhibiting in the global network of art galleries and biennales, Gupta draws us in with internationally familiar web design yet actualises this in the material conditions of Indian urbanisation. Using the seduction of consumerist branding and the affective economy of instantaneous interaction common to new media transaction, Gupta cajoles interactants into the global market place of online commerce, sentiment and aspiration. Her websites, in particular, promise to catapult the user into a shiny world of hard-to-come-by products – diamonds, kidneys, sanctification – with the mere click of a mouse. Just like gullible recipients of spam email and hoping to gain financially from or guiltily deposit monies in off-shore locations, we readily submit to Gupta's lurid online colour schemes and directives to submit information to her sites' text fields. And yet the further we follow the faceless imperatives of these web presences commanding us to "take a kidney test" or "get blessed for instant peace and happiness" the more we are pulled below the threshold of the operating system of networked globalisation.

In *blessed-bandwidth.net*, Gupta facilitates a one-stop religious bazaar for the user, urging them to choose a religion accessible through drop-down menus and receive a blessing. But like all items offered up for online transaction, uneasiness about the authenticity of quality, supply and delivery accompanies them. As we enter into acquiring a religious experience, motivated as

Gupta intimates by the inverse impulse of insecurity produced at the intersection of dislocation and surveillance in networked time and space, we simultaneously become suspicious and require validation. At this point, we have the option to have our blessing "verified" by viewing images or video of the various pilgrimages made by Gupta herself to famous temples and churches of major religions in India including Sikh, Hindu, Muslim, Christian and Buddhist. Carrying an actual cable for network connection, Gupta performs a series of rituals to assist the blessing of the physical stuff of the Internet that binds computers to each other and enables data to flow. Gupta's physical visitations, then, at various pit stops around her country and backed-up by evidence provided by photograph or video become the work undertaken by a body situated in time and place. It is this work that guarantees the feeling of security in a drifting sea of global connectivity. There is always this sense, as you become further immersed in Gupta's cheerful platitudes, that someone else is carrying out undeclared and undervalued labour in restrictive, regulated and arduous ways in order for the network transaction to flow efficiently. Someone, who ordinarily might be invisible at the global operation of networks, but whose existence *just below the threshold* Gupta makes us acknowledge likewise in a cheerful fashion.

What is left deliberately unresolved in *blessed-bandwidth.net* is the dialectical antagonism of affect and discursivity that characterises so much experience in contemporary translocated culture. The more we participate in networked economies, politics and cultures the more we retreat into both political and religious fundamentalisms. Shilpa Gupta is cognisant of the fact that these antagonisms between outage and seepage, anonymity and situatedness, metaphysics and material life are not in the least exclusive but mutually constitutive of the dogged operation of networks. By siphoning off some of the network's capabilities, Gupta reminds us of the ambivalence lurking at the core of every self-possessed choice we believe is our primary gain from interacting with information technologies.

Aesthetic and cultural praxis in the network involves running the gamut from deploying its protocols in hyperbolic and intensified modes in order to underscore its groundless logic to slipping below the operational threshold of its sprawling system and finding the hiccups of fluctuation and differentiation. Working in this more liminal zone, the cultural "net-worker" deploys the global functionality of the system in a located manner, grounding any aspirations to a seamless "space of flows" instead in the inflections, warps, colours and contours that shape networks into vibrant and heterogeneous clusters.

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2. "Outage", *Federal-Standard-1037C, Telecommunications: Glossary of Telecommunication Terms*, 1996 (hypertext version). <http://www.its.bldrdoc.gov/fs-1037/>
3. See the work of Marc Augé, *Non-places: Introduction to an anthropology of supermodernity* (London: Verso, 1995); Manuel Castells, *The Rise of the Network Society* (Oxford and Malden, Massachusetts: Blackwell Publishers, 2000); Arjun Appadurai, *Modernity at Large* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1997).
4. "Outage", *Federal-Standard-1037C, Telecommunications: Glossary of Telecommunication Terms*.
5. Paolo Virno, *A Grammar of the Multitude: For an Analysis of Contemporary Forms of Life* (New York: Semiotext(e), 2004), p.84.
6. Alex Galloway and Eugene Thacker, "The Limits of Networking", *nettime* mailing list, 24 March, 2004. <http://amsterdam.nettime.org/Lists-Archives/nettime-1-0403/msg00090.html>
7. For a document of many of these actions throughout the late 1990s and up to the present, see the website of *Electronic Disturbance Theatre*. <http://www.thing.net/~rdom/ecd/ecd.html>
8. Hakim Bey, T. A. Z. *The Temporary Autonomous Zone, Ontological Anarchy, Poetic Terrorism* (Brooklyn, NY: Autonomedia, 1991); Critical Art Ensemble, *Electronic Civil Disobedience and Other Unpopular Ideas* (Brooklyn, NY: Autonomedia, 1996).
9. Stephan Wray, "On Electronic Civil Disobedience", paper presented to the *Socialist Scholars Conference*, March 20 – 22, New York, 1998. <http://www.thing.net/~rdom/ecd/ecd.html>
10. This term is borrowed from Andreas Broekmann "Networked Agencies", 1998. <http://isp2.srv.v2.nl/~andreas/texts/1998/networkedagency-en.html>. Broekmann is interested in thinking through not simply the connectivity of the network but also how to think of culturally specific networks and cultural specificity in the network.





(TOP) Michael Goldberg still from *Avatar* 2005 interactive installation

(CENTRE) Dean Sewell *Culture Jamming* 2005 billboard photograph

(BOTTOM) Riot Generation Video *Precarious Work*, Milan Euro Day 2004, Milan 2004





(TOP) Raquel Ormella *Che* 2005 photo details from three 'zines

(CENTRE) Alexander Brener and Barbara Schurz *Fuck all Forms of Political and Cultural Discrimination* 2000 pencil on paper 56 x 41 cm

(BOTTOM) Suzann Victor *His Mother is a Theatre* 1994 human hair, velvet, bread, woks, mechanisms, buttons, light bulbs Photo Simon Thong



# PARTICIPATING ARTISTS, WRITERS AND COLLECTIVES

## ZANNY BEGG

*Crowded In: The Multitude Makes a Come Back*  
Catalogue essay

## BELUCHI WEAVERS

Assorted War Rugs c.1985 – 2003 wool  
Private collection

## GORDON BENNETT

*Camouflage # 2* 2003 acrylic on linen 182.5 x 152 cm  
*Camouflage # 6* 2003 acrylic on linen 182.5 x 152 cm  
*Camouflage # 9* 2003 acrylic on linen 182.5 x 152 cm  
*Camouflage # 13* 2003 acrylic on linen 152 x 152 cm  
All courtesy the artist and Sherman Galleries, Sydney

## ALEXANDER BRENER AND BARBARA SCHURZ

*Ya Basta* 2000 pencil on paper 56 x 41 cm  
*Fuck all Forms of Political and Cultural Discrimination* 2000  
pencil on paper 56 x 41 cm

## KENDELL GEERS

*After Love* 1996  
Two colour poster

## PHIL GEORGE

*On Border Patrol* 2005  
Digitally manipulated photograph 80 x 180 cm

## MICHAEL GOLDBERG

*Avatar* 2005  
Interactive installation

## SHILPA GUPTA

*Blessed – Bandwidth.net* 2003  
Online interactive installation

## ANNA MUNSTER

*Outage, Seepage, Blockage: Art and Cultural Praxis in the Network*  
Catalogue essay

## DAVID MCNEILL

*Art and Disobedience*  
Catalogue essay

## RAQUEL ORMELLA

*Che* 2005  
Three 'zines

## RIOT GENERATION VIDEO/GLOBAL TV

Video installation  
Courtesy Ilaria Vanni

## WILL SAUNDERS

Opening Speech

## DEAN SEWELL

*Culture Jamming. Helping You Communicate Better* 2005  
Photographs

## SQUATSPACE

*Wicked Problem: Redfern/Waterloo* 2005  
Installation

## ILARIA VANNI

*Imagining Politics, Politicising Images*  
Catalogue essay

## SUZANN VICTOR

*Deep Love* 2005  
Lantern, transparency, lens

## DMITRY VILENSKY

*Negation of the Negation* 2005  
Installation

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