

Richard Gilman-Opalsky and Stephen Shukaitis

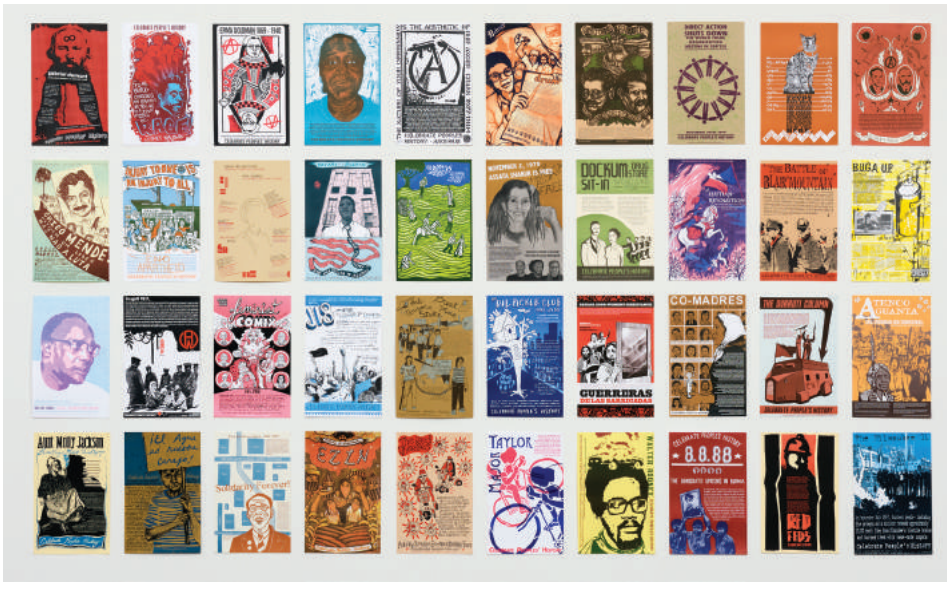
# SPECTRAL COMPOSITIONS IN A TIME OF REVOLT

*In March 2017, Firstsite, a contemporary art gallery in Colchester, UK, hosted #WorldsUpsideDown, an exhibition curated by STEVPHEN SHUKAITIS that explored art's treatment of moments of destabilization, crisis, and renewal.<sup>1</sup> Included were photographs by Cairo-based artist Mosa'ab Elshamy of the 2011–2013 revolt in Egypt;<sup>2</sup> Justseeds's Celebrate People's History poster series;<sup>3</sup> and David Mabb's Long Live the New! Morris & Co, Hand Printed Wallpapers and K. Malevich's, Suprematism.<sup>4</sup> These works were chosen because each communicates or represents moments of upheaval and provokes questions for audiences about how such moments resonate with each other and about what we can learn from aesthetic representation of such moments. Connecting with the themes of this issue, the exhibit explored how cycles of struggle expand aesthetic possibilities and media communications, from the Russian revolution's embrace of the avant-garde to more recent utilization of social media.*

A public seminar with Richard Gilman-Opalsky and Stephen Shukaitis was organized to explore themes in the exhibition and in their respective writings. What follows is an excerpt from that seminar.

*ASAP/Journal*, Vol. 3.2 (2018): 313-332

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**Figure 1.**  
Installation view of a selection of the of the Celebrate People's History posters. Photograph courtesy of Firstsite.

**RICHARD GILMAN-OPALSKY (RGO)/** My book, *Specters of Revolt*,<sup>5</sup> is about revolt and philosophy, thinking about global uprisings since roughly 2008. It's mainly focused on how the uprisings themselves are a part of thinking, or what we may call "the general intellect" of societies and people in different positions of desperation. Stephen wrote a book called *The Composition of Movements to Come*, also published in 2016.<sup>6</sup> And his book is not about revolt, at least not defined in the same way. What he looks at in *The Composition of Movements to Come* are radical art projects in politics and creative practice. But one of the things I find in his work is that his interest in radical art and creative practice is similar to my interest in insurrectionary disruptions, social upheavals, and events like that.

We're both looking for new ways of thinking and being, new forms of life, new ways of dealing with old impasses in radical and revolutionary politics or projects. I think it's fair to say that Stephen and I both begin where a lot of previous generations ended, with a kind of disaffected radical hope. A term I use in one of my earlier books, *Spectacular Capitalism*,<sup>7</sup> appears as a section entitled "Revolutionary Alternatives to Revolution." There, I think about what it means to give up on the grand nineteenth-century idea of totally changing the world, of having a major transformation through revolutionary movements. Would that mean having to give up on every concept of revolution? We don't think so. Both Stephen and I are interested in such revolutionary alternatives to revolution.



**Figure 2.**

David Mabb. *Long Live the New! Morris & Co. Hand Printed Wallpapers and K. Malevich's Suprematism, Thirty Four Drawings, including covers, addendum and afterword* (2016). Book covers and acrylic on wallpaper mounted on canvas. Photograph courtesy of Firstsite.

To this end, in *The Composition of Movements to Come*, Stephen talks about different avant-garde practices in art activism and creative cultural production. You talk about the “art of the undercommons.” And I don’t think we ought to take for granted that it is obvious what that means. So maybe you could, first of all, define what you mean when you talk about art activism against art? That’s one of your phrases, when you talk about the “art of the undercommons.” Could you give some examples of what you mean by this?

**STEPHEN SHUKAITIS (SS)**/ I’m interested in forms of cultural and artistic production that don’t necessarily appear as fine art or aren’t classified as art, or which aren’t thought of in the realm of “proper” art, to the degree such persists conceptually. For instance: in

this room here, we’ve asked people to respond to the exhibition by making flyers about how they would change the world. I want to look at the practice of making flyers, of making zines, or making your own music as being just as important as David Mabb’s wonderfully painted Morris and Malevich mash-ups, or, in a different manner, the photography of Egyptian photojournalist Mosa’ab Elshamy. They might not have the same formal quality or craft to them, but they can express something that is deeply important to their creators. And they can have quite an impact in the world as they circulate. I’m interested in forms of cultural production that we can think of as art, but which we don’t necessarily have to think of as art—or which often don’t fit neatly into a category. And you can find this as a way into the history of the avant-garde,



**Figure 3.**  
 Photograph of the flyer-making station for the exhibition (2017). Courtesy of Firstsite.

which is quite skeptical of the notion of art itself. So, we could go back to ready-mades, to Duchamp taking a urinal and writing “R. Mutt” on it.<sup>8</sup> What happens when you do that? I’m interested in those kinds of gestures that radically reshape the collective practices of all kinds, from looking to making, and then often the art world itself.

**SEMINAR PARTICIPANT/** *What you’re saying about Duchamp—I listen over and over again to Grayson Perry’s Reith Lectures from 2013.<sup>9</sup> He makes lots of very valuable points about what art is, how anything is art. We’ve reached*

*the end-stage in art, but that doesn’t mean to say that is the end of art outreach. And that’s essentially as you said: you can have something beautiful to look at, but that isn’t necessarily an end-in-itself; it sparks things. I’m fascinated by the idea that anything is art. Is it? Yes, it can be.*

**SS/** I totally agree, and there is a sense in which over the past one hundred years in art history and thinking that this is often the case. So anything is art if you call it art. And that’s the case whether you put it in conceptual terms—perhaps by calling it pictorial nominalism—or not.<sup>10</sup> Art has no essence in itself but only the condition of being

socially constructed as art. That’s basically what Roger Taylor argues as well in his book *Art, an Enemy of the People*,<sup>11</sup> though for him that’s much more of a problem than creating possibilities.

Now, you could say that gets you to a place where art has no meaning—but I would disagree. The question for me is instead in asking what happens, what is possible, by and through calling something art. What kind of social spaces does that create? Or, as you said, what does it spark? That’s what my interest is: the sparking that is possible through doing the

things together in an artistic frame. In his writing, Richard explores moments of political revolt as doing the work of philosophy, as being a philosophical analysis in and of itself. I take a similar approach, but in a different direction. Instead, I'm exploring moments of revolt through particular forms of artistic and cultural production, and working to tease out their meaning, their sparking.



**Figure 4.**  
*One of the flyers produced during the exhibition (2017). Creator unknown.*

**RGO/** There's a way in which you can hear in the examples you gave an effort to try to think about art beyond its conceptualization as the private property of a professional class of artists. In our societies—in capitalist societies—the concept of production is always connected with power. And so, if you say that anyone can participate in creative production, that's a form of power. There's a certain sense in which, for Stephen, the de-professionalization of art production, the art of the undercommons, is a kind of open invitation to everyday people who wouldn't otherwise think of themselves as artists, as having the power to create something, to spark something, and maybe to change things.

But it is important to notice something about these recent uprisings we've seen (and they've been in and around London, too): the reaction against them. The reaction against them

is usually comprised of the same tri-part opposition: (1) they're irrational, (2) ineffective, and (3) violent. But as a philosopher, I think there's something strange about that because philosophy is supposed to like the opposite things. Philosophy proclaims rationality, objectivity—you know, calm, cool analysis. Philosophy prefers logic and order and places hope in argumentation as the effective path to change. So basically, the revolt is always condemned as the opposite of philosophy. It's a violent, irrational, ineffective, and dangerous emotional outburst.

I want to de-professionalize politics almost like Stephen wants to de-professionalize art. And I don't know if that's the right way to say it. It's not that we want to de-professionalize art, politics, or philosophy in an institutional sense, but that we don't want to allow a class of professional thinkers, politicians, and artists



**Figure 5.**

*Photograph from the flyer-making section of the exhibition, including installation shot of an untitled piece from Mosa'ab Elshamy from the 2011 Egyptian revolution (2011). Courtesy of Firstsite.*

to tell us what we can do creatively, politically, or intellectually.

When the Egyptian revolution happened in 2011, the people knew that they didn't like Mubarak, but it raised questions throughout the whole region. One of the most popular demands that emerged in that wave of uprisings was "down with the regime." So, that demand was in Tunisia, it was in Egypt, it was in Bahrain: "down with the regime." There were particular problems in each place, but also a sort of general and common expression of "we want something else." And that activity raises questions about the society; it raises questions about the power of everyday people, and not that of the professional class of politicians.

**SEMINAR PARTICIPANT/** *Philosophers like to resolve things, don't they, to explain? And as you said, the revolution is . . . What they're doing is a human reaction to oppression, and there's so many forms of oppression. I wonder what art will come out of the USA in the current moment.*

**SS/** This is probably a pithy thing to say, but I think there's more than a few of us who looked at the election of Donald Trump and said, "this is horrible, but music is going to get really good again."

**RGO/** Yes, music and art. It's also good news for comedy. People always sharpen the knives when something really objectionable happens.

I don't want to say the situation with Trump is good or dialectically productive, because for real people it actually matters what he's doing with these immigration bans—and also in terms of foreign policy, health policy, and education policy. These things do really matter, although there is another side to it, for sure. Hopefully, the music takes up the problems, the art takes them up, the intellectuals take them up, everyday people take them up, and with any fortune, the revolt takes them up too; we've already seen the occupations of airports take up Trump's anti-immigrant position. And really, I think of all of this activity, which is ultimately social activity, as the activity of real power.

Previously, we discussed the nature of imaginary power as opposed to real power. And sometimes we say that imaginary power isn't what we want. We want real power! But I would put a slight twist on that, because real power is worth nothing if you cannot imagine something radically different. What good is real power without the imaginary power to think of something much better, much different? So here, art can help with power. But if you only value power by measuring how it changes policy, then our power doesn't look like real power.

**SEMINAR PARTICIPANT/** *It's a force, though, isn't it?*

**RGO/** Yes, and I don't think we should judge power in terms of how it changes policy. I work in a department of political science.

What many political scientists think is that nothing is political until it is articulated at the level of public policy. And I reject that. There are events that transform relationships between people. When we look at the 1969 Stonewall Uprising in New York, in the gay club down in Greenwich Village, we see power in the revolt. And that power changes things, it even changes law and policy much later on, as it participates in reshaping our thinking about sexuality, and eventually, issues like same-gender marriage. But the law only comes to reflect what's already been changed prior to the law, what's been happening outside of and against the law.

**SEMINAR PARTICIPANT/** *Power isn't necessarily words, and that is important, too. . . .*

**RGO/** Yes, I think this is really the point: to think beyond words and text. And this is what puts Stephen and me in such close proximity, because a lot of the specific examples he's interested in—in art—are non-textual productions. They're performative. Stephen is interested in a lot of performative work. And one of the things I find in Stephen's writing that helps me to think is a wide array of examples of non-textual thinking: thinking that's outside of the narrowly textual type of communication.

**SS/**It also applies to a difficulty I've had. There's this sociologist I quite like, John Clammer, who wrote a book called *Vision and Society*.<sup>12</sup> In it, he says that he wants to create not a sociology of art, but a sociology *from* art.

He wants to work from the direct thought process of art itself. I find this to be very interesting and very appealing. It reminds me of again how we talk about revolt as philosophy, revolt as thinking. But the difficulty is in how you write about it, explain it, mediate it, in a way that doesn't fall back into the traditional or institutional role of the intellectual who tries to explain everything in a nice pattern and a clever, tidy explanation. How do you take direct practices, whether they're artistic or political practices, and try to tease them out and explain and expand them without forcing them back into the box or format of pre-fabricated explanations?

**RGO/** You were asking how you can take something that is non-textual, like a revolt, and say what it means through text without somehow disfiguring or distorting its meaning. And I think this is precisely what has to be done, but it's very difficult to think about how to do it. The starting point for me would be at the level of definitions. There's a reason why I don't talk about ideology from below or the ideological content of revolt. Instead, I talk about philosophy from below and the philosophical content of revolt.

There's an important distinction between ideology and philosophy, and unfortunately, it's one that was lost on Marx. When Marx wrote *The German Ideology*, he was criticizing German philosophy. And it was true that in the middle of the nineteenth century his generation was hobbled by a culture of sitting around in bars and cafés and talking about

Hegel and having unending conversations about philosophy. And Marx was making a declaration against all that, saying that the world is burning outside, that you're all too damn philosophical. He, of course, famously wrote in his "Theses on Feuerbach" that "the philosophers have only interpreted the world, in various ways; the point is to change it."<sup>13</sup> But what he missed is that there's actually a critical difference between philosophy and ideology. Ideology is what you get when you already have a finished worldview through which you interpret and understand the world. In German, there's a nice word for it: *Weltanschauung*. And if you look at the world through this particular worldview, you look at it through ideological lenses that make the world support your worldview.

One way I saw this was in the *International Socialist Review*, a pretty popular Left-wing magazine. When the so-called Arab Spring started, they had many articles about how the people in Tahrir Square were anti-capitalists, how they were socialists, and how when they said, "down with the regime," they meant "down with capitalism." But that was not true. This was an ideological translation of a very complicated and heterogeneous social reality that was really much messier. And one of the things that I would recommend is to look at the really good 2013 documentary entitled *The Square*, by Jehane Noujaim. The cameras go into Tahrir Square and one of the things you see is the deep disagreement there. Friends and family members fighting in their apartments, really not sure at all about what



should come next. You see so many people who don't want the Muslim Brotherhood, but who think that it might be the best available option. There were other people who were categorically against it, and others who wanted total revolution. And actually, there were a lot of people who were just talking about opportunity, and not talking about abolishing capitalism. They're talking about reforms, they're talking about democracy.

For me, this open questioning is philosophical. Ideology is the end of open questioning.

With ideology, you already know how things ought to be: you're a conservative, you're a liberal, you're a radical, you're a communist, or you're an anarchist. And then you put on your ideological glasses and, through that *Weltanschauung*, you look at the world and everything you see is confirmation bias. Instead, I think we should look at the revolt as a philosophical rather than an ideological activity. And when we look at these revolts, we ought to resist saying that they are communist or Marxist or anarchist or liberal or conservative. That's what I try to do—to resist giving them, in a translation, some particular ideological perspective, which I think that in fact they don't have. They're much more philosophical, and it's precisely that fact that makes it so hard to translate such non-textual events. But this doesn't mean that open questioning in the philosophical activity of revolt is not saying anything at all. It's just not an expression of some cohesive ideology.

**SS/** This reminds me of approaches that have been developed by people working in social history, where the idea is to record a variety of experiences and perspectives—in particular, voices and stories that are usually not recorded as part of the historical record—without necessarily trying to impose a coherent or unified narrative on them. Social history, in this sense, is a process of registering the messiness of such accounting as much as the readable and communicative contents themselves.

**RGO/** Yes, and not to give the account a meaning that is external to it. It is a complex social history. The only thing I don't like about the word “history” is its implication that certain events, or a series of events, are finished and done and part of the past. Sometimes something happens, and while it seems to be over, it is in fact far from finished.

**SS/** Does history have to imply that?

**RGO/** It doesn't. I like the notion that history is happening. But I also think that what is happening are so many things that have already been declared finished and done. But they're *not* finished. A lot of these revolts—for example, Black revolt in the U.S.—involve taking up unfinished business. They're taking up very old problems in new contexts. You see this with racism, you see it with inequality. Inequality is very old. So when politicians call it austerity, you have anti-austerity protests. When you see the Indignados in Spain rise up, they're not addressing a new problem; it's a very old problem. Yet the problem of

dignity isn't only a historical problem. Nor is an uprising ever the last act in the history of confronting that problem.

**SS/** In some ways, you can say that history, as a concept, implies closure. And that's the same problem you identify in ideology: closure. It entails wanting to see an end and to say, "okay, here it is, it's over with, it's done."

**RGO/** I like the way you put it: that with both ideology and history the problem is that of closure. When you meet somebody who's very ideological, they're finished thinking about the questions that have been answered by their ideology. And that's the antithesis of philosophy.

By contrast, when young people, who are not following any example, try something new and courageous and scary and they're not sure what's going to happen: that's a philosophical moment. They are afraid, but they nonetheless feel that they must open a rupture for questioning.

A lot of the students I've had who were part of Occupy Wall Street have told me that they miss that period of questioning the existing reality. A real period of questioning, deep down into the bone marrow of society: should it be this way? should we have this? And I think such questioning is one of the things that goes away for a time when the revolt settles down. It doesn't go away permanently, just for a time. And I would say the same thing about art and the way in which you used the term "spark"

to mean the way it poses new questions and ways of thinking. That is the philosophical moment. Now, I wouldn't want to make art into philosophy, but it is at least philosophical. And I think that art actually does philosophy better than professional philosophers in many cases. If you go to an exhibit or watch a great documentary film and it is jarring and hurts and puts you in a place where you just . . .

**SEMINAR PARTICIPANT/** . . . *where you didn't want to be.*

**RGO/** Right. It's an affective experience. The power can be overwhelming. You leave the exhibit or the theatre or the music venue, and you say, "I don't think I'll ever be the same" or "I'll never think about this in the same way that I did." And this is precisely what good philosophers ought to aspire to do, but rarely do they do it. I would almost rather see the extinction of the class of professional philosophers who like to think, as Bertrand Russell argued, that everything comes from philosophy. Russell said that every open set of questions first belonged to philosophy, and once it collected enough certainty, it then broke off to become its own science.<sup>14</sup> But that's the ideology of philosophy. And it is possible for philosophers to become very ideological about their own practice.

**SS/** This is one of the things that really impressed me about working on the *Introspective* exhibition with Gee Vaucher.<sup>15</sup> When you look at the body of her work from over fifty years, she draws on and engages with a wide

range of radical politics. But despite that, she's very resistant to being labeled or pigeonholed as an anarchist artist, or as a feminist artist, or with any "-ism" for that matter. Does that mean that there are no connections between her work and those different strains of politics? Of course not. But she doesn't want to be trapped within a label or space where things are closed. And you can see how that plays out not just in the content of the work she produces, but also in the way she goes about it, the organization of life, for instance at Dial House, which is both very individual and collective at the same time. People talk a lot about the concept of prefigurative politics. With Gee's work you could arguably see something like a prefigurative aesthetics, where the method of producing art together is political in its content, but also necessarily and maybe more importantly in how it's produced. It's particularly interesting that Gee has suggested that if she has a relationship to anarchism, it's in always throwing her methods and assumptions into question. She never wants to be stuck in something, she always wants to rethink how she can do things differently. How she can organize, how she can think differently? I find that really compelling. And it becomes increasingly difficult to challenge yourself over time because it's really easy to fall into a comfortable thought pattern or routine. It takes a great effort to not do that.

**SEMINAR PARTICIPANT/** *Comfort is dangerous. Many just want to resolve, nurture, and come to a calm resolution of all conflict in life and society.*

**RGO/** Exactly. I'm glad you raised this because we haven't talked about it yet. There's a whole chapter in *Specters of Revolt* dedicated to this, which is called "Beyond the Old Virtue of Struggle." In politics, there's a long tradition, going back not only to Marx but also to Frederick Douglass and others, that thinks the way to change the world is through struggle and agitation. Douglass famously said that there can be no progress without struggle.<sup>16</sup> But life is full of pain and people struggle even when they're not doing anything political at all. They struggle to make ends meet, to make their families happy, to make themselves happy. People struggle with anxiety, with the uncertainty of their job and their future. People struggle financially, psychologically, emotionally. People struggle with physical afflictions, surprise illnesses, and death, all kinds of things from abuse to hunger to homelessness. So, for somebody to say today that in order to change the world the very first thing we need to do is struggle, you want to shout back: "No, I always struggle!" What I'm trying to do in that particular chapter is to consider ways of challenging the existing reality that are not so damn miserable! Something like joyful agitation.

But isn't it natural to want to be comfortable? Humans aren't looking for more stress, anxiety, agitation, and struggle. And there's been quite a bit of psychological research to show that it's damaging even physiologically to be overburdened with different forms of stress and anxiety. Alain Ehrenberg wrote a book, *The Weariness of the Self*, in which he talks

about how all of these everyday things can destroy you.<sup>17</sup>

What's great about art, which you can also see in recent revolts, is the way in which they're disruptive yet joyful. And the people gathering, they're not so unhappy in the gathering. They often are experiencing community for the first time, and that is disruptive to their everyday alienation. The struggle, properly speaking, is in everyday life outside of the revolt. The revolt, in this sense, is what interrupts the struggle.

**SEMINAR PARTICIPANT/** *It is the community element, the getting together, the common body of community. It's so important.*

**RGO/** Yes, and sometimes we underestimate this, this little bit of human solidarity. That's often hard to come by in everyday life. But the feeling of connection to others who share some of your disaffection is extremely important. The surrogates we create for friendship don't actually serve the functions of friendship. When I see these photographs here in the gallery, and particularly that one there with all of the bodies together, you see the people, and it's an experience that is really outside of the norm. And that picture of all the masses of bodies there in the street is a picture of a singular and extraordinary experience. I think everybody in that picture, despite the diversity of their ideological positions, must have left that scene knowing that the experience was an extraordinary thing. In the Arab Spring, despite the diversity of views and the

low confidence about how to really solve the problems, they all quite liked the aspect of coming together. They wanted to go back to the square, and I think they couldn't wait to go back, and it didn't take them long. When Morsi came in and changed the constitution they said, "Let's go back to the square!"

**SS/** If you look at the photographs here from Egypt, some of them were chosen because of the way that they juxtapose a really unusual break in everyday life with something that seems quite common. Like here's a woman who looks like she's walking to work, but with her gasmask on. Or maybe she's going to do the shopping. There's one picture from Tahrir Square with people playing ping pong. It's both something very ordinary, but a bit strange because of being placed in an extraordinary time and place.

They're in what the Free Association calls "moments of excess."<sup>18</sup> You get the outpouring of energies, of excitement, of enthusiasm, but that can't stay that way. Then sort of what would happen, how does it come back to everyday life, where does it go afterward? Or there's another image, which strikes me as quite surreal, where there's burning cars and there's a guy doing a handstand.

**SEMINAR PARTICIPANT/** *How do we view them, having looked at these pictures of distress or antithesis or irony, the traditional, beautiful things against the pictures? For example, the older masters and their very set, positioned family scenes. We can look at*

*anything that's put before us, what do we see in those now?*

**RG0/** This kind of returns us to the question of the past, doesn't it?

**SS/** Yes and no. For instance, in this one image here, it's striking because it immediately makes you wonder why is this person holding a frame? Why do you take an empty frame to a political protest? He is relying upon the idea of sort of the formal mechanisms of the frame of art production.

**SEMINAR PARTICIPANT/** *And it's a photograph. I'm speaking of paintings, aren't I? So it's a different element, yes.*

**SS/** Yes, but not totally. But a lot of formal elements, compositional approaches, come into photography from painting. So perhaps it's not a total distinction between the two. Not to reopen an old debate, but it does raise the question of what is the role and function of painting after the rise of photography. Why paint? It would seem that the orientation gets displaced from a quest for realism or accuracy into representation, which can be done better by photography, into something else. And that's something that I very much like in the work of someone like David Mabb, in how he brings together the designs of someone like William Morris with Russian avant-garde art. And so he's trying to tease out ideas at a formal level, but from quite different places and trajectories. People like Malevich use abstract shapes, very geometric. While someone like

Morris is much more sort of an arts and crafts approach, an organic sense of design. They're really different, but they're both examples of trying to reshape society through a form of art production. So as a painter, Mabb recognizes common elements in the intents of both, between Malevich's highly abstract forms of political art, and Morris's craft-informed designs that can and did look good as wallpaper in people's homes.

**SEMINAR PARTICIPANT/** *Evolution, it is an evolution through themes?*

**SS/** Yes, but it's also asking what can you get out of those forms of painting?

**SEMINAR PARTICIPANT/** *You can't do everything. You have to make a choice sometimes.*

**RG0/** A couple of thoughts come to mind about this—one of them prompted by Stephen's comment about photography. There was a very interesting discussion on photography by the French philosopher Jean-François Lyotard. He wrote about how, in pictorial realism, the reaction against photography came from the fact that painters had long been developing the skills with which to faithfully reproduce the natural world. Then, photography comes along and says that we can do that even better without your artistic skills. It's de-skilling, in a way, and there was a reaction against the technology.<sup>19</sup> I remember seeing something similar at the 2006 "Dada" exhibition at The Museum of Modern Art in New York City. . . . Reactionary German students

went to an exhibition of Kurt Schwitters and shot his pieces with rifles. Conservative students took up arms against it.

Liotard talks about similar reactions against film from earlier generations of storytellers. The fear was that the film, the camera, would destroy the artist's craft and our imagination. Because previously with storytelling you had to envisage the whole scene, but now the film relieves you of the burden of having to use your imagination in that way. In a sense, there's a certain conservatism. Lyotard was saying that the reaction against the new form is really just an undue respect for the old form and its masters. It's not only that the masters defend themselves against the new forms, but that the older generation made careers, professional careers, on various ways of "knowing the masters." And then you have somebody else who comes up and makes splatter paintings and declares that this is the work of the new masters. Those who know the old masters and teach those techniques are thus put in a defensive position.

But it doesn't have to be that way. We can look at those old works and still experience something through them. (And, in many ways, you could say that the music of John Coltrane is still, fifty years later, the music of a distant future.) If it makes you feel, who's to say that you ought not to feel something? I still read Plato, I still read Kant, but I don't say that Plato is the end of thinking and I don't say that Kant is the end of philosophy. . . . I once had a professor who was a Kantian who declared

that there is no philosophy after Kant. He felt that Kant had solved all of the basic problems of philosophy. There are people who feel that way about the masters in art, that this was the perfection and everything after is worse.

**SS/** But you can also use that overwrought sense of reverence for bourgeois culture against itself. I'm thinking of a really funny story during the 1848 revolt in Dresden when Bakunin took the paintings from the museum and put them on the barricades so the soldiers wouldn't attack.

**RGO/** That's right, yes. That was the story (as told by Guy Debord) that Bakunin said to the soldiers, if you want to kill us, then you'll have to put a bullet through your bourgeois canvas. It's a wonderful story.

**SEMINAR PARTICIPANT/** *We're very forgiving these days. . . . Forgiving in a Catholic sense. . . . Things are different. You absorb everything for what it is. I'm no expert, but. . . .*

**SS/** One doesn't need to be an expert to speak.

**RGO/** This is the crux of our message. When you look at Stephen's ideas on art in *The Composition of Movements to Come*, he says that all of these creative practices are things that anyone can do. And I insist in my book too, discussing what I call "the intellect of insurrection," that the intellect is elsewhere and everywhere, and that the experts aren't the only ones thinking. It's a feminist argument. I rely a lot on feminist epistemology. There's a wonderful book edited and introduced by Linda

Alcoff and Elizabeth Potter called *Feminist Epistemologies*.<sup>20</sup> The volume documents a long history of the total disqualification of women's knowledge as knowledge at all. All forms of knowledge rooted in the experience of being women, socially, biologically (i.e., sexual pleasure, pregnancy, birth), were ruled out as being too subjective to count as "real knowledge." That's why the male "experts" came up with terms like "old wives' tale."

There was something else I wanted to come back to now. In *The Composition of Movements to Come*, Stephen, you occasionally talk about the art of the undercommons, art against art, in oppositional tension with capitalism in the world. But a lot of the things, the specific practices you look at, while they do have a different internal logic than the logic of capital, they don't interact with the larger society. There are probably many more Dial Houses, and houses with unlocked doors, and we'll never see or visit them.

But I wonder how such isolated and disparate practices and projects challenge capitalism. Do you know what I mean? One has to make a little pilgrimage to visit such things, whether they reside in a museum or the countryside. And if you don't go looking for them, you may never find them or even know they exist. The thing that I like about revolt, on the other hand, is the way that the person who doesn't go looking for it is nonetheless seized by it. If you're in a city like Baltimore in 2015, you don't go out of your way to see what's happening. Your life in Baltimore is directly

disrupted by the revolt. The questions raised in the revolt become your questions, the city's questions. And actually, people around the country who aren't even in the city are affected by what's happening there. Whereas I wonder and worry about the disruptive power of the art of the undercommons. . . . If it didn't happen at all, things may be much the same as if it did. Is that something worth questioning?

**SS/** I think it's the wrong question—to think about whether particular artistic or political practices directly challenge capital at every moment. Rather it's a question of what kind of social composition they animate, which then could spill over into other areas, into other forms of political action. That's one thing I saw feeding into the rise of the global justice movement, coming out of things like Food Not Bombs or Critical Mass, for instance.<sup>21</sup> They create a social logic that at some point develops into another form of interaction. I'm more interested in how they work to organize forms of sociality than in wanting to judge them if they necessarily develop in certain directions. That seems to me to be just another form of closure.

**RGO/** I see, so as prefigurative practice?

**SS/** I wouldn't necessarily use that framing, at least all the time, even though I just did earlier. It can be a loaded concept. But, yes, and I think you see similar things when it comes to moments of upheaval. For instance, let's take The Mothers of the Plaza de Mayo. They're

standing outside a state building with a picture of a kid pinned to their chests. That isn't directly confronting the power of capital and the state. But what it does do is bring out something, a frustration, and understandable loss, which then becomes something else. And that was really valuable, especially in a context where more open forms of dissent and expression were very dangerous. Most forms of cultural production are not going to directly contest the domination of capital, whether they want to or not. There are a million punk songs about smashing the system that will never lead to that because that's not something a song can directly do—but it might contribute to a broader set of connections, social relations, interacting that then goes somewhere.

**RGO/** Yes, I see what you're saying. It's something like where Félix Guattari wondered whether or not all these little micro-revolutions would ever become *really revolutionary*?<sup>22</sup> You have all these micropolitical things that, in themselves, there's a certain antagonistic logic to them, a rival logic, but the question is: What will become of them?

**SS/** This connects back to social history. I'm thinking back to revolt a few years ago. They probably just came from people who knew each other through sports clubs, through neighborhood associations, through being friends, through maybe some music. And you can't say that being in a sports club caused the Baltimore revolt, no; but there is an indirect connection there.

**RGO/** I see. It sounds a little bit like James C. Scott's *Domination and the Arts of Resistance: Hidden Transcripts*.<sup>23</sup> You're talking about off-stage cultural production. It doesn't have to be on-stage in order to be important. And what you're saying is that it's not on-stage but it's still important. Scott's not focusing on cultural production, but it's the same idea. It's kind of like "domination and the arts of the undercommons and resistance." Is that fair?

**SS/** Yes, I'd agree with that. Though I'd want to add that Scott's work does address cultural production, in the broader anthropological sense of culture as everyday practice. And that's something that I try to work toward, much in the same way artistic avant-gardes have often argued for a merging of art and everyday life. But, yes, I've found Scott's writing very useful, along with people working in similar directions and concepts, like Robin D. G. Kelley.

**RGO/** Okay, that helps me understand. You know how you were asking about translation in the revolt? The subtext was about how to help the revolt speak without determining what it says. I think we can say that revolts are not conservative inasmuch as they're not about the conservation of the present state of affairs. They're always a challenge beyond their own boundaries, which is what I like about revolt. Sometimes, I think, in *The Composition of Movements to Come*, that you are overdetermining the significance of small things. And I like small things. You and I both share a resistance to the notion of big solutions, but don't you



run the risk of overdetermining the significance of small things?

**SS/** I suppose the difficulty is that there are forms of everyday cultural production which of course don't lead to becoming politicized. And so there's a very real risk of wanting to see in artistic or political practices that they will develop in the way we'd like them to. There's the temptation of seeing what we want to see. And it's important to try not to follow that. But that's also where I started from—with the question of political strategy—and given the bad reputation that discussing strategy has within anarchist and autonomous politics, is it possible to have a different way to strategize together. . . . how to do political strategy in a non-hierarchical fashion. And from there the question becomes one of how forms of artistic and cultural production create spaces for enabling that. Analytically, I want to be agnostic on what they develop in that space, even if politically I, of course, have my own take on what I'd hope would develop out of them. If you're looking at revolt as philosophy, and looking at what comes before and after the revolt, it's asking how you get there and what you do afterward.

**RGO/** That's really good. And for me, there is a hidden hope that cultural production may be able to help put people in a position to be able to act when revolt happens—to be able think with it, appreciate it, and to participate in it depending on the range of relations one may have to the revolt. It's part of what puts people more or less in a position to relate to it one way

or another, which is why some people obviously also react against the revolt as something that has to be shut down and opposed, because the cultural apparatus that they're integrated into is dissuasive of every kind of disruption or law-breaking. But then afterward, the art that comes out, it goes on the other side and continues to proliferate.

**SS/** But one of the classic examples is the relationship between anti-colonial movements and literature. Literature doesn't cause anti-colonial revolt; however, it develops a sense of community and belonging that fed into numerous anti-colonial movements.

**RGO/** Yes. In Bernard Bailyn's *The Ideological Origins of the American Revolution*,<sup>24</sup> he talked about all of the pamphlets that helped to put people in the position ideologically that made it possible for them become revolutionaries. He was trying to ascribe to the pamphlets and pamphleteering a certain role.

**SS/** One of the flyers we put up there is from a section of the book *Q*, by Luther Blissett.<sup>25</sup>

**RGO/** Ah, you put it up. Yes, I haven't read it yet.

**SS/** In that text, they're talking about flyers. It basically fictionalizes the invention of the flyer, where you have a bunch of people at a print shop and one guy says, "what are these extra pieces of paper"—"oh, they're just extra." Well, we could print something, a nice short message, and distribute thousands of them.

One thing that Stefano Harney asked me a few years ago: he said something like, “in your writing you come close to but never actually get to a politics.” That bothered me at first, the idea of not having a politics. But now I quite like it, the idea of getting close but never actually fixing a politics in the same way you can argue that labor struggles are most effective when you almost but don’t quite have a union. There’s that threshold/change moment that you’re approaching—but you’re not quite going there.

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### / Notes /

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<sup>1</sup> The website for the exhibition can be found at <http://www.firstsite.uk/whats-on/worlds-upside-down>.

<sup>2</sup> Mosa’ab Elshamy is a Cairo-based photographer working for the Associated Press covering daily news as well as in-depth cultural and social documentary projects across the Middle East. He is internationally known for this coverage of the Egyptian revolution and its consequences, which has been featured in *Time*, *Paris Match*, the *New York Times*, and *Rolling Stone*. For more information on his work, visit <http://www.mosaabelshamy.com>.

<sup>3</sup> The Celebrate People’s History poster series was started in 1998 by U.S. artist, curator, and activist Josh MacPhee. The project draws on traditions of do it yourself approaches to the production of both political materials and history, seeking to celebrate forgotten moments of resistance and rebellion. The project seeks to embody values of direct democracy and inclusion, both in terms of the materials produced, and through an open and participatory process through which people can propose and design new materials for the series.

At the present more than one hundred designs have been produced by more than eighty artists. Celebrate People’s History posters have been used in multiple ways across the U.S. and the globe, from being pasted up as street art to use as educational tools within classrooms. Over 300,000 prints have been produced and distributed. Copies of all the posters displayed here are available through Just Seeds, a decentralized worker-owned cooperative of thirty artists throughout North America who produce handmade prints and publications related to social and environmental movements. For more information, visit <https://justseeds.org/project/cph>.

<sup>4</sup> David Mabb is a London-based artist who utilizes appropriated imagery to explore and expand the intersections between aesthetics and politics. For fifteen years, he has been working with the designs of William Morris, which in recent years has involved contrasting and blending them with elements from the Russian avant-garde artists including Malevich, Rodchenko, Stepanova, and Popova. For more information on his work, visit <https://www.gold.ac.uk/art/research/staff/dm/01>.

<sup>5</sup> Richard Gilman-Opalsky, *Specters of Revolt: On the Intellect of Insurrection and Philosophy from Below* (London: Repeater, 2016).

<sup>6</sup> Stephen Shukaitis, *The Composition of Movements to Come: Aesthetics and Cultural Labor after the Avant-Garde* (London: Rowman & Littlefield, 2016).

<sup>7</sup> Richard Gilman-Opalsky, *Spectacular Capitalism: Guy Debord and the Practice of Radical Philosophy* (New York: Autonomedia, 2011).

<sup>8</sup> See Marcel Duchamp, *Fountain*, 1917, replica 1964, ceramic, glaze, and paint, 15 × 19¼ × 24⅝”, San Francisco Museum of Modern Art, <https://www.sfmoma.org/artwork/98.291>.

<sup>9</sup> See Grayson Perry, “Playing to the Gallery,” *The Reith Lectures*, BBC Radio, 4 episodes, <http://www.bbc.co.uk/programmes/b03969vt>.

<sup>10</sup> Thierry de Duve, *Kant after Duchamp* (Cambridge: MIT University Press, 1996).

<sup>11</sup> Roger Taylor, *Art, an Enemy of the People* (Sussex: Harvester Press, 1978).

<sup>12</sup> John Clammer, *Vision and Society: Towards a Sociology and Anthropology from Art* (London: Routledge, 2014).

<sup>13</sup> Karl Marx, "Theses on Feuerbach," (1845; Marxists Internet Archive, 2005), 3, <https://www.marxists.org/archive/marx/works/1845/theses/theses.pdf>.

<sup>14</sup> See Bertrand Russell, "The Value of Philosophy," in *The Problems of Philosophy* (London: Oxford University Press, 1912; Project Gutenberg, 2013), <https://www.gutenberg.org/files/5827/5827-h/5827-h.htm>.

<sup>15</sup> For more information on the exhibition, please see either its website (<http://www.firstsite.uk/whats-on/gee-vaucher-introspective>) or the book that was produced out of it: Stephen Shukaitis, ed., *Gee Vaucher. Introspective* (Colchester: Firstsite, 2016).

<sup>16</sup> Frederick Douglass, "West India Emancipation," in *The Life and Writings of Frederick Douglass*, ed. Philip S. Foner, vol. 2 (New York: International, 1950), 437.

<sup>17</sup> Alain Ehrenberg, *The Weariness of the Self: Diagnosing the History of Depression in the Contemporary Age* (Montreal: McGill-Queen's University Press, 2010).

<sup>18</sup> The Free Association, *Moments of Excess: Movements, Protest and Everyday Life* (Oakland: PM Press, 2011).

<sup>19</sup> See Jean-François Lyotard, "Answering the Question: What Is Postmodernism?," in *The Lyotard Reader and Guide*, ed. Keith Crome and James Williams (New York: Columbia University Press, 2006), 125-26.

<sup>20</sup> Linda Alcoff and Elizabeth Potter, eds., *Feminist Epistemologies* (London: Routledge, 1993).

<sup>21</sup> Ben Holtzman, Craig Hughes, and Kevin Van Meter, "Do It Yourself . . . and the Movement beyond Capitalism," *Radical Society* 31, no. 1 (2004): .

<sup>22</sup> See Félix Guattari, "The Proliferation of Margins," *Semiotext(e)* 3 (1980): 108-11.

<sup>23</sup> James C. Scott, *Domination and the Arts of Resistance: Hidden Transcripts* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1990).

<sup>24</sup> Bernard Bailyn, *The Ideological Origins of the American Revolution* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1967).

<sup>25</sup> Luther Blissett, *Q* (London: Arrow, 2003).

ED: is copy missing here?

ED: should we have Bios for Gilman-Opalsky and Shukaitis?