

# DISOBEDIENT CULTURES

## Art, Politics, and Resurgent Hope

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### Abstract

When political change is remote the only prospect for change is in the realm of imagination. Herbert Marcuse responds to this in his last book, *The Aesthetic Dimension* (1978) after the failure of revolt in Paris in 1968. He argues that although art cannot change the world as such it can change how the world is apprehended. Thus art's imaginative potential is part of a wider pursuit of freedom. The paper argues that the situation is bleaker today than in the 1970s. Neoliberalism enforces a regime of consumerism even more now than then, and operates globally. Still, hope reappears in direct action from the anti-roads campaigns of the 1990s to anti-capitalism in the 2000s and Occupy in 2011-12 (after a much longer history of direct action). Today's direct action and campaigning is specific, however, in addressing the trajectory of global capital. It also accepts its own ephemerality—leading Occupy to reject the processes of representation and issue no programme, instead inviting people to be present among others of like mind in the effective creation of a new society within the old. The paper asks to what extent art remains part of this picture of radical alterity, and whether Marcuse's critical aesthetics remain helpful. Among issues raised are Marcuse's Enlightenment view of art as autonomous creativity (rather than contingent on production within an art-world); a blurring of the divide between art institutions and the cultures of protest, as in the exhibition *Disobedient Objects* in London in 2014; and that appropriation may be art's perpetual burden.

### Keywords

contemporary art, critical theory, cultural institutions, protest, radical politics

### About the Author

Malcolm Miles retired as Professor of Cultural Theory in the School of Architecture, University of Plymouth, in 2016. He continues to write on critical theory and contemporary culture. His books include, *Herbert Marcuse: An Aesthetics of Liberation* (2011); *Eco-Aesthetics: Art, Literature and Architecture in a Period of Climate Change* (2014); and *Limits to Culture* (2015). His next book is *Cities & Literature* (2018).

Histories of the European avant-garde are more reassuring for those in power than for those who seek political change. Although avant-garde art began in protest against the prevailing values of high culture it is now collected by museums and assimilated to a global art trade. But, in any case, the modernist avant-garde is revolutionary more in style than in content and art's history shows a withdrawal from engagement since the 1870s (after the defeat of the Paris Commune in 1871). Any political comment in Impressionism—which began in 1874—is coded. For example, Edgar Degas uses the silk hat of a figure in the foreground of *Place de la Concorde* (1875, St. Petersburg, Hermitage Museum) to mask a statue of Alsace-Lorraine, then covered in a black cloth after its loss in the Franco-Prussian war. Paul Wood writes, “The Commune and the Prussian war silently haunt Impressionist painting in small tics and changes of viewpoint” (Wood 122). By the 1890s even coded references to contemporary politics are replaced by Symbolism's esoteric content and the development of a visual language of art purposively distinct from that of perception—art for art's sake. Yet distancing from ordinary life is the avant-garde's paradoxical claim to criticality. Reality is addressed obliquely, refracted rather than confronted. When art does take an oppositional stance (as in Dada from 1916 into the 1920s) it does so against bourgeois institutions such as art. Dada can be read as insubordinate in face of bourgeois cultural expectations but the evolution of the European avant-garde also includes the creation of its own public within an extended art-world.

Art's distancing instantiates a disbelief in the prospect of political change, offering change only in the realm of imagination. In his last book, *The Aesthetic Dimension* (published in English in 1978) Herbert Marcuse argues that a concern for aesthetics is justified by exactly such an absence of real political change but that, although it cannot change the world, art can change the ways in which the world is apprehended (1, 6). Thus art's imaginative potential remains a factor in the pursuit of freedom, if removed from the day to day operations of the dominant society. Today, I suggest, the situation is bleaker than in the 1970s when memories of the optimistic 1960s had not entirely faded. Neoliberalism insists today that there is no alternative to its regime and enforces this through consumerism. Still, hope reappears in direct action, from anti-roads campaigns in the 1990s to anti-capitalism in the 2000s and Occupy in 2011-12. Direct action has a history from medieval millenarianism to the Levellers and Diggers of the English Revolution of the 1640s, for instances, but today's direct action and campaigning is specific in addressing the trajectory of global capital while accepting its own ephemerality. Occupy, notably, rejected the processes of representation and issued no programme, instead inviting people to be present among others of like mind in a new society in the moment of its becoming. Is art part of this picture of radical alterity, or relegated to museum vaults? I want to ask if Marcuse's critical aesthetics remains helpful or whether the culture of protest campaigns is a more valid articulation of

social horizons. Among the issues raised are Marcuse's Enlightenment view of art as autonomous creativity (while art's production is contingent on its function in an art-world); a blurring of the divide between art institutions and the cultures of protest, as in the exhibition *Disobedient Objects* at the Victoria & Albert Museum, London in 2014; and that assimilation and appropriation may be art's perpetual burden. I begin with art's production under neoliberalism, consider protest culture and engaged art practices, and end by revisiting Marcuse's theory.

## CHANGED SCENARIOS

History does not repeat itself; conditions change, imperceptibly or in a sudden leap. After the failure of students and workers to overthrow the French state in May 1968 money has usurped the state's function in determining future change, the state becoming almost an outsourced provider of governmental services to capital. As material production is moved to the global South, further, the service economy of the global North (or ex-West) uses flexible working practices designed to instill feelings of instability in the workforce. The permanent precariousness of work engenders, too, reliance on the compensations of consumer culture while the news-media-entertainment sector is global capital's soft policing. Jeremy Gilbert observes,

The world of today is not the one that the radicals of 1968 hoped to build ... it is one in which the requirements of capital accumulation continue to organise most areas of social life ... generating massive inequalities and condemning many of the formerly colonised peoples to extreme poverty, ruining the planet's ecosystem and subjecting millions in the developed world to stress, overwork or poverty; and yet the culture of today's capitalism is different. (34)

Gilbert goes on to say that the hierarchies and career paths of corporate culture are now replaced by, "a networked world of flat management, rapid promotion, flexible working and short-term contracts" (34). This is presented as offering opportunities for individual rather than collective or social advancement, replacing solidarity by competitiveness. Isabel Lorey writes that, "the function of the precarious" has become, "a normalised political-economic instrument" (39). Precarity, then, introduces social atomism as well as multi-tasking and, for the lower paid, de-skilling. As Richard Sennett remarks, this is justified as, "freeing the political economy to behave more flexibly" (139). Guy Standing notes that the precariat is lent an image, "typifying a romantic free spirit who rejects norms of the old working class steeped in stable labour, as well as the bourgeois materialism of those in salaried white-collar jobs" (15). And Lorey adds that while people are

enraged by unacceptable conditions this does not produce the “pandemic” protest necessary for change (61).

Art is co-opted by neoliberalism as a commodity and aid to cultural tourism. Housed in cool post-modern sheds, in adapted industrial structures, or in shiny, zany structures which are themselves the exhibit, contemporary art fuses market awareness with the artist’s celebrity status. A chance encounter illustrates the gulf between art and precarity: sitting outside the Hamburger Bahnhof, Berlin (a redundant railway terminus converted to an art museum) in June 2014, I saw a man on a bicycle touring the litter bins to take out bottles: the deposit-collector (*Pfandsammler*) who retrieves them to claim the mandatory deposit (Oltermann 21). But the deposit-collector’s presence does not fit a city’s marketing image; hence counter-measures appear—in Hamburg solar-powered bins crush rubbish, including plastic bottles—so that, as social worker Stephan Karrenbauer says, bottle collectors are returned to “abject poverty” (quoted in Oltermann 21).



**Fig. 1.** A bottle collector outside the Hamburger Bahnhof Art Museum, Berlin.  
Photo by Malcolm Miles.

My entry fee to the museum cost the equivalent of 160 deposits. My lunch in the waterside café cost 500. Inside the white-walled museum, Florian Slotawa's car and storage containers from his apartment were exhibits in the group show *Everyday Life*.





Fig. 2. Interior, Hamburger Bahnhof Art Museum, Berlin. Photo by Malcolm Miles.

Far from realism, this displacement of real things in art-space states arbitrariness and an isolation. Each work stands alone and relies on the spectator to make sense of it, or not, as anything other than an expression of the contemporary art-world. More to the point, such exhibitions reflect the dominance of an art-world built on reputations, and a definition of the contemporary determined by an informal but strong consensus of dealers, curators, critics, collectors, and successful artists.

Increasingly this art-world tends to the flatness seen by Gilbert in the new economy. Pascal Gielen comments similarly that, “Time-honoured hierarchies, traditions, elites, canons ... are subject to eroding movements that have a tendency to always gravitate towards mediocrity” (Gielen, *Institutional Attitudes* 2). The art-world adopts a networked economy, its collaborations the outcome of competition not community: “This is why project-like thinking is so dominant ...

People only temporarily drift together, to then float collectively while realising a project, after which their swimming lanes often diverge again” (Gielen, *The Murmuring* 140). Neoliberalism “hitches a ride, even enhancing operations that were initiated in the art world with the best intentions” (Gielen, *The Murmuring* 137), while art’s hegemony shifts to new institutional formations: the biennale and independent curating (out-sourcing the curator’s role to precariously employed competitors for a place in the art-world), retaining the modernist avant-garde’s insistence on continuous evolution but in what I read as a vacuum of meaning. Sometimes modernism pointed to a vacuum of meaning—Samuel Beckett’s plays are an evident case, as discussed by Theodor Adorno (30-31)—as a refraction of debilitating social relations under capitalism; but Beckett drew out banality using the device of theatricality as a provocation while much contemporary visual art seems to dwell in helplessness.

## PROTEST

Against the rise of neoliberalism, protest cultures have evolved. Learning from insurgent movements such as the Zapatistas in Mexico—and histories of non-violent direct action from anti-nuclear demonstrations in the 1950s through Civil Rights marches in the 1960s onwards, including anti-World Trade Organisation demonstrations in Seattle in 1999 and Occupy—campaigns are organized worldwide via digital media. While each instantiation of refusal is ephemeral their cumulative impact stretches the horizon of the possible. Fran Tonkiss sees Seattle as indicating, “the emergence of a distinctive anti-globalisation movement” after anti-austerity campaigns in Brazil, Mexico, Jamaica, the Dominican Republic, India, and elsewhere (70-71). Noting that opposition to the Sardar Sarovar dam in India led to a withdrawal of World Bank funding, Tonkiss deduces, “[r]evolts against state or corporate power, resistance towards subordination and expropriation, movements of solidarity ... make a pattern of protest legible” (73).

Occupy began in Zucotti Park, New York in September 2011, after a call to occupy Wall Street in the anti-consumerism magazine *Adbusters*, and became a worldwide protest against the dominance of the financial elite, the 1% against whom Occupy posed the 99% whose wealth has been appropriated (van Gelder 1). David Graeber sees this elite as gaining power through donations to political party funds (39); Noam Chomsky also argues that a concentration of wealth yields a concentration of political power which, “accelerates the cycle” (28). Sarah van Gelder sees the occupation of Zucotti Park as when, “the 99% awoke, named our crisis, and faced the reality that none of our leaders are going to solve it [so that] we would have to act for ourselves” (3). Occupy organized its own health care through participating medical

professionals, generated energy from bicycles, and thus assumed some functions of the state while replacing representative democracy by permanent debate in the General Assembly. But, as Occupy Wall Street grew in scale, participant Sarah R writes that the General Assembly ceased to be, “where core planning was being formulated” (quoted in Taylor et al. 54). Yet Manissa Maharawal recalls, after raising the concerns of South Asian women there, “we did a crash course on white privilege, structural racism, and oppression ... on history and the Declaration of Independence and colonialism and slavery” (quoted in Taylor et al. 39-40).

Open debate and consensus decisions are common in alternative settlements (Miles 110-130) but there is another side to occupation: Kristin Ross writes of factory occupations in France in 1968 as, “a supple kind of organisation, with no defined a priori platform,” transcending, “the distinction between leadership and mass activity” (79). So, to be present with others of like mind is *in itself* transformative, and co-presence produces culture in the social rather than aesthetic sense (articulating shared values in the acts of daily life). All this leaves material traces—badges, banners, documentary evidence—which can be souvenirs, alongside the immaterial traces of changed awareness. Such objects may be lent aesthetic value but are not art while some art, often the work of collectives formed in refusal of a received individualism, engages with protest.

### **DISOBEDIENT OBJECTS: PROTEST CULTURE IN THE MUSEUM**

If being there is in itself transformative, protest culture *enacts* rather than represents the values of campaigns outside equivalents of art-world mediation and reception in museums. If Dada attacked bourgeois values by subverting bourgeois ideas of art, its acts of refusal are absorbed now into art’s mainstream and market. *Disobedient Objects*, curated by Catherine Flood and Gavin Grindon in London in 2014, used a major museum, the Victoria & Albert, to assemble the material culture of protest from the Suffragettes in the 1900s to the climate change camps and anti-globalization campaigns of the 1990s. But how does such material culture sit in a major museum’s ambience? Badges, banners, protest equipment are outside art and heritage. Florence Waters, reviewing the show for the right-wing English newspaper *The Daily Telegraph*, feared a worthy but dull documentary experience, recalling that the first exhibit she encountered—a metal pan lid banged in the street in Buenos Aires—was an “inert specimen” of a complex political struggle. Waters also noted that many of those who loaned items for the show were reluctant to do so, guarding personal associations or questioning the museum’s aims. And yet Waters also says she was engrossed for 90 minutes by badges made from radio set power receptors as signs for illicit broadcasting in Poland, and a banknote from Myanmar



in which (the then-dissident) Aung San Suu Kyi is portrayed in the watermark, among other items. The catalogue explains that in Buenos Aires the pan lids were banged during protests which forced out four presidents in “the first national revolt against contemporary deregulated capitalism” (Flood and Grindon 6-7).

I want to note two other exhibits: photographs of posters and street signs made by *Grupo de Arte Callejero* (GAC, Street Art Group) in Argentina from 1997 onwards to indicate the sites of detention centers under the military dictatorship, and where the perpetrators of covert disappearances live. A catalogue essay states,

A typical scene: on a day like any other in the late 1990s, somewhere in Buenos Aires, a group of young people are plastering the streets with posters while talking with neighbours. The posters show the face of a man who lives in the neighbourhood, giving his exact address, phone number and record: he is an army officer involved in numerous cases of illegal detention, torture and disappearance. He was the head of one of the numerous clandestine detention and extermination centres ... He is free, thanks to the so-called Pardon Laws .... (Longoni 103-4)

GAC says it practices political militancy through art. Campaigning culture counters modern art’s premium on authorial originality, being either produced by collectives or distributed anonymously. Some radical artists have, in parallel, adopted collective working methods as an enactment of alternative social values.

Also included in *Disobedient Objects* was a spoof newspaper produced by the anti-roads group Reclaim the Streets. Precedents for spoofs include an issue of the mass-market British tabloid newspaper *The Sun*, owned by Rupert Murdoch, issued during a print strike in 1986 with the headline ‘Murdoch Fucks Donkeys: Newspaper tycoon in bizarre sex triangle’ (anon, in Flood and Grindon 93), or Class War’s eponymous paper (illustrated, in Flood and Grindon 93). Those were explicitly campaigning publications but the tactics of campaigning and alternative art merge in the environment-art-education group, Platform’s, two editions of *Ignite* in December 1996 and November 1997, within a politicized art practice including guided walks in London’s financial district, briefing meetings on the oil industry, performance work fusing personal history with that of oil and climate change, and a range of evidence-based reports on oil’s destructive impacts.

*Ignite* used the masthead of a real London paper, *Tonight*, distributed free to commuters in the evening peak hour, but which had ceased trading. Issue 1 proclaimed, “London company in dirty deal shock” over a story of BP’s link to the death of protestors against oil extraction in Columbia; a side-column was headed “Shell police accused of torture” in Nigeria, over a box advertising a competition to “win a developing country” (Platform, *Ignite*, no. 1 1).



Fig. 3. Front page, Ignite, December 1996. Author's collection.

The competition was open only to multinational companies asked to send a postcard saying why human rights abuses and environmental destruction are not their responsibility. Issue 2, the *Smogbusters* edition, dealt with air pollution in London, depicting a brown cloud enveloping Canary Wharf in the redeveloped Docklands. *Ignite* (no. 2) acknowledged the group's support by Arts Council England, noting that, "IGNITE is published by PLATFORM's 90% Crude project, a long-term investigation of the oil industry and transnational corporate culture ... looking forward to progressive ways in which we might be living our lives in the first century of the next millennium" (Platform, *Ignite*, no. 2 2).

*Ignite* was given away at railway stations, like *Tonight*. Platform's acceptance of arts funding (although only one of many funding strands) implies that *Ignite* is art, although to me this is an uninteresting issue. But when Reclaim the Streets produced *Evading Standards* using Platform's space and equipment Platform disowned it, in part because it used the format of the still trading *Evening Standard*, raising a threat of legal action, and because Platform did not align themselves to direct action (conversation with author, c. 1999). Reclaim the Streets were known for performative protest, for instance placing sand and deckchairs to block a main road in central London, drilling holes in a motorway to symbolically plant trees. Yet Platform's repudiation of a work seemingly like one of their own is intriguing, suggesting that the boundary between art and protest culture remains at times—*Evading Standards* being overtly a campaigning publication—even when values coincide.

In the lead up to the 1997 British general election *Evading Standards* carried a headline General Election Cancelled over an image of share traders in panic at falling prices and a story of opinion polls showing massive voter cynicism and support for non-parliamentary action (Reclaim the Streets 1). The paper was to be distributed free in support of a march by striking Liverpool dock workers, and the stock was stored at a church in central London; it was confiscated by police informed by an undercover officer who infiltrated the group. This was found in court to be illegal but by then the 25,000 copies were pulp. The paper was reprinted with only minor changes to lay-out.





Fig. 4. Two editions of *Evading Standards*, 1997. Author's collection.

On page 3, Labour leader Tony Blair sells fast food from a van—“Greasy Blair sells burgers”—and pages 6 and 7 give information on DIY (Do It Yourself) media, economics, protest, communities, and direct action; an item on the back page states “Papers ... reveal that [Conservative Prime Minister, 1990-1997] John Major and [Labour Prime Minister, 1997-2008] Tony Blair were in fact the same person ... played by a single talented actor” over a box: “The society that abolishes every adventure makes its own abolition the only possible adventure” (Reclaim the Streets 8). Blair won the election, later contributing significantly to the neoliberal project.

*Evading Standards* can be situated in a history of protest culture given Reclaim the Streets’ use of street theater, which was aligned to protest since the San Francisco Mime Troupe in 1967 (Doyle 71-80). Street theater was a departure from an institutionalised mainstream parallel to the refusal of artists in the 1960s to make art-objects for the market, but has been more difficult to assimilate, not least because performance is by definition ephemeral. As the art-world replaced objects by reputations, resuming business-as-usual as it re-coded the refusal of



the object not as protest but as a legacy of Marcel Duchamp's use of ready-mades in the 1910s, street theater spread into campaigning. Campaigners evolved distinct means of occupation such as the tree houses and tunnels of anti-roads protests, and communication, such as the verbal codes used by the Dongas, anti-roads campaigners at Twyford Down who adopted a quasi-tribal identity (McKay 127-158). Such ephemeral cultures have faded except that ... in the consciousness of those present, the once-widened horizon never closes in (I speculate).

This raises an interesting problem: Protest cultures are ephemeral while art is fixed in the museum's artificial temporality. *Disobedient Objects* juxtaposed art to the documentation of insurgency, seeing both as having agency. At the same time, the mainstream art-world is aligned to neoliberalism's economic and social imperatives. The art duo Hewitt + Jordan (Andy Hewitt and Mel Jordan) said in 2004,

We try to emphasise that art and cultural systems are not benign; they are a significant part of society and are deeply affected by political and ideological agendas. We believe in the possibility of art having some agency in the development and support of democratic systems. The dominance of advanced capital makes it all the more vital to maintain art as a space for thinking and for contesting authority. (21)

Faced with the art-world's nastiness, and the ephemerality of protest cultures, a search for real cultural agency may be forlorn. Being present in a moment of direct action is a lastingly transformative experience but—as with modernism's aporia—is separated from the major part of everyday existence. Most people, myself included, were not at Occupy any more than, myself excluded here, they are regular visitors to art museums. This leads me back to Marcuse's validation of aesthetics in face of a political impasse (although as I write in 2017 there is a Left resurgence in Britain on a scale not witnessed since the 1960s).

## RADICAL AESTHETICS

Marcuse said in a lecture in New York in 1967, "some sort of despair or desperation" led him to aesthetics while, "all prosaic language ... seems to be dead" (Marcuse, "Art in the One-Dimensional Society" 53). He extends this in *An Essay on Liberation*, written during and revised shortly after the events of May '68: "the piano with the jazz player stood well between the barricades; the red flag well fitted the statue of the author of *Les Misérables* [Victor Hugo]; and striking students in Toulouse demanded the revival of the language of the Troubadours" (Marcuse 30). That language, the *Langue d'Oc*, was in vogue in then but figured

historically in celebrations of medieval courtly love. Perhaps it had an alterity for 1960s students akin to that of African masks for Cubist painters in the 1900s. If so, Marcuse sees a prospect of qualitative social change when the arts, “assume a new Form and function ... consciously and methodically destructive, disorderly ... a political passion: a position of protest, denial and refusal” (Marcuse, “Art in the One-Dimensional Society” 57).

Marcuse relies on art’s autonomy; and a negative aesthetics rendering reality as if unreal. The former revolves around art’s distinctness from everyday life wherein beauty is itself radically other to capitalist routine and domination (like the *Langue d’Oc*, perhaps). And negative aesthetics is expressed as follows:

The world intended in art is never and nowhere merely the given world of everyday reality, but neither is it a world of mere fantasy, illusion, and so on. It contains nothing that does not also exist in the given reality ... nevertheless the world of a work of art is unreal ... because it is more as well as qualitatively other than the established reality. As fictitious reality, as illusion (*Schein*) it contains more truth than does everyday reality ... Only in the illusory world do things appear as what they are and *what they can be*. (Marcuse, *The Aesthetic Dimension* 54; my italics)

Gielen echoes Marcuse: “It is only because of our ability to see the world through a double lens that we can conceive of both the natural world and culture as being different ... Because we can distinguish between the real world and an imagined, or fictional reality, change and innovation are within the realm of human possibility” (*Institutional Attitudes* 12). The horizon widens.

Yet art evokes alternative scenarios at the risk of setting it aside in a self-contained aesthetic realm (the pitfall of modernism), and of aestheticizing what it depicts, including suffering. As Marcuse writes, referencing Auschwitz and My Lai [a killing of civilians by U.S. soldiers in the Viet Nam war], torture, starvation, and dying are not illusory but,

Art draws away from this reality because it cannot represent this suffering without subjecting it to aesthetic form ... to the mitigating catharsis, to enjoyment. Art is inexorably infested with this guilt. Yet this does not release art from the necessity of recalling again and again that which can survive even Auschwitz and perhaps one day make it impossible. (Marcuse, *The Aesthetic Dimension* 55)

There is no exit from this difficulty. It is an occupational hazard for aesthetics, and poses a more or less permanent tension between art’s ability to draw attention to specific aspects of reality and its self-distancing from them.

Today, corporate killers operate from desks (as Platform reiterate in various projects on the oil industry). Art circulates like money, producing an illusion of autonomous spectatorship in its cool sheds. Like fashion, publicity and advertising, the look counts most, which is why public sculptures are useful in city marketing—a means to re-badge a zone in the cultural economy—and why the lived city is marginal to enterprise culture. The protest culture cited above, in contrast, uses the skills of art and communication to inflect social values; but more important is what might be regarded as a weakness but could be a strength: ephemerality.

Protest is a collective act—being present with others—and imaginative—imagining another reality, insisting on alterities—and takes place in what Henri Lefebvre named moments of liberation, the unannounced realisation of clarity which occurs to anyone at any time amid (yet which liberates from) the mind-dulling regime of capital (Shields 58-64). Lefebvre argues that such moments are transformative, and this informs some of my remarks on ephemeral protest above. What I mean is that once an imagined horizon is extended by such experiences, it tends not to draw in again but to stay a beacon of another kind of future. The moment cannot be exhibited, of course, its status almost like pre-verbal experience; only traces of the material culture it spawns remain, as in *Disobedient Objects*.

The difficulty is that if art is produced as Gielen emphasizes in an artworld and not simply according to an artist's creative intention, as Marcuse tends to assume, its capacity to evoke a liberating moment is restricted by the conditions of its production. Similarly, it might be said, a transformative moment is produced within specific conditions. Yet, if the moment liberates from routine then so might art liberate consciousness from the regime ... or so it could appear. This, I realize, is a somewhat speculative, even slippery, argument.

Marcuse revised Marxism to go beyond the conditions of production but not beyond the nature of art as he saw it from a Kantian perspective of free intention: aesthetics parallel to the disinterested judgement and non-vested interest which Kant saw as essential to a free society. In contrast, collectives such as GAC or Hewitt + Jordan (now working with Dave Beech as Free Art Collective) create a DIY zone echoing that of protest and direct action. At the same time, their concerns are overtly politicized, moving art nearer to (but never quite within) campaigning. The question is *to what extent material culture—art or campaigning—directly enacts its values or merely represents them*. And whether such shifts occur within, as well as exterior to, culture's institutions.

## INSTITUTIONAL REVOLT?

Claire Bishop argues that there are examples of change within art's institutions. Although she cites Rosalind Krauss's "relentless pessimism" derived from Fredric Jameson's critique of capitalism, Bishop asserts that "a more radical model of the museum is taking shape ... [and is] rethinking the category of the contemporary" (6). This entails a dialectical mode, both politicized and engaged with temporality, in the redefinition of contemporary art around meaning rather than the market. Surprisingly, Bishop sees traditional museums with a collection as "the most fruitful testing ground for a non-presentist, multi-temporal contemporaneity" (23). Among her examples is the Museum of Contemporary Art Metelkova (MSUM) in Ljubljana, housed in a new building designed by local architects Grolger Arhitekti on the site of a disused military base. Slovenia is now a member of the European Union, but its recent past is that of conflicts consequent on the break-up of the Yugoslav Federation. Rather than present European art history, MSUM presents that past as the material of its collection, including digital archives and documentary displays. As Bishop says, the visitor's first encounter is with a section titled War Time, juxtaposing photographic documentation of the occupation of Metelkova in 1993 to Jenny Holzer's *Lustmord* (1993-94), a photo-text series on skin which alludes to the rape of Bosnian women in the conflict. Slovenia is not Bosnia, and Holzer works at a safe distance from the conflicts to which she alludes; yet MSUM seems to elicit the viewer's sympathy. This is not a retreat to pastoral or remote pasts. It is, indeed, assertive of conflict as a contemporary condition, and hence the uncertainties of belonging now. MSUM is committed to taking "the side of traditions that have historically proven to have emancipatory social potential ... [and] giving space to practices that have been historically overlooked" (Bishop 49-50). Many museums might claim the latter; still, MSUM seeks to maximise its own situation rather than append itself to the global art-world. MSUM also links its education programme to activism, the activist group Anarhiv using its space for political theory discussions. Bishop does not elaborate on Anarhiv's direction, but I accept her view that institutions such as MSUM—she cites the Reina Sofia Art Centre in Madrid, and the Van Abbemuseum in Eindhoven as well—use their agency to redefine what art museums do.

Thinking back to Marcuse, however, and the protest cultures cited above, I want to end with Freee's project, *Protest Drives History* (2008), a posed photograph of the artists holding a banner with that text, sited in the bar of the Institute for Contemporary Art (ICA), London and on a billboard outside.





Fig. 5. "Protest Drives History," posed photograph used as billboard poster, Free Art Collective, 2008. Photo courtesy of the artists.

If *Ignite* and *Evading Standards* stand on a divide between art and protest, *Protest Drives History* appears to adapt DIY tactics and the banner (a sign of campaigning) for art without disengaging from the world in which protest operates. In the ICA bar it may have seemed a gesture; in the street it may have looked like art, or not to those in the know, but the message on the banner lingers after the first encounter. To me, it does not mean that protest drives history but that, despite the hint of futility as the artists struggle to hold the banner against the wind in a bleak, flooded quarry, *protest interrupts history*. The very vulnerability of the artists' efforts speaks of the overwhelming force of late capitalism and yet, just ... they stand. But then, I should not overlook that in a few historical moments such as the English and Bolshevik revolutions, protest has driven history. The 1917 Revolution in Russia began, for instance, with a march for International Women's Day. The 2003 war in Iraq proceeded, however, despite a million people marching against it, in London.

To say that protest drives history, then, conveys the potential insurgency of power-to in face of the dominant condition of power-over. This sentiment and its enactments in symbolic form interrupt and fracture the neoliberal illusion of inevitability. It does not matter if the statement is unproven. In “Problems and Transformations of Critical Art,” Jacques Rancière argues that a critical art creates, “awareness of the mechanisms of domination to turn the spectator into a conscious agent of world transformation” (45). This changes perceptions not conditions, in keeping with Marcuse’s theory (although I do not suggest any influence). Rancière also argues that, “art risks being inscribed in the perpetuity of a world in which the transformation of things into signs is redoubled by the very excess of interpretative signs” (45-46). That might describe much recent art and its readymade appropriation by the market. Nonetheless, Rancière, like Marcuse, finds hope in the interstices, his writing technique itself being to advance an idea, qualify it, gain ground in the end but allow contingency. That ground is not change itself but, as Marcuse argued in the *Aesthetic Dimension*, a shift in the world’s apprehension, an imaginative extension of the horizon of the possible, which is what art can do.

In conclusion, bourgeois novels often had happy endings, or else sad ones which allowed the reader to experience catharsis. Art’s rendering of suffering shares this trait (as argued above). It would be inappropriate for me to deny the difficulties of art’s ambivalence, and its seemingly perennial mediation by market forces even when a movement begins in refusal of conventions. Protest culture is not immune to such absorption into museum culture, as seen above, yet it can equally be said that an exhibition such as *Disobedient Objects* brings a wider public to ideas for change, and demonstrates that people have pursued change practically. All I can say is that the polarities of art’s social and aesthetic dimensions are not incompatible opposites even if they may seem mutually disabling, but end-points on an axis of creative tension where the work of theory is done. And if art’s autonomy is in one way a legacy of Enlightenment now remote to a world of precarious living, perhaps that, too, or especially, is a reminder of an autonomy absent under the regime of later capitalism. I give the last word to Marcuse: “Art breaks open a dimension inaccessible to other experience” in which to “encounter the appearance of that autonomy denied them in their society” (*The Aesthetic Dimension* 72).

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