You had heard about its arrival but never expected it to operate like this. Earlier in the month, flyers had been circulated asking you to, “Get the black out. Bring three to ten items that you associate with blackness to the Black Factory on this appointed day.” Now you stand there watching a white box truck pull up to the local YWCA and wonder what on earth this truck wants with your coffee grounds, dominos and Missy Elliot CDs. As you watch the crew get out of the truck, you see them unload a large table adorned with blenders, scissors and pullovers onto the sidewalk. Then suddenly, a white parachute begins to inflate from the back of the truck. To your freakish surprise, the balloon inflates into a massive KuKluxKlan hood where you can faintly see the workers setting up display booths inside. Instead of the Black Panther Willie Wonka you expected, the artist, William Pope L, begins to talk and laugh with people as they begin to bring their items of “blackness” for pulverization or documentation. You nervously approach and hear Mr. Pope L say, “Well, the Black Factory is here to provide opportunity.”

Quite possibly, the Black Factory is the central work in the exhibition, Interventionists: Art in the Social Sphere. The Black Factory is a truck that goes on tour, “Bringing the politics of difference where it is needed most.” At each stop, the Black Factory engages a local community with a set of tools for disrupting their expectations. People want in line with their items of blackness only to have them transformed into some of the most unlikely, and unexpected objects: rubber ducksies, prayer rugs, drinking water. The experience is as far away from didactic as possible, yet one can not help but think that in that ambiguous experience, they received the one thing Pope L promises the Black Factory will provide: opportunity.

The Interventionists: Art in the Social Sphere is both an exhibition and a limited survey of tactical practices in contemporary visual culture beginning in the late 1980s. The timing of this exhibition is not without a sense of urgency as the entire world feels ‘unsettled’ (to use a term of Jenny Holzer took center stage in the early 1980s. If one were to survey the surface of what represents American art over the last ten years for signs of political urgency, one would not be too encouraged. It would appear as though “political art” has fallen out of fashion since artists like Barbara Kruger, Hans Haacke, Leon Golub and Jenny Holzer took center stage in the early 1980s. Fashionable or not, however, political art has continued, albeit off the art world screen, throughout the 1980s. The most telling point of departure for this “off the radar” political art would be the increasing emphasis on the tactics of intervention. Instead of representing politics, many political artists of the 1980s employed techniques of art to engage real life situations.

The term “tactics” is important when thinking about interventionist practices and this essay will go into this term in more depth. However, for now, let us think of the term tactic as a maneuver within a game and for the interventionist, the game is the real world. Their projects are made to operate within various systems of power in the real world and they use the techniques of art to maneuver within it. Driving around the United States with a factory for carving up expectations about race is just one tactic among many.

In an era shaped by the phenomenon known as globalization, the switch toward tactics has been more warmly received outside the U.S. than in it. The lack of visibility, and funding, in the United States obviously contributes to the categorical myopia of interventionist practices in U.S. museums. However, the dialogue regarding tactics, assisted in large part through the use of the internet and global exhibitions and conventions, has provided a fluid exchange across oceans and nations. Thus, this exhibition does not limit its survey to the American national landscape, but instead follows several tendencies that highlight this switch to tactics.

Tactics can be thought of as a set of tools. Like a hammer, a glue gun, or a screwdriver, they are means for building and deconstructing a given situation. Interventionist tactics are informed both by art and (more importantly) by a broad range of lived visual, spatial and cultural experiences. They are a motley assemblage of methods for bringing political issues to an audience existing outside the art world’s insular doors. In order to do so, they appeal to a viewer who is confronted by an increasingly privatized and controlled visual world. Humor, sleight of hand and high design are used to interrupt this confrontation and bring socially imperative issues to the very feet of their audiences. In short, these artists are interventionists.

If one had to make a generalization about the point of departure for the “political” art of the 1980s, it would be the unanimous refusal to use representation as a tactic. The images of violence and exploitation that so often, rightly, move people to political action are conspicuously absent. Instead, laboratory experiments, perplexing archives, mobile homes and bags designed for shoplifting fill MASS MoCA’s gallery spaces. That these things “present” as opposed to “represent” is not an accident. When the words “political art” are spoken, most people imagine a unilateral institutional critique, depressing refugee photographs, or possibly graphic statements somehow attacking the viewer for ignorant complicity. The lack of these methods does not imply that such issues are less important now, but rather that the methods for communicating these issues have changed. The symbolically charged image, as a tactic, no longer feels adequate as a communicative device.

In understanding why this is the case, it is instructive to look at the increasing growth of visual culture over the last twenty years. Could it be that the commercial flooding of the visual landscape has inadvertently led to the visual exhaustion of its viewers? Such pivotal factors as the rise of the culture industry, the demise of the Soviet Union, and the increasing privatization of public visual and social space have dramatically transformed the cultural landscape of the 1980s.

The quote: A Taco Revolution
“A taco revolution, I am there.” – Taco Bell Chihuahua dog.

“The various analyses of “new social movements” have done a great service in insisting on the political importance of cultural movements against narrowly economic perspectives that minimize their significance. These analyses, however, are extremely limited themselves because, just like the perspectives they oppose, they perpetuate narrow understandings of the economic and the cultural. Most importantly, they fail to recognize the profound economic power of the cultural movements, or really the increasing indistinguishability of economic and cultural phenomena.” – Antonio Negri and Michael Hardt, Empire.
The Interventionists

The sixties are more than merely the homeland of hip, they are a commercial template for our culture, a historical prototype for the construction of cultural machines that transform alienation and despair into consent." – Thomas Frank, Compendiate Cool

In 1995, Bill Clinton assumed the US presidency to the rock and roll sounds of Fleetwood Mac. The boomer generation had gained ascension, and Clinton raised the horn of victory with a saxophone in his hands. The moment was inescapable. Just three years earlier, the Berlin Wall fell and the "end of history," as Francis Fukuyama had so famously described it, was upon the world. The 1990s were a complex decade known for the rise of the dot-com, the generational switch in power to the baby boomers, the end of the Cold War, and the end of revolutions. Yet, revolutions were occurring. They were marketing revolutions, as the most popular marketing campaign of the 1990s, the Che Guevarian clad Taco Bell Chihuahua so gloriously made known. The United States officially shifted toward an "information economy" with the often contested but frequently used term globalization as its dancing partner.

Globalism and the culture industry combine to form a fertile ground for the growth of interventionist practices. The fact that "culture" became the primary industry of global capitalism was not lost on many of the artists across the globe. Theodore Adorno, the genuine member of the German Frankfurt School, saw this shift early on when he castigated the consumer-oriented turn in music in his 1938 essay, "On the Fetish-Character in Music and the Regression in Listening." He dubbed the commercialization of culture "the culture industry," a catchall term for everything from film to music, and "the culture" industry, a historical prototype for the construction of cultural machines that transform alienation and despair into consent. The culture industry is the effect, if not always the origin, of globalization in our neighborhoods. Gentrification became a buzzword to describe the efforts by many cities to remake their downtowns into investing hot spots for global capital. Artists found their own-housing habits as complicit with renewal strategies for exciting lower income families in larger metropolitan areas. Rosalyn Deutsche writes in Eictions: Art and Spatial Politics, "When galleries and artists, assuming the role of the proverbial 'shock troops' of gentrification, moved into an expensive storefronts and apartments, they wielded the method by driving up rents and displacing residents." While the student riots of the 1960s increasingly felt the brunt of expanded privatization, so did the arts (see Gregory Sholette's essay). The space for non-commercially driven art, generally the haven for revolutionary images coupled with the increasing politicization of art practice, rapidly decreased. As Brian Wallis, Chief Curator at the International Center for Photography in New York writes, "In recent years, the gradual withdrawal and relocation of NEA funds have created a sort of Darwinian ethos in the world of alternative spaces. Many of the smaller and more fragile spaces have ceased to operate or have become 'virtual spaces.' Those that have survived have become larger and more like those institutions they once challenged." While political representation was being depoliticized, space, it seems, was becoming radically politicized. This twist is the critical turn.

The six maclaments speak

This is not to say that these conditions – the increasing banality of revolutionary images coupled with the increasing politicization urban and campus spaces – approach the moment when they became all the more acute during this period. It is instructive to look at the writings of the Situationists (1957-1972), an avant-garde collective inspired by, if not past member of, Dada, CoBRA (acronym meaning: Copenhagen, Brussels, Amsterdam) and the International Movement for an Imaginist Bauhaus who anticipated these very shifts. The Situationists included the Dutch painter Ander Jorn (1974-1975), the Dutch urban designer Constant Nieuwenhuyss (1970- ), theorist Raoul Vaneigem (1934 - ), and worked with a slew of other notables, like AdBusters began rampantly re-articulating popular advertising to produce an underlying message such as the McDeath logo here.

The second tactic was the derive, a short meandering walk determined by one's desires. The derive was designed to resist the work and control oriented design of Paris which had been put in place by Baron Haussmann in the 19th century. The derive would reveal hints of what the Situationists called psychogeography. "The study of the precise effects of geographical setting, consciously managed or not, acting directly on the mood and behavior of the individual." While at first such meanderings may seem fairly leisurely and not the least bit political, they propose the radical idea that ways of being in physical space (particularly in the cities) are political acts. The consequences of detournement and the derive were all the more acute during this period. The spectacle is a territory. The city is a spectacle. Both tactics, derive and detourné, take as a given their trespassing nature. They must cross into the territory of others, whether these are the advertisements of Nike or the orderly streets of Paris, to produce new meanings. This sensibility becomes visually apparent in the radical intervention of video performance pieces and the "full steam ahead" approach to socio-political actions that they became all the more acute during this period. It is instructive to look at the writings of the Situationists (1957-1972), an avant-garde collective inspired by, if not past member of, Dada, CoBRA (acronym meaning: Copenhagen, Brussels, Amsterdam) and the International Movement for an Imaginist Bauhaus who anticipated these very shifts. The Situationists included the Dutch painter Ander Jorn (1974-1975), the Dutch urban designer Constant Nieuwenhuyss (1970- ), theorist Raoul Vaneigem (1934 - ), and worked with a slew of other notables, like AdBusters began rampantly re-articulating popular advertising to produce an underlying message such as the McDeath logo here.

The Interventionists, warned of the spectacle nature of late capitalist society, by spectacle (a key term for the Situationists) Deborah meant the overly visual and alienating aspect of late capital. While more orthodox Marxists of the period were haggling over the alienation caused by the rise of consumerism, the Situationists asserted that culture itself was becoming the ultimate commodity. Clothing, music, film, television and even walking were all forms of commodification. Their hysteria finds validity in the increasing privatization of culture, the form of intellectual property, copyright and neoliberals, policing, and control of public space if culture was turning into a commodity, then the Situationists were determined to develop methods to confront and reverse this trend. Their aspirations resulted in the development of two key tactics that can be seen in much of the work in this exhibition. The first is the detournement which is basically the re-arranging of popular sign-systems in order to produce new meanings. For the Situationists, this took the form of re-inserting our own language into the thoughts bubbles of popular comics strips. In the comic strip here, the gentleman is saying, "The very development from class society to the spectacular organization of non-life leads the revolutionary project to become visible what it already was essentially." This form found new relevance in the 1990s when "culture jammers" and later magazines like theBusters began rampantly re-articulating popular advertising to produce an underlying message such as the McDeath logo here.

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The Interventionists

User's Manual to the Creative Disruption of Everyday Life

the extraordinary yippies, Abbie Hoffman and Jerry Rubin, whose pranksster antics foreground much of the interventionist work of the 1990s. One of the most exciting actions took place on August 24, 1972 when Hoffman led a group to the New York Stock Exchange and dropped dollar bills down to the traders below. The sudden appearance of money filtering down from the sky caused eager traders to pile on top of each other as they all instinctively chased the money. As planned, the small event spread and grew across the mediated globe. As Jerry Rubin states, “You can’t be a revolutionary today without a television set – it’s as important as a gun. Every guerilla must know how to use the terrain of culture that he is trying to destroy.” The Yippies understood the connection between the spectacle and political action and the influence of his tactics can be seen in much of the work in the exhibition.

Abbie Hoffman and Jerry Rubin understood (probably more so than the Situationists who didn’t have much of a sense of humor) the importance of reading human with dignity into the action. Their tactics, while just as heartfelt and real as the Students for a Democratic Society, were tempered by an understanding of how they would be interpreted on a national media front. Humor was a tactic. Humor was a tool. Their actions were a manipulation of visual codes in a specific time and in a specific place which produced a critical result. In a sense artistic techniques were a resource for manipulating the situation of everyday life. The codes are re-designed whether they are in the streets, on a billboard, on one’s body, or in a classroom.

Games, Tacticts and Strategies

Jerry Rubin and Abbie Hoffman thought of life as a game and they played that game well. As stated earlier, their “tactics” gained meaning from how they were positioned with the game. How clever, witty and flagrantly media friendly were important factors in their success. Key to the interventionist sensibility, is the understanding of tactics and how they gain meaning by operating within a game. When the linguistic philosopher Ludwig Wittgenstein (1889-1951) stated, “What we do is to bring words back from their metaphysical status to their everyday use,” he indicated that language is not about meaning, but about ‘use’. A word’s use came from how it was positioned within a game. When communications or language are operated as a game, it was important to him as he understood that words operated as maneuvers within a system of meaning. The sociologist Pierre Bourdieu (1930-2002) expanded this notion to interact social systems (ranging from knitting clubs to art to Bedouin tribes) as games and knowledge itself as maneuvers within it. To investigate this claim further, we use the concept of “involuntary entertainment” as a starting point for an approach to the discursive sites we inhabit, even the ‘tour’ itself is up for grabs.

For a number of years, Critical Art Ensemble has made the field of biotechnology their focus. We let us think of biotechnology as a game. When Critical Art Ensemble, present their own amateur practice as a tactic, researchers are operating in a game owned by someone else. They are “intervening” in the game of biotechnology. In a boom of raw research, this is the point where the reworking of that language (whether visually, linguistically or spatially) becomes quite political. When Critical Art Ensemble present a series of tools for tackling the given expectations of how this protected field should work and are rearranging them. They are trespassing into this field and as they “reassemble” what the science itself research. This is the point where the reworking of that language (whether visually, linguistically or spatially) becomes quite political.

At times, cultivating public participation becomes an interventionist approach. For example, the act of inviting a Reverend Billy to your workplace or your home is a tactic. It becomes apparent when we think of politicians who use rhetoric and spin to gain public approval to do this into an interventionist understanding, let us think of the real world as the game Monopoly. In this case, the interventionist plays on a board generally owned and operated by someone else.

An interventionist’s ‘tactics’ are utilized in order to unhinge, rework, restate, or reclaim various social systems. Just as the Situationists reworked the given language of a comic strip to critique the “bourgeois Marquis” and right-wing satirists of May ’68 Paris, so too does an interventionist dismantle a dominant language during the current period.

This exhibition moves between various tactics of intervention in order to transform a broad field of approaches. These approaches are categorized into four sections: Reclaim the Streets, Nomads, Ready to Wear, and the Experimental University. As a caveat, almost every project in the exhibition could fit in more than one category. Generally, the combination of a series of tactics is used to produce a result. This categorization is only used as a means to ease a visitor’s entry into a different form of art making and viewing.

In fact, this is why the catalogue is designed like a user’s manual. This decision harkens back to the Russian Constructivist Vladimir Mayakovsky’s (1893-1930) book of poems designed by El Lissitzky (1890-1941) that had tabs allowing the “user/reader” to flip to each poem. It also incorporates the underlying emphasis of interventionist practice into the media of its presentation.

Reclaim the Streets

“Today, steel action groups such as the Tute Biance, use spectacular forms of conflict and theatrical actions designed for the performance possible to climb up a huge crane and risking one’s own life to hang a banner – “against the State.” or watch the film Dschubban by Oliver Ressler and Dario Azzellini, 2002.

The streets have long represented the public sphere: a space where all citizens can participate democratically and freely. Most political artists operate with the desire to expand, test and operate in the public and so, the streets are in a sense, a second home. The section “Reclaim the Streets” (RTS) is named after the radical form of protest begun in London in 1970. It describes the discourses of the ordinary Comintern or the ‘tactics’ of the New left. It as an ordinary meeting that re-arranged the rules of interpretation to disrupt the repressive forms. In their project, “xxx” for the exhibition, e-Xplo’s tour bus travels a predictable journey between MAss MoCA and the Clark Art Institute. The passengers listen to a GPS-triggered sound track that abstract-ly narrates the 'tour's' journey. The passengers are encouraged to enter into a playful reading experience of the city as a whole. The passengers are encouraged to enter into a playful reading experience of the city as a whole. The passengers are encouraged to enter into a playful reading experience of the city as a whole.

In their project, “the exhibition”, e-Xplo’s bus takes a leisurely journey between the fantastic landscapes of the rural and the urban. The passengers watch a GPS-triggered sound track that abstractly narrates the ‘tour’s’ journey. The passengers are encouraged to enter into a playful reading experience of the city as a whole. The passengers are encouraged to enter into a playful reading experience of the city as a whole. The passengers are encouraged to enter into a playful reading experience of the city as a whole.

In their project, “the exhibition”, e-Xplo’s bus travels across these power regimes. This logic becomes apparent when we think of politicians who use rhetoric and spin to gain public approval to do this into an interventionist understanding, let us think of the real world as the game Monopoly. In this case, the interventionist plays on a board generally owned and operated by someone else.
The Interventionists

For over thirty years, Polish born Krzysztof Wodiczko has expanded the Russian Constructivist’s notion of utility and technology for the public good. As Wodiczko acknowledges himself, his work is a mix of Situationism and Constructivism with design. “Designers must work in the world rather than ‘about’ or upon it.” His preferred term is “Interventionist design” which he has incorporated into his ongoing teaching at the Center for Advanced Visual Studies at MIT. (His essay from 1994 is included in this catalogue). With a shift away from representation and emphasis on “use” in the social sphere, it would be no surprise that Krzysztof Wodiczko is one of the interventionist’s seminal figures. By emphasizing use over representation, Wodiczko’s projects reveal his inherent suspicion of capital and control. The projects tend to augment individual autonomy and make visible social oppression. As a émigré from Poland, his political affinities from 1994 is included in this catalogue. With a shift away from representation and an emphasis on “use” in the social sphere, it would be no surprise that Krzysztof Wodiczko is one of the interventionist’s seminal figures. By emphasizing use over representation, Wodiczko’s projects reveal his inherent suspicion of capital and control. The projects tend to augment individual autonomy and make visible social oppression. As a émigré from Poland, his political affinities

Homeless Vehicle

Wodiczko’s Homeless Vehicle Project, 1988-89 is a critical point of departure for much interventionist political art of the 1990s. The design of the vehicle was inspired by the 1987 mandate by New York Mayor Ed Koch declaring that all homeless people of New York must undergo psychiatric evaluations and if they failed, must be hospitalized. Wodiczko decided to focus on the issue of homelessness and used the shopping cart as a media. In conversations with homeless people, Wodiczko designed this project for multiple purposes. The Homeless Vehicle not only provided a user-friendly place for sleeping and can collection, but also provided visibility for the issue of homelessness. Wodiczko is under no illusions that he is incapable of acting as a social service agency. He is the job of a properly functioning government. However, this project brings a dynamic visibility to the issue. The oldest and most common reference to this kind of design is the bandage. A bandage covers and treats a wound while at the same time exposing its presence, signifying both the experience of pain and the hope of recovery.

Since Wodiczko’s Homeless Vehicle, many “mobile” projects have built upon and departed from Wodiczko’s work. Michael Rakowitz, a student of Wodiczko at CAVS, is the author of one such project called Parasite. Parasite, as the name implies, literally feeds off the urban environment. Using the existing HVAC exhausts of buildings, the homeless shelters inflate. Rakowitz produced many Parasite projects in consultation with homeless individuals and unlike Wodiczko’s Homeless Vehicle, Parasite could be wrapped up into a small bundle and placed in one’s pocket.

It is not far fetched to state that many of these “mobile” projects find affinities in displaced populations. The mobile nature of the work points, in function, to a nomadic populace who are, to same degree, parasites of the urban environment. Displacement is an increasingly common politicized position. Tools for mobility find increasing presence in a world continually forced to stay on the move.

User’s Manual to the Creative Disruption of Everyday Life

Looking through the lens of displacement and trans-nationality (or non-nationality), the abundance of tents in the exhibition comes into focus. The tent is mobile architecture that folds up and is easy for one person to carry. It as though life is an ongoing camping trip. The tent provides a home for those trespassing or camping out in public space. It facilitates autonomy, and like a bandage, points to the need for autonomy for displaced populations.

Perhaps no one, except Buckminster Fuller, has explored the possibilities of tents more than Dutch artist/designer Dri Wapenaar. Wapenaar has produced tents for reading newspapers, playing pianos, hanging off trees and this exhibition, a tent for giving birth and for memorializing the dead. Tents have surely come a long way.

Ready to Wear

Trained as a fashion designer, Lucy Orta develops conceptual and functional projects that extend and perpetuate her socially concerned aesthetic. She produces nomadic architecture as well as nomadic clothing. In Orta’s œuvre, clothes become tools, and the body becomes activated. Among many of her radical fashion creations, she has developed architectural clothing lines that almost literalize tendencies hinted at in Wodiczko’s Homeless Vehicle. Her Refugee Wear series (1992-98), which she produced in response to the Gulf War, drew Orta her first international attention. The work is at its most distilled in the early piece Habitent (1992-93): a high design tent/jacket with whistle, lantern and transport bag. Here we see yet another example, of clothing making visible and moderately assisting the situation of global refugees. Her clothes are literally spaces of refuge. It is a fashion of resistance and survival.

Clothing is not only a space of autonomy and refuge, but an industry as well. In particular, in the age of globalization clothing has been more often than not correlated with its industrial practices in the form of sweatshops. This connects directly with the work of J. Morgan Puett who has produced a site-sensitive installation exploring MASS MoCA’s previous identity as Arnold Print Works (1861-1942). Puett also comes out of the fashion industry as a previous owner of four stores in New York City called J. Morgan Puett and her project at MASS MoCA, The Word That Means Smuggling Across Borders, 2003, references this history. Amidst a burnt-out ruin of bricks and wood, a loan industry survives. Bustling away inside a small cottage, a tailor assists patrons in producing suits made from the insurance plans of the old Arnold Print Works site. The work is poetic, participatory, and strangely enough, functional. The business survives as Puett has formed a cottage industry in the very galleries of MASS MoCA.

Fashion also acts as camouflage. As the Center for Tactical Magic writes, “Disguise is the power to conceal, to hide away in the shadows of another’s misperception. The appropriation of signifiers in the minds of onlookers, keyed in to their signal decoders aligned hacked bandwidth.” GIsing “under cover” is not so much an entertaining game (although fun does play a part), it is a necessary tactic when trespassing onto the territory of other’s. Disguise is needed to blend into a different game. The Center for Tactical Magic has produced The Ultimate Jacket (2003).

As a center strongly influenced by various schools of concealment and espionage (private detective, magician, ninja), they have produced a jacket as a means to augment one’s ability to act in various situations. The jackets contain over 50 secret pockets and allows the interventionist to slip from the identity of a worker to the identity of a ninja.

“Although their name contains the word ‘Men,’ it doesn’t describe who they are, it describes what they do: they use any means necessary to agree their way into the fortified compounds of commerce, ask questions, and then smuggle out the stories of their undercover escapades to provide a public glimpse at the behind-the-scenes world of business.” From the Yes Men website, www.gatt.org
In October 2000, the Yes Men found themselves in the confounding situation of agreeing to speak in Salzburg, Austria on behalf of the WTO at a conference of international trade lawyers. The group wrote that unfortunately the General Director of the WTO, Michael Moore, would be unable to attend but they would happily send a representative, Dr. Andreas Bichlbauer. Dr. Bichlbauer arrived with a security guard and cameraman and proceeded to give an audacious PowerPoint presentation on the need to streamline voting in the United States by selling votes on-line and the need to ban sissies as an inefficient holiday. After the talk, the cameraman claimed Dr. Bichlbauer had received a pass in the face by an anti-WTO protestor. Since their first foray into speaking, the Yes Men have given several talks with increasing absurdity as representatives of the WTO. The gold testard with three-foot phallus on display here is the result of one of the Yes Men’s most bizarre forays in Tampere, Finland. The group, represented this time by Hank Hardy Unruh, presented a lecture to a group of Finnish college students on the inefficiency of the Civil War. Slavery, Unruh argued, would have inevitably been replaced by the much cheaper economic solution of sweatshops. At the end of his lecture, Mr. Unruh’s assistant ripped off the lecturer’s clothes. Underneath his suit, Mr. Unruh wore a golden “Management Leisure Suit” which came equipped a large, inflating phallus. At the head of the phallus, Mr. Unruh explained to the astonished class, a satellite-fed monitor allowed the manager to present a lecture to a group of Finnish college students on the relationship between research and practice without making theoretical assumptions beforehand.” -Lucy Orta in conversation with Nicholas Bourriaud, 2000.

Yet, while tactics are a useful place to begin, they are not necessarily the best place to end. While it is true that many of these projects gain their resonance through a dance within the dominant systems, some of these projects prefer to think more strategically about changing these systems as well. As De Certeau defines it, tactics depend on a dominant system. For De Certeau tactics constituted small subversions such as lazy work ethics and meandering walks through the city. He was not particularly interested in whether or not these tactics added up to anything actually revolutionary. However, political artists are constantly concerned with, to use De Certeau’s term, strategies. They want socially benefical results. Frustrated with political irrelevance, many interventionists have catered their projects to fit in numerous spheres and to resonate across a wide-range of audiences. They operate in many different social games from the “art world” to the “activist” world to the “biotechnology” world. They understand their work means different things to different people. With this in mind we can side-step the argument that these practices, in and of themselves, are not politically effective. Their connection to a robust array of audiences and methods, such as activists, publishers, or everyday people allows their specific project to come into light. The false dichotomy between activist (ambitious) and artist (utilitarian) need not be such a devastating issue if we shift terms toward interventionists operating within a network of resistance. We can see in the documentary Disobedience (2000) by Oliver Ressler and Dario Azzellini that the tactics used by interventionists are popularly used in the growing global justice movement today. To say there is a connection between experimental interventionist practices and the collective protest actions today would be putting it lightly. Form of intervention practices do not work in isolation and, in fact, are part of a greater struggle for freedom.

That is why New York-based art collective 16 Beaver has been included as both a signpost and metaphor for social connection. It would be difficult to consider what this constantly shifting collective does as “art”, yet their growing importance to this type of interventionist practice can not be emphasized enough. 16 Beaver is simply a reading group that has met every Monday since 1999. Over the course of five years, they have produced projects reaching out to other groups and have connected various intellectuals, artists and activists through their humble space with regular meeting times. This connectivity, and there are countless other examples of this, is crucial in blurring the distinctions between those that just produce art and those that produce politics. To end on a sobering tone, it is important to emphasize the complete lack of consensus among interventionists. Practices among interventionists vary greatly and these tensions should not be ironed out just because they are under one roof. Nor should this exhibition be misinterpreted as a “greatest hits” of interventionism. This assortment of artists/activists/readers/groups/designers presented here point to new forms of resistance that are increasingly privatized and visualized cultural sphere. They are methods for resistance integrally connected to larger social movements sweeping the planet. While it may be true that there are extraordinary differences of opinion regarding how social change can be brought about, most artists will agree that the current political climate is more dangerous than ever. Tactics for broadening social justice and public dialogue are not simply an artistic challenge, but one placed on everyone interested in democratic participation. The artists in the show are not telling us what to do, but are providing tools for us to engage these questions. In short, the interventionists provide, as William Pope Li’s Black Factory explicitly advertises: “opportunity”.

Nato Thompson
Assistant Curator MASS MoCA

User’s Manual to the Creative Disruption of Everyday Life

The Interventionists

The Interventionists

The Interventionists

The Interventionists

The Interventionists

The Interventionists

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From a lecture given Nov. 6, 2003 at the Rethinking Marxism's 5th International Gala Conference, University of Massachusetts, Amherst.

In 1994, the Boston ICA produced the exhibition, "Public Interventions" curated by Eleanor Heartney and then ICA director, Milena Kalovska.


For more information see the burgeoning field of critical geography spearheaded by the writings of David Harvey, Mike Davis, Edward Soja, Neil Smith and from the art writings Rosalyn Deutsche and Meeon Keon.

Definition found at www.angelfire.com/ar/corei/SI/SIsecc.htm


Ibid.

subRosa's project, *Refugia*, investigates sites of refuge for women. The prominence in the exhibition of the term “refuge” correlates directly to larger social conditions such as the shrinkage of social services and the increasing displacement of global populations.

Puett prefers this term to site-specific.

From the website, www.tacticalmagic.org

The INTERVENTIONISTS

Or: can there be revolutionary art without the revolution?

By Gregory Sholette

“Art into Life!”... “Art into Production!”... “Liquidate Art...!” proclaimed the slogans of the Soviet avant-garde. They likened themselves to engineers standing “before the gates of the vacant future,” as several hundred years of Russian monarchy collapsed in a matter of days. Men and women of diverse artistic temperaments including, El Lissitzky, Klucis, Stepanova, Popova, Tatlin, Rodchenko, Gabo, Pevsner, and the Stenberg brothers described themselves variously as Constructivists, Objectivists, Engineers, and Productivists. Their goal was nothing less than a “universal human culture” founded on reason, collective production, and technological utility. Some expressed believing for conventional artists describing them as the “corrupters of the human race.” Others abandoned their studios and sought to enter factories, extolling standardized production processes modeled on Henry Ford’s assembly line. They developed designs for workers clubs, portable propaganda apparatuses, and art laboratories where experimentation with new Constructivist principles ideally preceded real world implantation. The artist Tatlin, who is credited with coining the slogan Art Into Life, even designed a flying bicycle that would grant every Soviet citizen aeronautical mobility.

More than eighty years after Mayakovsky proclaimed “the streets shall be our brushes - the squares our palettes,” a discordant collection of interests once again seeks the liquidation of artistic detachment by staging a fresh assault upon the tenuous boundary between art and life. 4 These forces include not only artists and intellectuals, but also philanthropic foundations, governmental agencies and above all global corporations; an imperious focus of hegemonic power, a point I return to below. For the moment it is enough to note that within this constellation of interests a particular subset of individuals understand this conflict as a site for critical, artistic engagement within the public sphere. These gathered here under the rubric of interventionism represent compelling examples of this tendency. And because the subsidiary theme of the exhibition is artist as tool provider, comparison to Constructivist and Productivist, post-revolutionary Russian art is unavoidable. Needless to say, this essay steers directly into this theme of the exhibition is artist as tool provider, comparison to Constructivist and Productivist.

Predictably, the definition of utility varied from artist to artist, and from manifestos to manifestos. Yet, around one point this complex movement converged. A new conception of pragmatic art would cast aside conventional notions of industrial design and applied art. It would aim instead at something far more sweeping in scope. As Lyubov Popova asserted, under the fast changing circumstances of the 1920s, “organization was the principle of all creative activity, including artistic composition,” and “the ‘artistic organization of the object’ would inevitably become ‘the principle guiding the creation of even the most practical, everyday things’.” Rodchenko carries this logic to extraordinary lengths claiming that, “Contemporary art is a conscious and organized life that is able to see and build. Anyone who has organized his life, his work, and himself is a genuine artist.” Or as El Lissitzky states, “The private property aspect of creativity must be destroyed all are creators and there is no reason of any sort for this division into artists and non-artists.”

Such sentiments argue for a diffusion of creative work throughout a singularly transfigured society rather than the lock-step discipline of an avant-garde elite leading the cowed masses. They also echo the remarks of the young Karl Marx and Frederick Engels who argued that:

“The exclusive concentration of artistic talent in particular individuals, and its suppression in the broad mass which is bound up with this, is a consequence of division of labour... In a communist society there are no painters but only people who engage in painting among other activities.”

Therefore, if socially useful art is ultimately determined by the society it serves, the artist, as toolmaker must, by necessity, look to the public sphere, and not to the realm of art, for the logic of her work. It also means that the success of any fully, radically expanded idea of art is ultimately measured by its very disappearance into the daily life of the masses. Obviously, in a revolutionary moment, such an objective introduces extraordinary possibilities. It also presents risks, not only for artists, but citizens and even for the state as vanguard aesthetics appears to appropriate the very dynamic of the revolution itself. Doubt this same, extraordinary ambition made these artists, along with other, semi-autonomous movements in post-revolutionary Russia, troublesome to the increasingly centralized and aesthetically conservative Communist Party. As is well known, by the mid-1920s, most of the radical artistic practices I refer to had either been absorbed into orthodox forms of industrial design or sidelined by the official Stalinist aesthetic of socialist realism. Yet while Constructivist ideals of disseminating amongst the masses gave way to dox forms of industrial design or sidelined by the official Stalinist aesthetic of socialist realism. Yet while Constructivist ideals of disseminating amongst the masses gave way to outright displacement of the avant-garde itself, the desire to drag art into life remained central to most 20th Century avant-garde movements including the Surrealists, the Situationists and Fluxus. Never again, however, did it foment the astonishing range of prototypes, theories and artistic programs aimed at not merely subverting existing norms, but at reinventing human existence in toto. Nor was art spared retrogression back into its familiar, rarified, commodity form as art historian Benjamin H. D. Buchloh has asserted.

Nevertheless, the radical legacy of early 20th Century art remains broadly detectable today, much in the same way background traces of radiation evoke a distant, primordial universe. Take the test yourself. Visit any survey of recent art and try to locate a single participant who is not compelled to make some reference to the world beyond art, be it political, personal or through appropriation of popular media or youth culture. At the same time however, if all one can argue is that a trace of social engagement lingers on today, as an artistic theme or curious academic problem, then certainly the grouping of past revolutionary art alongside its tepid, contemporary progeny offers a questionable family portrait. Fortunately, there is a wrinkle in this picture. Within its folds is a different interpretation of, as well as an alternative genealogy for, contemporary art itself.
The Interventionists

Nigger Inc. There is even a “factory” that simulates industrial processes and public service workers who monitor potentially hazardous forms of production such as genetically modified food. Meanwhile, the Critical Art Ensemble describes itself as a “cellular collective construction” exercising “solidarity through difference.” 14 Yet, contrary to early 20th Century art movements, contemporary art groups, as if reflecting the plasticity of identity formations in the post-industrial world, might be said to perform radical subversion or enact collective identity itself, intervention embody them. Incongruity, pluralism and informality have come to supplant notions of unanimity and revolutionary discipline. Tactical conditions not grant, unifying principles compel their formation, which explains perhaps why so many engage in self-mockery and invertebrate play.

Logically, discrepancies also emerge in terms of the audience for this art. While the Constructivists, following Lenin, believed rapid industrialisation held the key to radical, social transformation, and therefore understandably looked towards factory workers as the ideal audience/participant for their program, by contrast, no contemporary artist volunteers to enter the work world any more than they anticipate mass-producing utilitarian artworks. 15 Gone is the positive expectation that modernisation once inspired and with it the privileged role of the laboring class. Michael Rakowitz and his cohorts Bill Stone, George Livingston and Freddie Flynn for example focus on the urban indigent rather the industrial proletariat by building polyethylene shelters for homeless people that are inflated by heat exhaust from city buildings and subways. Similarly, the Danish group Nogo offers individuated sanctuary with their Small Shell System. It rolls as well as floats and can tap into the city’s electrical grid through the base of street lamps like some municipal parasite, but the occupant it aimed at is not the worker but an alienated nomad. Yomango’s line of shoplifting positive apparel and accessories allows the pleasure consumer to perform everyday acts of sabotage against the homogenizing effects of trans-national corporations. In each case, the intended audience for this work is less working class than simply the masses. But equally significant is the way this new wave of useful artistry functions as an ideal model for acts of civic disobedience rather than a practical strategy for defeating global capitalism.


PAD/D went so far as to propose an alternative arts network linking a variety of venues, including university art galleries, community centers, union halls, even churches into a sort of shadow art world that in turn would connect with non-art oriented activities. 16 Very much not avant-garde in approach, PAD/D sought to transform preaching to the converted into a bona-fide, counter-cultural community that anticipated some of the rhetoric surrounding the World Wide Web.

Not that this history is lost on the new wave of activist artists. 18 Perhaps Tatlin’s revolutionary slogan should now be rephrased as “do not preach. They do not advocate. As opposed to providing a literal political message, these artists provide tools for the viewer/participant to develop their own politics. In this sense, the political content is found in a project’s use. They supply possibilities as opposed to solutions.” 19

Perhaps the softer political tone of most of this work reflects a healthy disillusionment with expert culture as well as an acknowledgement that even when preaching social awareness artists remain a privileged class. And if some interventionists openly align themselves with the mass activism witnessed in Seattle, Genoa, Quebec, and so forth, their politics are, generally speaking, as informal and fragmentary as the wildly heterogeneous counter-globalization movement itself. They signal a rejection of traditional Left wing institutions. At the same time it is equally preposterous to imagine any of these artists openly embracing their own role in the way Constructivists and Productivists intended their art to help build communism in the USSR. This holds true despite the receipt of modest to strong federal funding amongst the artists. Instead of a lofty subversive goals, analyzes, and strategies therefore we find a call for self-determined cultural and social autonomy. However, there is a legislative model that contemporary interventionists somewhat resemble. It is the Non-Governmental Organization or NGO. Independent, unaffiliated, and scammers, groups such as Greenpeace, Doctors Without Borders/Médecins Sans Frontières, and Amnesty International stress pragmatic and tactic action over ideology. Nevertheless the question must be raised: can there be radical art without a revolution?

Ironically, or inevitably, it is not interventionist artists who lead the charge to collapse the allegedly transcendent into the merely secular, that is to say art into life. Instead this pressure comes primarily from the legitimating demands of the market, managerial class who make up what historian Chin-tau Wu calls enterprise culture: the unfettered privatization of all public life and services. Enterprise culture is a force that has come to dominate both the US and UK and is linked with the conservative governments of Ronald Reagan and Margaret Thatcher. According to Wu, it has also produced significant effects within the cultural realm. She writes, “Contemporary art, especially in its avant-garde manifestations, is generally assumed to be in rebellion against the system, [but] it actually acquires a seductive commercial appeal within it.” 20

The codependency between the captains of enterprise culture and contemporary art is plain articulated by John Murphy, former Executive Vice-President of Philip Morris Corporation when he states: “There is a key element in this ‘new art’ which has its counterpart in the business world. That element is innovation -- without which it would be impossible for progress to be made in any segment of society.” 21

Perhaps Italin’s revolutionary slogan should now be rephrased as “art into business,” assuming that the latter has already incorpo- rated most aspects of autonomous, daily life into itself. And clearly everything today can be market-branded from the war in Iraq to clothes and as social change. But that isn’t all. At the same time the language and logic of commerce has deeply permeated the art world. In art schools, students express concerns about how to market themselves. Once graduated, the emerging artist is keen to focus on product placement.
within prominent museums, journals and biennials. But why should this surprise us when the leading lights of the art world, from Matthew Barney to the managers of the Tate Modern, present high art as a spectacle of abundance, even of excess, in which success is measured by how many fabricators one commands and who throws the sweekest openings? And all of this shock and awe appears to be thanks to the marriage of high culture and corporate largesse. In terms of artist as tool provider, therefore, the boasting of Thomas Hoving, former director of New York’s Metropolitan Museum of Art, sums it up decisively: “Art is sexy! Art is money- sexy! Art is money - sexy-social-climbing-fantastic!” (Wu, 1997).

The current wave of artistic utilitarianism does indeed produce useful, tool-like art. And, these acts of resistance practiced within everyday life are witty and at times inspiring. Nevertheless, they remain disconnected from comprehensive visions of radical, social transformation. Their politics vague or at best subverted. It is worth noting by way of an admittedly oblique answer to the question raised about radical art and revolutionary politics that some of the most ambitious projects in the USSR in the 1920s, including Tatlin’s Monument to the Third International and Rodchenko’s Workers’ Club, never left the prototype stage. Perhaps foremost among these unrealized social interventions was the “people’s air bicycle,” or Letatlin, a peculiar combination of the pragmatic and the fantastic that Tatlin fabricated in the seclusion of the Novodevichi Monastery in the early 1930s. The personal flying machine at once signaled the possibility that every Soviet citizen could be mobile, travel freely; even temporarily withdraw from the collective. But more than that, one can read into Letatlin a sly, critical stance towards the increasingly bureaucratic and centralized Soviet state, as in other words, is it possibly Tatlin’s merging of autonomy and critique, rather than his call to art into life that most clearly prefigures today’s interventionists?

The interventionists

3 Ibid.
5 Note that both my caution and enthusiasm regarding this historical comparison is indebted to the important research and writings of Benjamin Buchholz, Hal Foster and Christine Lodder on the revolutionary avant-garde.
6 V. Stenberg from Art Into Life, p. 68.
7 Popova, “Commentary on Drawings,” December 1925, in Art Into Life, p. 69.
12 Art Into Life, p. 38.
14 Observations on Collectice Cultural Action
15 The Art Critical Art Ensemble, From
16 At least this is true in the US today. However, some notable exceptions from an earlier generation of artists include: Mieke Lademann Uhale who has worked with the New York City Department of Sanitation as their artist-in-residence for more than twenty years as well as such artists as Fred Lonidier, Mike Alewitz, Alan Sekula, Marty Pottenger and Toronto, Canada: Carol Conde and Karl Beveridge.