**BRIAN HOLMES**

## Intermittent Revolutions

**What is the best approach to artistic practice in the capitalist societies of the twenty-first century? The author feels that we need to combine artistic autonomy and political solidarity, turning radical artistic experience into a shared experience, and it is here that art becomes passionately attractive.**

An exceptional social movement is unfolding in France as I write. The part-time workers of the performing arts are on strike. Using their creativity, their sense of drama and their mastery of technique, they are staging demonstrations, occupying theaters, forcing the cancellation of well-attended summer festivals – and gaining the solidarity of the public, along with that of certain star directors, who remember the difficulties of their early days. These part-time performers and technicians are fighting for a whole way of life. But also for a holistic idea of what an "advanced society" could be.

It was in 1969, and as a direct result of the social struggles of '68, that performing artists and their supporting technicians gained access to the unemployment regime of the "*intermittents du spectacle*," originally created for the cinema industry. This coverage inscribes the fundamental uncertainty of artistic practice into economic reality, providing twelve months of minimum pay to those who manage to work at least 507 hours a year on or around the stage. For some 60,000 actors, singers, directors, set designers and specialized technicians who must constantly take time out to hone their individualized skills and to seek their inspiration, and who typically receive slim wages, often working as volunteers in spontaneous projects, this guaranteed monthly income is vital to a precarious artistic existence. And for a society that loves the artistic gesture, the support of these partially employed performers has seemed an acceptable price to pay. Yet this unique status, which alternative thinkers across Europe have seen as a possible solution to the problems of temporary labor in the postindustrial economy, is precisely what the French employers' union now wants to destroy, in order to replace welfare with workfare – and the multiple values of art with the bottom line of profit.

A movement like this expresses the central conflict that has motivated all my work as a critic, theorist and activist over the past ten years. And it takes the form that interests me most: public performance, political theater in the street. Because it is not exactly art, in the "proper" sense, that I find so passionately engaging. In contemporary institutions, visual art – like music, dance or drama – is usually understood as a competitive quest for excellence, replete with narcissism, high-society prestige, inflated egos. Little matter that the criteria of success are arbitrary, set by the pursuit of fashion, in the service of insider networks. Those are just the normal rules of the art-world game. But what's exciting, inspiring, and impossible to find in galleries or museums, are the moments when radical experimentation becomes a shared experience. When creativity leaps and ricochets through a crowd in the street, transforming, multiplying, losing its origins for its futures. These are the moments of political carnival, when life itself seems beautiful – and dangerous for the established order. Art that takes to the streets opens up new spaces for democratic debates, in closest touch with personal experience.

Of course, art and life are never so simple, and positive outcomes can never be guaranteed. The mere existence of such threatening moments is the reason why so many contemporary social forms appear as capture-devices – strangely seductive sutures or scar tissues over the outbursts of

collective expression. It's no accident that a massive, publicly subsidized cultural institution emerged after the turmoil of May '68, in France and to a greater or lesser extent, in all the social democracies. And this kind of institutionalized culture is just a poor and outdated cousin of professional consciousness production, which is now able to include the inventions of consumption and use within its ever-expanding feedback loop. When an invention happens, when a sensation and a desire are born, the mind-designers are immediately dispatched to make models, "artistic" prototypes of the popular gestures that will soon come back to us in the form of commodities, logos, fashions – fetish objects whose possession and display becomes our passport into the world of subjectivity-for-the-screen. Through a paradoxical reversal, art in the streets can also become the instrument of a new status quo in the marketplace.

Cultural innovation, or the invention of sensations and relations, has been one of the keys to economic growth over the past twenty years. For two reasons. The first is that a world of sensation and relation is what people most intensely want from life. That was the only thing that could overcome the crisis of declining motivation that had fallen like a blight on the mechanized societies of Fordist factory production in the 1970s. But the second is that the switch from industry to a cultural-informational economy proved to be the perfect way to capture a widespread rebellion in the overdeveloped countries – and to channel its overflowing energies into the production of the stimulating, scintillating masks that could cover up the fragmented reinstallation of the capitalist production system all over the globe.

How to face the integration of artistic practice into an ideological machine? The strategies of infiltration, derived from the work of artists like Felix Gonzalez-Torres in the late 1980s – and later promoted beneath the label of "relational art" – were in this sense bound to fail. The idea was that an individual twist could be given to standardized media products and normalized institutional frameworks, opening up spaces within mass culture for creative reception. But what might have been subversive in the 1960s or 70s had now become a function of the dominant system. The personal touch is everywhere in our postindustrial service economies. The "exfiltrations" of the techno musicians and ravers, seeking "temporary autonomous zones," turned out to be much more effective. Escaping commodity circuits, refusing architectures of control, the ravers staged outbursts of collective freedom, detached from straight society. For a long time, their very distance from the norm made them look innocuous, irrelevant. But when their capacity to spark off autonomous urban events became infused with political concerns, among groups like the Tute Bianche or Reclaim the Streets, then the transgressive carnivals began. Transnational solidarities drew vastly different groups of protestors together in a whirlwind. The media consensus that had been constructed over capitalist globalization was finally broken. Creation met resistance once again.

Artistic autonomy, political solidarity: this is the most potent combination. The invention of new behaviors ceases to be simple fashion when it is knitted into collective struggles, whose existence necessarily spans a longer term. A radically new style of public performance – like the Pink & Silver march invented in Prague, at the World Bank/IMF meetings in September 2000 – takes on depth and meaning for each person involved, when provocative "display" is just part of a broader confrontation, whose stakes go beyond those of temporary autonomy or individual expression. Still these more obvious aesthetic displays, operating at their superficial and immediate level, are what serve to break consensus, gesturing vividly to those who remain outside the struggle. The irreverence and formal abstraction of artistic procedures opens up a subjective gap within the daunting gravity of political involvement, which for many people would otherwise be unbearable. What is embodied and dispersed among the crowd is a new kind of vibrant

oscillation, between improvised expressivity and patient, long-term collaboration. The artistic experiment then becomes transversal, it develops simultaneously across the social groups, uniting them amid proliferating differences.
Over the course of just a few years – say, from the first Global Day of Action in the spring of 1998, to the massive confrontation in Genoa in the summer of 2001 – this meeting of artistic creation and political resistance became a familiar reality again, for a new and rising generation. But France, the country where I live, was strangely quiet during this period; and when I considered the artistic scene, it often made me wonder about the value of certain welfare-state innovations, like the special status enjoyed by the *intermittents du spectacle*. Did this precursor of a possible "social wage" or "guaranteed citizenship income," which leftist intellectuals saw as a kind of economic infrastructure for the emergence of the multitudes, really do anything except encourage individual complacency, and aestheticism in the most traditional sense? Of course the answer changes, depending on the people involved. But it seems that a paradox holds sway in contemporary societies: those things we fight for, and sometimes win, only really matter when the struggle is renewed on other grounds. As though the transversal forms of social movements, cutting across the economic and cultural categories, were in fact their most important content.

The themes and even the style of the counterglobalization demonstrations have been visible in the actions of the part-time theater workers, responding to a strong desire for renewed political engagement in French society, particularly among the younger people. But unlike the period that extended all the way to September 2001, we are now facing powerful and violent resistance from the right in almost all the developed countries. Society, they say, must be run like a business – with the support of the police and the army, if need be. In this new atmosphere, the mere interruption of the media consensus is no longer enough to permit even the hope of substantial changes. The problem is to tackle specific issues concretely (for instance, questions of the welfare state), without losing the transversal force of the movements. As the conflicts deepen, those involved with art could have an important part to play. It would mean refusing the cooptation of the protest aesthetic, and contributing instead to the formation of effective solidarities, of a new political resistance, while holding open spaces for the multiple values of art – the fragile and vitally necessary spaces of intermittent revolutions.

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