

Viva la revolución

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FINAL DRAFT

El radical (The Radical)

In a 1969 cartoon in the Black Panther, the organ of the Black Panther Party, the progression of revolutionary consciousness amongst black Americans and the white elite's reaction are illustrated in a most illuminating way: On the left half of the poster, are drawn a black man and a black woman, with short, straightened hair, dressed in polite, white conservative fashion – the man in a dark suit, the woman in a buttoned-up lace-collared dress. The man holds a U.S. flag in his raised right hand. The woman is holding a Bible. To their left is a smaller-scaled figure of a white man, Uncle Sam-looking (perhaps portraying Johnson). The black woman and man seem to be moved and singing. Above their heads are the words “We shall overcome” in large letters. The white man looks overcome with emotions and, sniffing in a handkerchief, is mouthing the words “Beautiful, beautiful...” Under the scene is written 1965. On the right of the poster, stand another black woman and man. They style big Afros and African-patterned shirts, flared pants and sunglasses. Their faces are defiant and they seem to be shouting. Their right fists are raised above their heads right under the words “We shall overthrow.” The small white man looks at once appalled and horrified. His caption reads, “My God, anarchy!” The year is 1969.¹

Y su descontento (And Its Discontent)

To the extent that the black consciousness aimed at opening the gates of the white capitalist bastion to the black populations, the white elite, however reluctantly and by force, eventually found political and economic utility in letting black people in; they were new voters and formed new markets. The Civil Rights movement of the late-50s and early-60s made its highest legal gains in 1964-5 with the Civil Rights Act of 1964 and the Voting Rights Act of 1965, both under Johnson, who ended a speech that urged the passing of the Voting Rights Act with the popular refrain “And we shall overcome,” appropriated from the song that was the all-but-official anthem of the Civil Rights Movement. The appropriation of the language of the grass-roots movement by the state signaled the attempt to diffuse the movement's politics and stunt its radical growth; granting certain “rights” – and that only under extreme popular pressure – while fundamentally preserving the racist and classist structures of power and political and economic systems.² A year earlier and in the context of relations with Latin America, Johnson's predecessor articulated the logic of this maneuver quite clearly. “Those who make peaceful revolution impossible, will make violent revolution inevitable,” Kennedy said in a speech at the anniversary of the establishment of the “Alliance for Progress,” the civil mask put on the interventionist policies undertaken in response to the Cuban Revolution and the threat of spread and success of other revolutionary movements in Latin America. “We propose to complete the revolution of the Americas, to build a hemisphere where all men can hope for a suitable standard of living and all can live out their lives in dignity and in freedom. To achieve this goal political freedom must accompany material progress.” Amongst “revolutionary” measures for attaining both “political freedom” and “material progress” was a clause in the charter of the Alliance for Progress – included under the pressure of the U.S. negotiators – that committed Latin American governments to promote conditions that would “encourage foreign investment in the region.”³ Meanwhile, U.S. imperialist/militarist interventions continued through campaigns such as Operation Power Back (invasion of the Dominican Republic by 24,000 US troops in 1965), Operation Brother Sam (set up to assist in Brazil if the 1964 military coup did not succeed on its own.), and later Operation Condor during which the US supplied intelligence and

expertise to a campaign of political assassinations, terror and repression waged by an alliance of dictatorial and militarist governments in South America, all the while training proficient military cadres in the newly expanded and renamed (in 1963) U.S. Army School of the Americas.⁴

La Herencia, I (The Heritage, I)

When in mid- to late-1960s, it became glaringly clear that a more colourful facade would not transform the fundamental injustice of the racist capitalist system, anti-racist activism in the U.S. aligned itself with the anti-imperialist and socialist ideals that inspired the radical edge of emancipatory social and political struggles around the world. The younger black generation formed the Black Panther Party in response to unchanged conditions of life, continued and heightened racist reactions to the Civil Rights gains, and state violence against increasingly mobilized black communities.⁵ The BPP's social programs rejected at once the inherent violence and the benevolent façade of the capitalist/racist nation state in favour of self-governance and communal economy. Between 1965 and 1969, major "race riots" took place in Los Angeles, North Omaha, Houston, Buffalo, Milwaukee, Minneapolis, Newark, Detroit, Baltimore, Chicago, Louisville, Washington and Pennsylvania. During this time, the Black Panther, the BPP's newspaper with a circulation of 250,000, became the voice of revolution, featuring graphic art by Emory Douglas – also BPP's Minister of Culture – in almost every issue. Douglas' aesthetic strategies – at once utopian, radical, tactical and accessible – closely corresponded with the developing politics of the movement.⁶ Talking about his work and its connection to the movement, Douglas states, "It was an art form that hadn't been used by a black organization, a militant organization [...] All this occurred at the height of the resistance movement and involved solidarity with other people around the world and working with these other coalitions. Other movements were inspired by what we were doing and beginning to implement the same type of programs to deal with some of the same issues. All this had an impact as it related to how people dealt emotionally with, and became attached to, the art."⁷

La otra globalización (The Other Globalization)

As we conceptualize so we must historicize the terrain of resistance to neoliberal globalization. The 1960s and 1970s, as Douglas reminds us, were periods of global mobilization of the Left against new forms of Western fascism (defined most accurately in a BPP poster as "the power of finance capitalism"). The 1960s generation of radical activists were increasingly aware of how white Western capitalism was reformulating itself through export of capital, creating dependent economies and expanding consumerism on the one hand and brutal military intervention and occupation, military coup d'états and installing puppet regimes on the other. Radical movements in the Middle East, South America, Africa and Asia were local expressions of a global revolutionary consciousness ideologically inspired as much by Fanon's writings as by those of Marx, Lenin and Mao. The Cuban Revolution, the Algerian War of Independence, the war of liberation in Vietnam and the Palestinian liberation movement provided both theoretical and practical role models for other "Third World" revolutionaries. In the Iranian context, for example, several guerilla groups formed in the 1960s and operated both inside and outside the country. They were mostly driven by students who were radicalized during or after the violent repression of the Oil Nationalization Movement by the U.S.-backed coup d'état that re-instated Reza Pahlavi to the throne in 1953. These radical groups were connected to a vast and highly active network of other "Third World" groups – particularly in Europe – comprised of students, political exiles and émigrés, and were keenly aware of anti-imperialist struggles around the world. While earlier generations of political activists in Iran (and elsewhere) had strong nationalist tendencies, the 1960s and 1970s generations situated their local struggles within a global perspective.⁸

La Herencia, II (The Heritage, II)

Of significance in the two decades leading to the 1979 Revolution in Iran are the interconnections between artistic practices and revolutionary activism. There were many artists active in the guerilla groups or somehow connected to them. Poems, songs, stories and political graphics in particular, because of relatively easy, accessible and cheap print and audio reproduction and distribution technologies – photocopy and cassette tape – were the main carriers of the revolutionary poetics and politics. Formally and ideologically, their aesthetic approaches were akin to their contemporary counterparts in other countries. Their function was ritualistic, communicative and instructive. They memorialized events that the tightly controlled and censored mainstream media left invisible or else highly distorted; they carried identity-building ideals; they rallied their audiences' sentiments in support of revolutionary engagement; and they spread the movement's ideology as well as strategic and tactical messages. As such, they were far from commodities and intellectual properties. With some exceptions, they were autonomously produced and repeatedly reproduced by others, and their primary channels of distribution were mostly underground activist and intellectual networks in particular amongst students. Translations of literature of revolution from other languages – from guerilla handbooks to Aimé Césaire's poems – as well as appropriated political graphics and iconography of other struggles – the BPP's raised fist amongst them – are highly visible and important in this corpus. Along with encouraging a nation-based revolution, these practices collectively fostered a transnational culture of solidarity and struggle.⁹

La Herencia, III (The Heritage, III)

During the 1980s to mid-1990s, unwinding from the political push of the earlier decades and already under the spell of neoliberal economy/culture policies, the art system in North America really had very little space for openly oppositional art. In fact, during this time there was naked hostility toward artistic engagements that aimed to radicalize the sphere of the arts, either by making visible the politics of the art sector itself (institutional critique as activism before it was co-opted as a genre), or by making art about radical politics and political subjects (labeled “political art,” the kind of art that triggered a disdainful smirk in elitist art circles). The artists who made their politics apparent in or subject of their art did so mostly in parallel and autonomous art spaces and primarily in relation to politics of race, gender or sexuality (labeled politics of identity). These were of course highly contested grounds. But, although the artists' demands were radical for the white, heterosexual, male dominated art system, they fell short of revolutionary demands as they mostly aimed to open up the mainstream spaces to gender, cultural, “racial” and/or sexual diversity. On the whole, during this period there was clearly a lack of awareness of (or indifference to) class politics, geopolitics and how the local systems tied into global orders. The art system responded in the same way as the U.S. government did to Civil Rights movement. Token artists were allowed in but only to add colour to the offerings, ultimately expanding the art market without changing its power structures or its socio-political roles. This process on the one hand culminated in depolarizing and fragmenting contesting communities, and on the other led to trivialization of their demands and co-optation of their rhetorics and methods.

Contra ambivalencia (Against Ambivalence)

In response to critical questioning brought to North American art/culture institutions particularly with regards to their cozy relations with big businesses and neoliberal states, the dominant argument– if not an unabashed defense of the system – is something along these lines: Capitalism permeates the very air we breathe and indeed we are no longer capable of living in a different atmosphere, thus we have no option but to work in/for it and hope to change the system from within. Underneath its apparent

pragmatism, utilitarianism and truism, however, this is entirely a cynical, defeatist, misleading, complacent and/or lazy attitude. Unable to self-glorify any longer in the wake of wars, environmental disasters, economic crashes and deepening poverty and social divisions – contemporary art for art's sake (also technology for technology's sake and science for science's sake) assumes a posture of accountability to the local or national economy which justifies both its existence and its social and political ambivalence. Ambivalence is a state not a position. Once assumed and claimed as a position, ambivalence is every bit as ideological as and more dangerous than any political stance. On the surface, ambivalence may appear to stand at a distance from the dominant political systems and, in some ways, even look mildly critical of them by not buying into them whole-heartedly. However, as a political stance, ambivalence is deeply rooted in and supported by academic, bureaucratic and arts institutions and direct beneficiary of the neoliberal policies and structures that afford it the luxury of research without community commitment, experimentation without regard for social well-being, and re/production without progressive ethos. Linguistic, aesthetic and political ambiguity and ambivalence are symptomatic of intellectual paralysis, political/economic opportunism and/or the fear of reprisal.

La realidad de lo que es (The Reality that Is)

Benjamin argued that capitalism transforms the function of the arts (their use value) from serving in communal rituals and traditions to objects of exhibition, subjects of speculation and industries of mass distraction (consumption without critical attention). Major art festivals in urban centers around the world – from Shanghai to Sharjah, Sidney to Venice, Kassel to Istanbul – are places where art agents and private and institutional art clients and collectors meet and discuss contracts and prices, special loci where the state bureaucracy meets corporate machinery, and together they assign a market value for the arts based on the latter's capacity to attract national and international tourists, animate businesses and sell art to its audiences and its audiences to advertisers and sponsors. Art, drinks, t-shirts, catalogues, political cache and public approval are all on sale. Over the years art festivals have developed in tandem with neoliberal schemes that inflate the surplus value of cultural commodities while maintaining a tight grip on the distribution of the capital gain and ownership of the art/culture infrastructures whose sustainability is entirely dependent on corporate underwriting and/or state funding and their ideological whims.¹⁰ Not surprisingly, with the exception of art stars, culture celebrities and higher echelons of arts/culture management, the majority of artists and cultural workers who produce what festivals trade (directly or on the fringes), remain at the lower end of the economic boom they help to create, often strapped for cash and barred from the presumably bustling economy that cashes in on their labour. This process works regardless of the stated intentions, aspirations, objectives, themes and concepts of the festival's producers – artistic directors, curators, artists, administrators, educators, organizers, etc. The capitalist mode of operation is engrained in the very mechanisms and relations between contemporary culture and political economy.

Un espacio diferente (A Different Space)

Barely over a decade old, the current trends in activist art/media, however, bloomed initially in a different space, that of anti-racist, anti-oppression, anti-colonialist, anti-imperialist, anti-globalization activist and fringe circles. Echoing their historical precedents in their transnational ethos and solidarity across various borders and levels of separation, current media/art activisms produce various media/art objects/projects not just alongside with but as forms of engagement in social and political struggles. Anti-war, immigrant rights, queer rights, indigenous rights, trans-national and/or cross-community solidarity, anti-racist and anti-gentrification movements are vibrant environments where activist art/media play essential and integrated roles in the development of the movements' theories and

practices, as well as in their cultural and pragmatic networks and modalities of popular education and solidarity action. This surge was no doubt partly inspired by the Chiapas Uprising and the ways in which the Zapatistas, incorporating and mobilizing the indigenous cultural methodologies, opened a highly effective media front by activating transnational solidarity and action. Similarly, soon after the start of the Second Intifada (2000), Palestine solidarity activists waged a campaign to “globalize the Intifada” – as a current popular slogan goes – through transnational solidarity actions in tandem with independent art/media production. These examples arose out of intense necessities on the ground and were echoed in the anti-globalization movement’s convergence and use of creative methodologies and independent media in advance of, on the way to, during and after Vancouver (against APEC, 1997), Seattle (against WTO, 1999), Quebec City (against Summit of the Americas, 2001), Genoa (against G8, 2001), and the successive World Social Forums since 2001. In North America since 2000-2001 and in response to the Bush administration, its Canadian and Mexican allies, and the so-called “War on Terror” and “Security and Prosperity Agenda,” the radicalization of resistant politics and action has also been accompanied by an increase in activist art/media production as an integrated part of resistance. Increasingly, this resistance is being formulated as an anti-imperialist movement characterized in theory and practice by transnational solidarity and organizing.

Arte después/exterior de arte (Art After/Outside Art)

With the proliferation of cheap electronic media technologies and networks, it is now given that the revolution will be televised,¹¹ youtubed, blogged, text-messaged, printed, streamed and podcasted. But it should also be obvious that the revolution is not an art/media practice/object and, certainly, not an art/media festival. Some parts of the art world, both institutions and artists, have been quick to adopt some forms and instances of activist/politically-engaged art/media. This move helps boost the artist’s and/or institution’s claim to aesthetic vanguardism, exhibit their desire for renewal/renovation and/or expand their audience base. But this move neither challenges the art system’s inherent hierarchies and power relations, nor radicalizes its politics and modes of social operation and reception. Rather, this is a transient form of engagement that, as can be observed quite often in such projects, parachutes in, voyeurizes, colonizes and ultimately commodifies communities and their struggles. Characteristically, this form of engagement tones down the social critique, decontextualizes the radical practice and sanitizes the political expression by stylizing it, all under the veneer of artistic standards, public accountability, corporate acceptance and/or popular appeal. For activist art/media practices to be meaningful and to function effectively – that is, to maintain their radical and tactical ethos and aesthetic rigor – they must remain in dialogue with channels of community mobilization, collective action and communal distribution. In other words, they cannot be limited to nor address themselves to the demands of the existing systems because activist/art practices ultimately find their meaning and their use value in the extent to which they intersect, commingle, collaborate, coincide with, are inspired by, challenge and/or contribute to the theory and practice of the movement they originate in. It is only in such a dynamic and symbiotic existence that they cross the limits of contemporary art/media, transcend their exhibition-oriented nature and commodity function, and take on a critical and revolutionary role.

La autonomía necesaria (The Necessary Autonomy)

The continuation of critical and resistant discourse in activist art/media of social transformation seems to demand creation, however temporarily, of autonomous spheres. Such autonomy has to be conceived in relation to mainstream channels of capitalism as well as ideologically and pragmatically rigid leftist formations that have outdated understanding of the relations between art and resistant politics. If the former sees in art and media primarily their commodity and market potentials, the latter limits their

function to representation and/or information within a hierarchical structure. While activist art/media projects inevitably perform both the communicative and the instructive functions, they also and most importantly have the potential to open up critical spaces for experimentation and collaboration in radical theorizing and organizing. An example of such projects was “Negotiations; from a Piece of Land to a Land of Peace” (2003), the first large-scale art-driven event in Canada focused on Palestine-Israel organized by a group of artists and activists. The experimental and collaborative spaces of this project became the ground for radical theorizing about the rights of Palestinians as indigenous people, the position of Israel as a settler state and the global continuities and connections that maintain the brutal colonial power relations. The project also encouraged participation by diverse communities as well as renewed and innovative cross-community communication and action with initiatives that later led to very active networks that have distinctly shifted the political discourse.¹² It is important to mention that an autonomous sphere does not necessarily have to be envisioned as completely outside the existing systems and formations for the simple reason that such exteriority, however desirable, is not entirely possible. Rather, the autonomy may manifest itself as differences in the potentials, possibilities, types of relations, modes of engagement and/or critical spaces that are drawn upon and enabled by art/media practices.

Lo que exigimos de lo que es (What We Demand of What Is)

Certainly, so long as we are tied into the existing systems, structures and relations, we cannot assume a position that is fundamentally outside of them. But, in the logic of social change what is at question is not *what is* but *what we demand of what is*. In other words what’s at stake is the very willingness and ability to imagine and materialize alternatives and the degree to which these alternatives are substantially different from the existing orders. That we are inside the existing world system is not automatically a command to accept its finality. Utopia, the no-place of imagination, is not a place of complicity, complacency and compromise. The ideal does not have to adhere to the limits of the existent. And anybody who preaches against holding ideals that are substantially different from capitalism has either sold out or bought in. As transnational citizens and cultural producers who are interested in fundamentally transforming our social order, it is, as Brecht advocated, “not at all our job to renovate ideological institutions on the basis of the existing social order by means of innovations. Instead our innovations must force them to surrender that basis.”¹³ What is at issue then is precisely what concerned Benjamin at the moment of rise of fascism – that is, corporate capitalism boosted by state investment, public policy, militarist machinery, racist ideology, colonialist geo-politics and domestic populism¹⁴ –and should concern us today for the same reasons: *What revolutionary demands can we formulate in the politics of art?*

Si quieres tomar ron pero sin Coca Cola¹⁵ (If You Want to Drink Rum without Coca Cola)

The revolution will not unfold in the convivial clink of wine glasses, polite conversations or cozy knitting circles. The revolution will not attend opening nights, dinner parties, gallery or city tours. The revolution is not an innocuous performance. The revolution’s space is that of conflict and its aesthetics antagonistic and utopian. The revolution is live not time-based. The revolution does not start and finish in a pre-planned duration. The revolution is personal to the same extent that it is political, but the revolution is not individualistic and does not celebrate celebrities. The revolution does not apply for government, foundation and corporation grants and residencies. The revolution is a self-defined co-operative and it runs on the active participation of the “masses,” the marginalized, racialized, working-class people who engage in conscious activity toward transforming their lives and challenging the capitalistic power relations, systems and institutions. The revolution is not cynical, ironic, ambivalent,

fashionable, hip. The revolution does not hang out in cafes in gentrified urban spaces and combine art tourism with eco consumerism. The revolution is not professional, collegial, administrative. The revolution is not a one-time engagement. The revolution is not a campaign. It is not an NGO with a charity number. It is not a t-shirt with an iconic face on its front or a slogan on the back. The revolution is not a directed and contained social experiment. The revolution is loud, messy, chaotic, dangerous, unpredictable, uncontrollable, frightening, exhilarating, demanding, exhausting and it does not fit into any frames or scripts. The revolution takes place on the street across from barricades, fences, walls, checkpoints, prisons, facing guns, tanks, bulldozers, tear gas, surveillance technology, paddy wagons, mounted cops, riot cops, the army, anti-insurgency units, intelligence agents and crowds of people who are indifferent to it or have vested interest in maintaining the existing order. The revolution is exposed and risky. The revolution, like conflict, is historical, embodied and spatialized. The revolution's collectivity and language are not pre-formulated. They are contested and remain open to negotiation. The revolution is not a preordained monolithic unity. The revolution's relationality is in ongoing negation of relations of dominance and exploitation; its sociality guided by enduring, never-renting utopian ideals; its utopias always in-progress.¹⁶ The revolution is a political aesthetic. Its representational field is populated by real people in real time and space engaged in real action. The revolution is real and continuing. Viva la revolución.

¹ A 1969 reproduction was included in the exhibit "All Power to the People! The Graphics of the Black Panther Party" organized by Center for Political Graphics, on exhibit at Toronto Free Gallery, Sep 11 - Oct 11, 2008.

² Benjamin identified this as a fascist strategy, "Fascism sees its salvation in giving these masses not their right, but instead a chance to express themselves." What happened in New Orleans after Katrina effectively proved that the U.S. socio-economic and political system has remained fundamentally racist and segregationist.

³ Kennedy's speech can be found at the Fordham University's Internet Modern History Sourcebook at <http://www.fordham.edu/halsall/mod/1961kennedy-afp1.html>.

⁴ Some declassified U.S. government documents that prove its involvement in these operations can be found at the George Washington University's online National Security Archive at <http://www.gwu.edu/~nsarchiv/index.html>

⁵ Angela Davis also attributes the disbanding of the BPP to a police campaign of terror, incarceration and assassination against black revolutionaries. (Davis, Angela. *The Angela Y. Davis Reader*. Blackwell Publishers. 1998. Pp 10-12.)

⁶ For analysis of Douglas's work, its aesthetic and technological character, and its function and use value within the radical Black Power movement, read Colette Gaiter's "The Revolution Will Be Visualized: Emory Douglas in the Black Panther" and "Visualizing a Revolution: Emory Douglas and The Black Panther Newspaper", respectively <http://bad.eserver.org/issues/2004/65/gaiter.html> Bad Subjects Issue #65, January 2004, and <http://www.aiga.org/content.cfm/visualizing-a-revolution-emory-douglas-and-the-black-panther-new> AIGA June 08, 2005

⁷ "Revolution in Our Lifetime: Valerie Palmer in conversation with Black Panther's graphic artist Emory Douglas." Fuse Magazine. Vol 31, #4. Pp 19-28. On many of BPP posters and leaflets, the text appears in many languages, indicating the inter-community solidarity in resistance that preceded and transcends (neo)liberal states' so-called "multicultural" policies, the latter better understood as the attempt to contain and sanitize anti-racist and anti-oppression demands.

⁸ Note interview with historian Behrooz Ghamari on Against the Grain at <http://www.againstthegrain.org/program/73/id/311410/wed-7-30-08-surviving-iran>.

⁹ An archive of Iranian dissident leftist literature of 1960s to 1980s was the inspiration for and part of the exhibition “Theory of Survival” at San Francisco’s Yerba Buena Center for the Arts, July 19 – August 28, 2008. Note <http://theoryofsurvival.com/>.

¹⁰ Recently, the Conservative government in Canada announced drastic cuts to funding for the arts that effectively put an end to many art distribution and promotion initiatives. For more information especially artists’ campaign against the Conservatives visit <http://departmentofculture.ca>.

¹¹ With respect to the revolutionary poet, musician and teacher Gil Scott-Heron.

¹² Negotiation’s curatorial statement can be found at <http://creativeresponseweb.net/negotiations>.

¹³ Brecht, Bertolt. “The Radio as an Apparatus of Communication.” Online at <http://www.medienkunstnetz.de/source-text/8/>

¹⁴ One of the recent debates in North American intellectual and academic circles is about whether or not we should use the term fascism in reference to current regime in the United States or as an aspect of “globalization.” Some argue that we have to maintain the specificity of the origins and characteristics of historical Fascism in Italy, and that we cannot ignore the differences between contemporary political regimes and their predecessors nor exaggerate their similarities. It seems to me, however, that if we can use the terms ‘liberal’ and ‘communist’ to refer both to generalities in certain ideologies and forms of governance, as well as to historically specific political parties and formations without getting confused, there is no good reason why we can’t do the same with fascism. The claim here is not that the Bush regime or “globalization” copy Mussolini’s Fascist state or are outgrowths of it, but that in all the broad strokes, in their strategies and practices, they are not fundamentally new and original; rather, they are contemporary manifestations of the historical trajectory of capitalism.

¹⁵ With respect to revolutionary artist, Victor Jara, from the song A Cuba.

¹⁶ For a concise and insightful critique of “relational aesthetics,” note 29 11 07, A Very Short Critique of Relational Aesthetics, Radical Culture Research Collective (RCRC), <http://transform.eipecp.net/correspondence/1196340894>, retrieved 26/09/2008.