*Tactical Irrelevance: Art and Politics at Play*

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**The Limits of Art: An Introduction**

During the student demonstrations in Paris this spring, a film student came into my office agitated and wanting to talk. Given that young people in France were demonstrating against a new, age-discriminating employment law that placed them in essentially the same position as almost everyone in the US workforce, he had his share of questions. His concerns centered not on the cynical, ungrateful and unruly French youth depicted in the US media: too bullheaded to understand that the law was designed to help them, unwilling to work or study to get ahead, but quite able to get the government to back down in the face of a mass tantrum. Instead, his voice was filled with an aching and restless desire as he asked, "Why couldn't that happen here?"

I remember asking myself that question back in 1999. I was working part-time as a teacher's assistant two years after college, paying off student loans, and reading about the student strikes in Mexico City demanding that education remain tuition-free. Imagine that! No tuition! This was not just a *dream* of overworked and under-financed university students but rather a *demand* that they were occupying campus buildings to achieve! Although the student occupation was ultimately broken when federal police stormed the university ten months into the strike, the students had demonstrated that they recognized themselves as political agents and possessed a faith in the concrete possibility of their program that made the 1999 counter-globalization protests in Seattle, however invigorating and remarkable, seem quite symbolic and abstract by comparison. What was it that gave those students in Mexico City and in Paris the sense that if they walked off their jobs, stopped going to classes, and began taking over buildings that they'd somehow win a battle against neoliberalism where it touched them most directly?

In light of the actions taken in Paris and Mexico City, not to mention by immigrants and allies in Chicago and Los Angeles and thousands of other cities and towns just this spring, an almost impossible charge is made in the title of this panel, *The Work of Art Against the Neo-Liberal Tide.* Advocates for political art, and I consider myself one of them, have frequently exaggerated the effectiveness of aesthetic intervention as much as Plato exaggerated its threat when he called to ban artists from the Republic. What can the work of art do, really, against the work of the World Bank? The efficacy of art is difficult to establish in an evaluative schema that privileges the quantifiable outcome, and in the present state of perpetual emergency, something more than artists' vague claims about raising awareness and promoting dialogue seem necessary.

Despite the rather rapid rhetorical move from the "end of history" to the "clash of civilizations," the present historical moment is one that breeds either blind acquiescence or the quietus of despair. For those lingering malcontents like my hapless film student eyeing faraway uprising with envy, neoliberalism says, "That could never happen here," and the neoconservative twist adds, "and you're unpatriotic even to entertain the idea." Even for those who have fought all their lives for change, we find ourselves secretly and sadly suspecting the truth of Maggie Thatcher's retort, "there is no alternative." Some, most visibly Judith Halberstam, have advocated embracing the present moment of 'failure' for the unexpected opportunities and tactical possibilities it might provide. Given this situation, how might we make operating in the relatively untroubled spaces of art practice—where every tempest might well disturb no more than the contents of a

teacup—more than an exercise in emotional self-preservation and into a considered political response?

This question is an old one and cuts to the core of matters of artistic relevance. Rather than relaunching stalemated debates such as "must art serve politics?," our time and energies might be better served by evaluating and rethinking recent strategies that have brought art and politics together. We must be open to unexpected, even undesirable answers and may even need to dispense with the notion that art can be by itself a form of political action. As artist and activist Trevor Paglen observes, "When Walter Benjamin asked how one might create works of art that were "useless to fascism" he perhaps did not foresee the answer that [tactical] media suggest: making art that is "useless to fascism" might mean making art that is 'useless to art.'"[1] While Paglen has advocated positioning artwork within a political context rather than being content to merely comment upon it, another approach might be to embrace the gap between art and action and to see this separateness as central to what the making of art can offer. If politics is conventionally understood as the exercise of or struggle over power, then 'political art' may be uniquely positioned to produce a 'metapolitics:' a set of conditions within which political action—outside both the confines of the artwork and the conventionally political—will become more possible for more people. In positioning their work not to *be politics* but to *permit politics*, artists must rework several well-worn and much abused threads of politicized practice: a critique of artistic autonomy, a foregrounding of content, and a commitment to 'dialogue.'

In this essay, I want to move toward the framing of artistic irrelevance as a strategic opportunity for more precisely and usefully considering the relation of aesthetics

and politics. I will use Jacques Ranciere's provocative work on the politics of aesthetics to consider two relatively recent artistic projects, emphasizing how they reframed the space of the political and produced new forms of identification and solidarity for artists and audience alike. Lastly, I hope to sufficiently complicate questions about the relationship of aesthetic and political activity to encourage us all—artists and scholars, citizens and subjects—to know more clearly what we're asking for when we ask for artists to "be political."

**Tactical Irrelevance and the Politics of Aesthetics**

Radical philosopher Jacques Ranciere has argued for a substantial redefinition of the terms of the debate concerning the places where politics and art intersect. He describes politics as something much more basic and expansive than our received poli-sci textbook definitions: "politics is not the exercise of power or the struggle for power. Politics is first of all the configuration of a space as political, the framing of a specific sphere of experience, the setting of objects posed as "common" and subjects to whom the capacity is recognized to designate these objects and argue about them."[2] Ranciere's longstanding commitment has been to examine how ideas like 'philosophy,' 'politics,' and 'aesthetics' are constituted such that some people (working class, non-white, and/or female) are assigned a position forever outside of them. For Ranciere, art is not political solely or even primarily due to the messages it conveys with regard to timely social issues. Rather, artworks are political "insofar as they suspend the ordinary coordinates of sensory experience and reframe the network of relationships between spaces and times, subjects and objects, the common and the singular."[3] In other words, Ranciere rejects prescriptions about art's role in representing or obscuring *political issues* in favor of

considering how aesthetic activity constitutes *communities*, shifts *agency*, and stages *dissension*, which is for him the foundational moment of the political.

Having cut his political and aesthetic teeth on the student demonstrations in Paris in May 1968, Ranciere is particularly well-positioned to address recent resistant artistic projects that take their inspiration from the forms of desirous, embodied protest arising in that historical moment. While many of these practices deal with timely political content, most are also concerned, more or less explicitly, with creating new or different consciousnesses of what constitutes the political. Topically political issues have been engaged by 'interventionists' from the Yippies to the Yes Men, while following Seattle, many activists began to see protests as opportunities to communicate at least as much through symbology and humor as speechifying and sloganeering. These efforts are often explained with the "spoonful of sugar" argument: that a complex or challenging point, made playfully or humorously, is less alienating and easier for an audience to swallow. However, they also embody an irreverent attitude toward authority and promote a culture of aesthetic democracy that prefigures a politics much more ecstatic and embodied than the nose-to-the-grindstone organizing and old boys' networking far more familiar as political models. This analysis of the political function of cultural action echoes claims made for Dadaist performances, Situationist derives, and the games and whimsical instruction pieces coming out of Fluxus—that aesthetic activity is something different than conventional political discourse by more accessible means, and that in that difference lies its power. Following Ranciere, then, the aesthetic domain is a place where people have the luxury of reframing the foundational precepts on which issue-oriented politics are based, and because those precepts are often framed as matters of aesthetics

(concerning judgment and taste in the Kantian sense), intervention in this domain is essential.

Ranciere's reformulation of the link between politics and aesthetics also prompts a rethinking of the concept of artistic autonomy. He describes the curious situation in which we enter art spaces "not sure to find art in the galleries and museums but get a better chance to see politics there than in parliamentary debates."[4] For Ranciere the concept of the aesthetic is a profoundly paradoxical condition that both defines art practice as part of a rarefied, elite world knowable only by the powerful while also and simultaneously producing a sensual experience that exists wholly outside the logic of domination.[5] This experience also constitutes a "dismissal of that partition of the sensible" that would render aesthetics apart from everyday life. Due to this paradoxical quality of artistic autonomy—that it produces responses that refuse the confines of the power system that defines them—Ranciere is not interested in prescribing certain content, settings or audiences for the critical artist. While it is quite clear that the conventional model of artistic creation and reception—in which the passive, pre-rational, and individualized artwork is meditated upon by a passive, pre-rational, and individualistic viewer—forecloses questions of collective political engagement, the call to 'take art to the people' elides some equally important questions. The populist-political mode of art making—forever evacuating one's practice from the walls and pedestals of the compromised, bourgeois gallery—has become such a truism of certain strands of radical art practice that certain foundational questions about that proposition, such as who is in the position to take what art to which people, are rarely answered satisfactorily.

Ranciere's expansive notion of 'critical art practice' can be criticized as so bracketing content and context as to function at times as an apologia for the kinds of pseudo-engaged art often championed under the term 'relational aesthetics.' However, his thought is very useful for artists interested in thinking rigorously about what we might *realistically* do in the aesthetic domain. Because the European tradition has held art as a separate sphere of human activity both above and outside of historical and political realities, discourses and practices of art today paradoxically offer semi-autonomous spaces in which the veracity of neoliberalism's claims might be questioned in relative safety and new possibilities for social and self-organization might be tested. Such an observation will hardly be earth-shattering to anyone accustomed to considering capitalism and its cultures dialectically, with the conditions produced by capital always containing the nascent energies of its defeat. Terry Eagleton offers a critical outline of the historical development of the idea of the aesthetic in European thought in which he discusses quite lucidly the paradox of artistic autonomy:

> It is not only, as radical thought has familiarly insisted, that art is thereby conveniently sequestered from all other social practices, to become an isolated enclave within which the dominant social order can find an idealized refuge from its own actual values of competitiveness, exploitation and material possessiveness. It is also, or rather more subtly, that the idea of autonomy—of a mode of being which is entirely self-regulating and self-determining—provides the middle class with just the ideological model of subjectivity it requires for its material operations. Yet this concept of autonomy is radically double-edged: if on the one hand it provides a central constituent element of bourgeois ideology, it also marks an emphasis on the self-determining nature of human powers and capacities which becomes…a vision of human energies as radical ends in themselves which is the implacable enemy of all dominative or instrumentalist thought.[6]

Following Eagleton, then, the artist's task appears to be pushing the valence the aesthetic from functioning as a screen for the ideology of capital and instead toward its capacity to

unleash libratory and self-determining human energies. The blithe irrelevance of art through most of Euro-American history ends up serving a tactical purpose: art can become a relatively safe and ‘conveniently sequestered’ space not for obscuring or aestheticizing capitalism but within which people might play with new forms of agency and enhance their expectations for participation in the politics routinely encountered in everyday life.

**Building Community on Borrowed Time**

In the spring of 2001, a group of artists and activists came together to launch fifty-nine “reclamation projects” over 72 hours in the city of Chicago as *The Department of Space and Land Reclamation* (*DSLR*).[7] The weekend sought to highlight, through intervention in the normative functioning of public space, “the fact that every square inch of urban space has been consciously planned on some level to make us think or behave in a certain way.”[8] The diverse projects included an enormous ball of trash rolled through the famed Magnificent Mile shopping district by people clad in white coveralls; sound devices installed in sewers and dumpsters that emitted moans, shrieks, and cries; graffiti modification and replacement of urban signage; and a public kissing marathon.

As significant to the organizers as the public projects were the relationships forged during the experience. Working out of an alternative gallery open day and night for project development, eating, socializing, and sleeping, the organizers wanted nothing less than to catalyze oppositional cultural expression in Chicago. As Nato Thompson, now associate curator at the Massachusetts Museum of Contemporary Art, later wrote:

> *DSLR* operated as an ad-hoc social space where groups from varying communities in Chicago could get to know each other. With free food, couches, and good music, the hub became the space where the real long-lasting social connections derived. The campaign's ultimate goal was to

> strengthen the ties in the disparate socially conscious communities of Chicago. And the power of ambiguous aesthetics and reclamation provided a conducive atmosphere for cutting through the strange boundaries between radical communities.[9]

The project proved enormously successful as just this sort of catalyst, and the following few years have witnessed a profusion of similar high-energy 'burst' events such as *DSLR West* (San Francisco), *Version* (Chicago), and *October Surprise* (Los Angeles), and even the less politicized annual *PsyGeo Conflux* (New York) can be seen as at least partly inspired by the *DSLR* experiment.

The *DSLR* model is attractive in no small part because it more reappropriates than directly threatens spaces of power. Considered in light of Ranciere's work, DSLR created an autonomous aesthetic space that existed within the spaces of the city but dismissed the logic of domination that constructed them. As the project's Web site explains, "Space created as a way to get to and from work was transformed into a site of play, space created to sell us products became a canvas for self-expression."[10] While this faith in self-expression as inherently libratory harkens back to the tension between bourgeois ideas about personal freedom and the political necessity of collective action that some have argued was the undoing of the American counterculture movement, the promise of creative autonomy also has the subversive potential identified by Eagleton in his defense of the double-edged power of the aesthetic. Refiguring the city as a 'canvas for self-expression' is a powerfully seductive way to bring people together into a collective space where cooperation must happen quickly for divergent projects to be realized in a very short span of time. Suddenly, artists—traditionally those most individualist of bourgeois individuals—identify with each other and the others in the

space not with the calculus of competition or spectatorship but as collaborators necessary for realizing each individual part of the common task.

Questions of collaboration and community were very much on my mind when I was planning *The Public Square*.[11] The three-week series of daily public events, broadcasted over low power radio, functioned both as my MFA thesis project and a parting gift to a town where I had lived as student and non-student, artist and activist, neighbor and friend. The project experimented with a hybrid model of a public square, one formed equally of institutional and classically public spaces and old and new communications media. Four 'sites' formed the corners of the conceptual square around which the project was structured. The first site was the museum, where an installation consisting of microphones, a mixer, a computer and other equipment collected and streamed museum sound 24 hours per day, with the webcast forming the second 'site' of the new public square. The third site was physical: each day for the duration of the exhibition I gathered a group outdoors for an exercise in assembly in public space. Some of these activities were planned by collaborators or me while others were events that would have happened anyway—an anti-war vigil, a meeting of an alternative newspaper collective—but which the project then highlighted and reframed. Events ranged from overtly political guerilla theater (mock weapons inspections of the engineering campus) to civically-minding, perambulating discussions on urban planning to informal parties in which participants exchanged used clothing on the steps of the mall or gave out free food on the sidewalk in front of Pizza Hut. Each of these events was broadcast via the final public 'site' of unlicensed FM radio for listeners in the area and picked up, depending on the range, at the installation in the gallery.

*The Public Square* involved scores of people from all the parallel groups I'd worked with during my six years in town: independent media activists, obviously, but also undergraduate art students; peace and social justice religious leader but also high-school aged 'unschoolers;' mothers of inmates, but also reclusive NCSA scientists. A city council member participated in one event; a middle school conflict resolution counselor did a special project with her class for another. Like the *DSLR* organizers, I wanted to create a space where this mixing of interests and identifications could occur with the faith that something—and not necessarily something obvious or concrete or instrumental—would survive beyond the project and well after I moved away from the town. While the gatherings were usually small—an average of ten people came to each event, sometimes fewer and occasionally many more—they worked out ideas about participation by doing it, and I know of at least one group that has continued to meet and has grown since they initially organized an event for the project two years ago. Evaluating the project quantitatively in this way seems inappropriate, however: *The Public Square* was not mainly about catalyzing long-term organizational efforts, though that is certainly a welcomed result. Instead, it was about animating social relations and the spaces in which they unfold in order to place people directly in the center of new ways of participating in and arranging them.

While Urbana is admittedly an unusual town—a place where the Indymedia center purchased the post office—I was nonetheless struck by the absolute comfort with which people approached using pirate radio. Even at a women's softball game, where we came the closest to being kicked out, no one seemed worried or frightened to know that their words were on the air—indeed, they eagerly called the plays and interspersed casual

political commentary in a homegrown broadcast of the game. There was something so intuitively 'right' about taking to the airwaves informally that the actual fact of its illegality (attenuated by the slim chance of getting caught) mattered very little to anyone. The audience/participants 'identified' with the act of seizing the airwaves—and, crucially, *disidentified* with a legal regime that proscribed that action. The project involved numerous small gestures of disobedience against civil laws and civil norms that implicated everyone involved—from the teens at the mall who joined the clothing exchange to the university that hosted the exhibition (and unwittingly provided a rooftop for a pirate radio antenna). In a small and tentative way, people could test less circumscribed forms of action, explore new identification, and enhance and amplify their expectations for more broad and future participation.

**Being Political and Doing Politics**

Though *DSLR* and *The Public Square* did not ignore questions of politicized content to the degree that Ranciere does, neither did they function in conventionally political modes: participants were left with no single burning issue to protest, no word to spread, no concrete action to take. By continually looking to participants to animate public spaces and deflecting resolution and conclusion back to the audience, the arena of the political was left open for reinterpretation and ready for new forms of action. The claim that previously naturalized conditions and experiences are in fact subject to and constitutive of politics has been a foundational project of every liberation movement, most clearly summed up in the familiar feminist slogan "the personal is political." Both *DSLR* and *The Public Square* similarly re-framed the subject of politics and shifted the locus of agency from individual to collective. By doing this successfully in the

'conveniently sequestered' space of art and play, they helped to build conditions in which other form of politics in other arenas would become more possible.

By way of a conclusion, I want to point out some crucial ways that projects like *DSLR* and *The Public Square* differ from other forms of artwork that emphasize direct, intersubjective encounters between artist and audience, initiators and participants. Grant Kester has written a very important text that emphasizes the transformative role of conversation and process in socially-engaged art.[12] He closely analyzes what he calls the 'dialogic art' of the Austrian art collective WochenKlauser, who stage interventions into policy around social issues. In projects like *Intervention to Qualify former Drug Abusers for Occupation* and *Intervention in Community Development* WochenKlauser bridges the 'conveniently sequestered' space of art practice wand the bureaucratized processes of urban administration to find new ways to allocate resources and services in or on behalf of a community, organize common material and symbolic space, and give voice to a marginalized group.[13] The group accomplishes its work not through the disruptive tactics of the demonstration or irreverent game and instead through a *sustained* commitment to mutual identification so that mutual goals can be developed and accomplished.

Kester contends that WochenKlauser's dialogic aesthetics understands the possibility for social transformation to be "not simply as an instantaneous, prediscursive flash of insight, but as a decentering, a movement outside self (and self-interest) through dialogue extended over time."[14] His emphasis on the importance of sustained commitment echoes the almost axiomatic position in community art circles that projects of long duration, preferably initiated by an artist with even longer-term local roots or with

a group 'insider' as collaborator, are preferable to one-shot interventions or high-energy, short duration projects like *DSLR* and *The Public Square*. Yet the reality of these projects is more complex: the experience of working together intensely forges identification with a common task, and the identifications produced in even a weekend help create a common history that can animate future work. Furthermore, the model is in many ways frank acknowledgment of the position of the (young) artist in the neoliberal city: in an era of extreme capital mobility to which many people, especially youth, must adjust as best they can, it is unrealistic to expect artists and cultural activists to put down roots for 5 or 10 years before they can start making work that addresses the conditions where they live. The temporary, high-energy, festive event is perhaps a response to a situation of chronic economic precarity, with a working life cobbled together from numerous odd jobs that makes a sustained, consistent, long-term engagement with one project and one group untenable.

Not only do 'burst' event clearly not foster 'dialogue extended over time,' they also do not stage encounters between people with differential levels of systemic power in hopes of generating "a local consensual knowledge that is only provisionally binding and that is grounded…at the level of collective interaction," to use Kester's words. Instead, they exhibit a marked suspicion that consensus is the preferred outcome of dialogue. *The Public Square*, for example, sited its conversations in locations where their content—even if the participants ended up agreeing with one another—would still symbolically contest the organization of the space in which they took place (e.g. locating a discussion of the commercialization of higher education on the grounds of the university's research park). Projects like *The Public Square* and *DSLR* also seem to have

given up on coaxing the powerful to identify with the powerless and instead address themselves to whomever might be passing by, electing to cobble together an audience and perhaps even prefigure a community out of atomized individuals who come together temporarily to share—or, crucially, to contest—a common symbolic space.

The importance of the difference between the consensual—some might say therapeutic or administrative—politics promoted by Kester and the foundational dissensus advocated by Ranciere cannot be overstated. At stake is the very definition of what politics is and at what levels in the constitution of the political might artists intervene. Kester and WochenKlauser seem drawn to a pragmatic approach of staging policy interventions that is rooted in a liberal, 'greatest good for the greatest many' ethic. Such work has had admirable success: WochenKlauser's *Intervention to Aid Drug-Addicted Women* of 1994 established a shelter in Zurich that is still operating today.[15] By contrast, the interventions staged by *DSLR*, *The Public Square* and similar projects occur on the level of how the political is constituted and who and what are therefore given access to or excluded from it. Conclusions about these questions are continually forestalled, and the artwork seeks not so much to find an answer as to stage a disagreement that operates on many levels—material, symbolic, and discursive.

When we ask for art to 'be political,' then, we should be clear about our expectations and the assumptions about politics embedded in them. Do we expect the artwork to effect material change, and if so, for whom, or do we want the artwork to use its autonomy to reframe the idea of the political? Because I tend towards Ranciere's view that art (inescapably) functions politically without necessarily being 'about' politics, I'd like to avoid making prescriptions for what a critical art must be or do. Because I

respect the way that Kester's dialogical aesthetic restages artistic irrelevance as an opportunity for material, rather than exclusively discursive, intervention, I stop short of criticizing the work as some kind of aestheticized social service. While dialogic art must still "suspend the ordinary coordinates of sensory experience and reframe the network of relationships between spaces and times, subjects and objects, the common and the singular," to borrow Ranciere's words, it must still reach some kind of an accommodation with those 'ordinary coordinates' to effect material change. At what point does playing with alternate constitutions of politics and testing new forms of agency become serious and translate into the kinds of collective action my student, and indeed I myself, yearn to join? Exactly how to balance these diverging commitments—to a politics predicated on dissension and an aesthetics that aspires to material change—remains an open question. Fortunately, many people are working, both alone and together, on practicing the answers.

**Notes**

In memory of Michael Piazza, who instructed a generation of Chicago artists in the methods and politics of collaborative practice.

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[1] Trevor Paglen, describing his own activist media work, from Trevor Paglen, *Paglen.Com* [Portfolio Web site] ([cited May 3 2006]); available from http://www.paglen.com/pages/projects.htm.

[2] Jacques Ranciere, *The Politics of Aesthetics: The Distribution of the Sensible*, trans. Gabriel Rockhill (London: Continuum, 2004).

[3] Jacques Ranciere, *Aesthetics and Politics: Rethinking the Link* (2002 [cited May 8 2006]); available from http://www.16beavergroup.org/monday/archives/001881.php.

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[4] Ibid.

[5] Ibid.

[6] Terry Eagleton, *The Ideology of the Aesthetic* (Cambridge, MA: Basil Blackwell, 1990). Page 9.

[7] Counterproductive Industries, "Department of Space and Land Reclamation," (Chicago, IL: 2001).

[8] Counterproductive Industries, *Www.Counterproductiveindustries.Com* [Web site] (2003 [cited April 30 2006]); available from http://www.counterproductiveindustries.com/.

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[10] Counterproductive Industries, *Www.Counterproductiveindustries.Com*.

[11] Sarah Kanouse, "The Public Square," (Champaign-Urbana, IL: 2004).

[12] Grant Kester, *Conversation Pieces: Community and Communication in Modern Art* (Berkeley, CA: University of California Press, 2004).

[13] WochenKlauser, "Intervention in Community Development," (Ottensheim, Austria: 1997), WochenKlauser, "Intervention to Qualify Former Drug Abusers for Occupation," (Vienna: 2003).

[14] Kester, *Conversation Pieces: Community and Communication in Modern Art*. Page 84-85.

[15] WochenKlauser, "Intervention to Aid Drug-Addicted Women," (Zurich: 1994).