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What is to be Done? [Burning questions for our movement]

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Please forgive me for being a little provocative in titling this short paper after the famous pamphlet by V.I. Lenin published almost a century ago.[1] In his text Lenin outlined in detail several problems within the social democracy and labour movements in pre-Revolutionary Russia, and argued strenuously for the institution of an all-Russian political newspaper. In so doing, he affirmed the signal role of the media: writers, artists, designers, photographers, the bourgeois intelligentsia, in fomenting revolutionary activity on the part of the masses. On some important levels Lenin echoes the thought of the utopian socialist Fourier, who was among the first to argue that artists should form the advance wing of the (political) avant-garde, a position that you may agree has become increasingly hollow in recent years. In *What is to be done*, Lenin discussed also the problems of organization within the social democracy movement, struggle and political agitation, what today we would call patterns of resistance, action and intervention in the public sphere. He affirmed that "without revolutionary theory there can be no revolutionary movement (practice)"(28). Following the example of Frederick Engel's *Der Deutsche Bauernkrieg* (*The German Peasant War* 1875), he

reinforced the need for theoretical struggle to be placed on par with the political and economic. "Three coordinated and interconnected sides, the theoretical, the political and the practical/ economic"(31).

In this paper I will briefly explore the terms and conditions of 'oppositional', what I prefer to call 'operative' art practice. This will necessitate a negotiation of the political efficacy of strategic (exemplary), interventionist, instrumental and communicative actions. Unfortunately, there is no time here to link this discussion to the practical problems of the historical avant-garde as these have been constituted within the past century but perhaps there will be opportunities to engage with these issues in discussions during throughout the symposium.

Strategic (exemplary) actions, as forms of agitational protest and/or resistance, were criti-cised by many groups who participated in the events of May 1968, in Paris, Nanterre, and other so-called countercultural demonstrations in various urban contexts throughout the 1960's. These actions were criticized, not only for their implicit absence of theory, but also their anarcho-individualistic, heroic and spectacular character. Advocates argued that the exemplary action has a symbolic use value that is only fully understood after the event - usually as a result of mediation (framing) through the media - and that its spontaneous unprogrammed character encourages the fusion of various political tendencies that otherwise would not coalesce as collective protest. Exemplary subversive actions however often precipitated the reproduction of the vicious cycle of provocation-repression, ironically identified to those engaged
in this form of social protest, as a mark of success. Like the union tactic of the wildcat strike (the-illegal strike), the repression precipitated by such actions is usually so severe that it blocks the

formation of all other types of *legitimate* protest. Furthermore, these subversive actions often serve to reproduce the very mechanisms of authority at which they are aimed.

By way of contrast, intervention (instrumental action), allow a range of critical and/or resistant strategies to be attempted without (usually) precipitating a crisis or "culture war"[2] of the kind evident recently in the U.S., Canada and elsewhere. In the form of a *interruption* or *mediative action*[3] a cultural intervention within a context characterized, for example, by its resistance to change, may encourage several positions (and responses) to be adopted by those engaged in the enactment or performance of social protest, as well as those at which it is aimed. The major problem is that the intervention may simply *remain* at the level of theory, instead of engendering (and engineering) an authentic state of praxis on the part of those participating.

The origin of the use of the term intervention in the discourse of art can be traced to the writings of Karl Marx, specifically his famous "11th Thesis on Feuerbach" (1845). Here Marx argued that "The philosophers have only *interpreted* the world in various ways; the point is to *change* it." Almost a century later Bertolt Brecht paraphrased Marx with: "The theatre became an affair for philosophers, but only for those philosophers as wished not just to explain the world, but also to change it."[4] In his famous essay "The Author as Producer"[5] Walter Benjamin, Brecht's contemporary, extolled the virtues of the *operative* artist, providing as his example the communist author Sergei Tretiakov "whose mission was not to simply report but to struggle; not to play the spectator but to *intervene actively*" (Benjamin, W 1969: 223; emphasis added). Benjamin's prognosis for the political project of the photographer was similar: "What we should demand of the photographer is the text that would wrench his (sic) work from

modish commerce and give it some revolutionary useful values." Benjamin's concept of the operative artist "intervening actively" implies both the subordination of any impulse to aestheticise and the ordination of critical agency. In other words it could be characterised as a post-aesthetic strategy, one which nonetheless could contain those values nominally subsumed under several aesthetic ideologies.

In the late 1950's the International Situationists (I.S.) endorsed Brecht's and Benjamin's operative/interventional projects for artists committed to social change. In the very first issue of the I.S. review outlining the situationist project, they endorsed the fundamental importance of intervention as a post-theoretical and practical aspect of their critique of the (Debordian) society of the spectacle.

"The constructed situation is bound to be collective both in its inception and development. However it seems that at least during an initial experimental period, responsibility must fall on one particular individual. This individual must, so to speak, be the 'director' of the situation. For example, in terms of one particular situationist project - revolving around the meeting of several friends one evening - one would expect (a) an initial period of research by the team, (b) the election of a director responsible for the co-ordinating the basic elements for the construction of the decor etc., and for working out a number of *interventions*, all of them unaware of all the details planned by the others), (c) the actual people living the situation who have taken part in the whole project both theoretically and practically, and (d) a few passive spectators not knowing what the hell is going on *should be reduced to action*."[6]

If exemplary actions are without theory; interventions attempt to put theory into action, to wed theory to practice. Both are intrinsically related to one another, as was understood clearly by those who participated in the occupations, sit-ins, teach ins, theatrical agit-prop events and other forms of protest evident during the 1960's. However, the intentions and ultimately the "audience" response are different.

"The exemplary action consists, instead of intervening in an overall way, in acting in a much more concentrated way on exemplary objectives, on a few key objectives that will play a determining role in the continuation of the struggle."[7]

General Characteristics of Actions

exemplary/strategic action	**intervention/ instrumental action**
anarchic/individualistic	collective/collaborative or participatory in form
spontaneous	planned
dynamic/direct/focused	exhibits less dynamism/ indirect
absence of theory	theory laden/movement toward praxis
induces repression/ confrontation	integrative, mediative/ interruptive/ provocative
cathartic	non-cathartic
provocative	attempts to lessen provocation/encourage dialogue
dialectical	usually undialectical
theatrical	performative
spectacular	non-spectacular
projective	reflective

The table of oppositions above represents general differences between two types of political action [performance], configured as acts of protest or resistance. Depending upon the circumstances and the type of event, intervention can become an exemplary action, and thus devolve into a form of political posturing, closely implicated in extreme versions of behaviour characterised by violence, anarchic rejection or destructive nihilism.

The meaning of these distinctions becomes patently clear, of course, when we consider the use of the terms direct/strategic action and intervention in either the power vocabularies of the State and special interest (terrorist) groups. Intervention as indirect action is usually precipitous, and as historical events have testified, intervention as a euphemism for neo-colonial incursion can lead to forms of local resistance that will eventually lead to armed struggle and ultimately war. Intervention (as strategic interruption), particularly when it is used by a group attempting to counter or resist the power exhibited by another group, that is in control, is very different from the interventions used by a controlling group attempting to reinforce its control. When employed as political rhetoric by the state, intervention is usually synonymous with incursion, an action that will reproduce/reform, or transform already existing or previously extant power relations. C.I.A. incursions (interven-tions) in Chile in the early seventies, Nicaragua, Bermuda and elsewhere in Central America, as well as more recently Russian intervention in Chechnya and its other republics, attest to the major differences between the two. Interventionist strategies employed by the left attempt to interrupt the passive consumption of the dominant ideologies and contest the hegemony of the state, whereas the interventionist strategies

used by the right tend to reproduce them, thus exercising or maintaining their control.[8]

Communicative action is very different from direct action or intervention, although it may seem to employ some of the characteristics of both. Jürgen Habermas, who has arguably done more than anyone to theorise various forms of political action within the public sphere, distinguishes between strategic, instrumental and communicative actions. The distinction, he argues, between actions that are oriented toward *success* and those toward *understanding* is crucial.

"in *strategic actions* one actor seeks to influence the behaviour of another by means of the threat of sanctions or the prospect of gratification in order to cause the interaction to continue as the first actor desires,"

Whereas
"in a *communicative action* one actor seeks rationally to motivate another by relying on the illocutionary binding/bonding effect (Bindungseffekt) of the offer contained in the speech act" (Habermas, 1990:58).

Habermas distinguishes between openly strategic actions and those that are covertly strategic; the first involves the systematic distortion of an event and unconscious deception on the part of the participants, the second involving various types of conscious deception, is manipulative and therefore inherently propagandistic.

In another passage Habermas asserts that:
"communicative actions (occur) when social interactions are co-ordinated not through the egocentric calculations of success of every individual but through co-operative *achievements of*

understanding among participants." (Habermas in Thompson and Held 1982:264) (emphasis added)

He argues that art has an important place as a critical mediating agent in what he terms "the decolonising process"; How art could, or should mediate decolonisation is less clear in his work. If science, philosophy and art are thoroughly institutionalised and therefore subjected to increasing ideological incursion by what he terms "the legitimating practices of the state", how can any one `sphere' - such as art - become the privileged site for communicative action? The question then, he wrote in 1983 "is how to overcome the isolation of science, morals and art and their respective expert cultures" (1983,90:19), and return them to the public sphere.

Habermas has consistently affirmed that art, along with philosophy, law, politics and economics, are important sites for mediation, communicative rationality and pragmatic action. He is somewhat ambivalent however about the extent to which this can occur in an institution that the forces of an increasingly technocratic and bureaucratic modernity have rendered into increasing autonomy from the life world. As a Kantian, he has remained somewhat resolute in his defence of the separation of pure and practical reason from aesthetic judgement.

"In modern societies, the spheres of science, morality, and law have crystalised around these forms of argumentation (instrumental reason). The corresponding cultural systems of action administer problem solving capacities in a way similar to that in which the enterprises of art and literature administer capacities for world disclosure." (Habermas,1987:207).

It is clear from this last statement, employed in his extended critique of Derrida's purported collapsing of the genre distinction between literature and philosophy, that while Habermas views art and culture generally as an important locus for theoretical attention, he maintains a boundary between forms of communicative action that can occur within the spheres of political, legal or philosophical discourse, and those that can occur within the domain of art and literature. For Habermas art remains at the level of representation, distanced from the material reality and "spatio-temporal structures" of the life world, and as such, can not be considered as ideal a site as is language - or rather speech - for the deployment of communicative action.

At an early stage in the development of his communication theory, Habermas recognised the inherent problematic of communicative actions that do not offer the possibility of their own (dialectical) transformation. While his system/lifeworld paradigm could adequately describe the instrumental logic behind the progressive development of administrative bureaucratisation and the economic forces driving the conflict(s) between the system and the lifeworld, [9] communicative actions, wrongly used, could have, as his intellectual mentor Walter Benjamin himself understood, wholly undesirable consequences.

With his Frankfurt School mentors, Habermas does recognise a important place for art as a critical mediating agent in the decolonising process; however, how art could, or should mediate is less clear. "The issue now", he writes in 1983 "is how to overcome the isolation of science, morals and art and their respective expert cultures" (1983,90:19), and return them to the pubic sphere. By the early 1980's it seemed as if Habermas was beginning to heed Marx's injunction in his Theses on Feuerbach. And by this time he had fully articulated the restrictions wrought upon life world

activities by the hegemony of expert cultures and their rarefied exclusive esoteric languages. However Habermas' own work as a philosopher still remained somewhat distanced from that very life world which he so wished to protect.

I agree, somewhat, with Terry Eagleton's prognosis that as an academic Habermas is "aloofly remote from the sphere of political action" but that his work as an intellectual represents a "political strike for the life-world against administrative rationality." Eagleton however, also generously admits that "...art itself is for Habermas one crucial place where the jeopardized resources of moral and affective life may be crystalized; and in the critical discussion of such art, a kind of shadowy public sphere may be re-established, and so mediating between the separate Kantian spheres of the cognitive, moral and aesthetic." (Eagleton, 1990:402)

[1] Lenin, V.I. *What Is To Be Done: Burning Questions of Our Movement* Foreign Languages Press, Beijing 1975 original in Russian 1902

[2] Bolton, Richard *Culture Wars Documents from the Recent Controversies in the Arts* New York: The New Press 1992

[3] see Barber, B, Guilbaut, S and O'Brian *Voices of Fire: Art, Rage, Power and the State* Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 1996 and Bolton, R., Culture Wars: 1992

[4] Brecht, B., "Theatre for Pleasure or Theatre for Instruction" in Willett, S., *Brecht on Theatre 1933-1947* pp 71-72

[5] addressed to the antifascist league meeting in Paris, 1936.

[6] I.S. No 1 1958:13 for another discussion of this quote see Barber, B "Notes toward an Adequate Interventionist [Performance] Practice" in ACT Vol I No. 1 New York; Inter (French version) No 46 Summer 1990 Quebec. Also in Barber, B. *Reading Rooms* Halifax, Eyelevel Gallery publications 1992.

[7] ibid.

[8] See also Barber and Guilbaut, S. "Performance and Social and cultural Intervention: Interviews with Martha Rosler Parachute. I have previously discussed the differences between direct (exemplary) actions and intervention as a critical strategy by contrasting the art actions of the Guerilla Art Action Group (G.A.A.G.) to that of Adrian Piper, a black feminist artist/ philosopher. See B Barber "Towards an adequate Interventionist [Performance] practice" *Reading Rooms*, Halifax: Eyelevel Gallery, 1993.

[9] As Habermas argued in *Legitimation Crisis* (1975), the system has penetrated deeply into the lifeworld, progressively reorganising its practices in accord with its own rationalising, systematising and bureaucratic logic. The instrumentalising of human activity, he posited, destroys the possibilities of democratic participation in social interaction and political decision making.