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Art: Radical Political Imagination

brumaria

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This text is the introduction to *Brumaria 5, Art: Radical Political Imagination* – a volume that results from a thoroughly agreeable collaboration between Brumaria and the European Institute for Progressive Cultural Policies in Vienna/Linz (eipcp)[1]. Various texts included here were originally written for *republicart.net*, a long-term project of the eipcp to stimulate multilingual critical production in Europe. Thus, while it's clear that this issue of *Brumaria* is the exclusive responsibility of its editors, it's equally essential to stress from the outset that its content didn't just appear out of thin air. The organization of the thematic materials we are publishing here is the fruit of incessant exchanges over the last few years with diverse individuals and groups from across the growing networks that knit together artistic creativity and political autonomy. However, two major circuits of exchange recently led us to formalize this issue. On one hand, the sustained discussion around public gatherings such as *Klartext*, *Disobedience* and *hack.it.art*[2]; on the other, the ongoing contact with Argentinean compañeros, facilited in part by the attention that exhibitions such as *Ex Argentina*[3] and *Collective Creativity*[4] have directed to the

landscape of social movements in that country, and to the role that new forms of synthesis between art and activism have played there.

Some of the work published here refers to the fact that exhibitions such as those mentioned above have been held in well-known spaces of the international art system. This fact, added to the supposed presence of "the political" in massive exhibitions such as the last two Documentas and the Venice and Berlin Biennials, appears to justify the recent chatter over a new "fashion" of political art.[5]

Issue 5 of *Brumaria* takes sides in this debate. Our point of view can be expressed without detours. To begin with, we consider it a mistake to lump together, within the framework of the art institution, projects and phenomena which are of completely diverse natures, and which, though doubtlessly connected in some ways, should not be assimilated to each other. On the one hand, the inclusion of artistic exercises with certain social or political profiles into a regime of organization and exhibition characteristic of the art system (and this, however worthy, deserving and necessary particular critical or curatorial inicatives may be, however laudable they are in contrast with other oportunistic and banalizing examples). And on the other hand, the realization of projects such as *Ex Argentina* or *Collective Creativity*, which, without in any way restricting themselves to the institutional spaces of art, arise from a desire to make visible in those spaces a series of experiments in the intermixture of art-politics-activism, based on modes of investigation, organization and exhibition that seek to remain close to the nature of the practices that they map.

However, the most important thing is the impossibility of even speaking about the visibility of diverse forms of *political art* in the international art institutions without confirming that their

presence oscillates between marginality and a type of *dependent* centrality that serves, in a contradictory way, to inject novelty into the globalized art system.[6]

Beyond the exceptions and contradictions of these cases, the fundamental observation that we need to express and almost to cry from the rooftops is this: The interpretation of occasional breakthroughs to visibility of the new politicized art practices cannot be reduced to a top-down plan of the mercantile *establishment,* nor to a gracious concession of the *intelligentsia* of the international art system. Instead, what we find in the art field is a reflection of the same type of irrefutable presence that has been expressed on a global scale for over a decade by the recomposition of autonomous and antagonistic political networks, and by what Colectivo Situaciones has called the new forms of *social protagonism*. As Brian Holmes argues, the outbreak of direct action in the 1990s is what burst the bubble of consensus that had sustained an international order built on neoliberal hegemony, which isolated and paralyzed critical forces within the controlled perimeters of the intellectual and political systems. Direct action erupted before the eyes of international public opinion with the insurgency of the Zapatists in 1994, of Seattle in 1999, of Prague in 2000... However, these were just momentary flashes amidst the slow recomposition of the multiple forms of autonomous politics which have created a new cycle of trans-local struggles.

Only recently have we begun to glimpse the real outlines of something that had previously remained a powerful intuition: namely, the existence of a considerable number of practices that attempt to merge the heritage of the politicized artistic vanguards with the new forms of political autonomy and social protagonism, from a basis in the origins of the global process evoked above. Experiments in Latin America, in Eastern and Western Europe,

which in many cases led (although sometimes haltingly) to contacts or mutual awareness, via the incipient networks of the antiglobalization movements and not by the exclusive and restricted accounts and communicational channels of the art system. Experiments which we have only recently begun to see as a larger tapestry, of which it is now possible and necessary to attempt genealogical diagrams. Now is the moment to construct these genealogies and to establish and exchange accounts produced *from within*, accounts that respond to the inherent nature of the experiments, not in order to immobilize them but to spur them forward, to encourage them to branch out and to multiply, helping them proliferate across the context of contradictory institutional visibility that we sumarized at the outset of this text.

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*Brumaria*º 5: *Art: Radical political imagination* is for the most part a collection of materials already distributed in an informal way, but also of others that have appeared in more consistent autonomous and extra-institutional networks and channels of communication. It presents a tentative proposal to organize, without any claim to exhaustivity, the arena of discussion concerning *the recent trajectory and present state of the recombination of art-politics-activism,* grouped into seven thematic hubs that perhaps can serve to (1) confirm particular profiles of the phenomenon, and thereby (2) orient certain lines of discussion that are here postulated as *discussions internal to the nature of the phenomenon*, that is, in no way subjected to problematics imposed from the outside by an institutional or academic vision that, for example, would reproduce paralyzing divisions between art/politics, inside/outside of institutions, etc.

First, the section *new institutional and cultural critique* traces the outline of a new type of critique of art institutions that supersedes

the self-referentiality and circularity of classical institutional critique, which was broadly assimilated as a device of institutional reproduction and renewal after its moment of strength in the late 1960s and 1970s. The concept of institutional critique formulated by Benjamin Buchloh opened the path to a genealogy of conceptual practices different from the dominant accounts of positivist conceptualism in Europe and the United States. This genealogy helped to delineate a variety of cases which, as Craig Owens pointed out, are not grouped together by common traits of style, but instead by the fact that they replace the *production of work* with an *analysis of the institutional frame, conceived as the central feature of artistic practice.* Institutional critique constituted a projection into the artistic field of the anti-institutional dynamics displayed by the antisystemic movements of the '68 cycle. In the beginning, it operated at the heart of a process characteristic of "developed" nations: the increasing interpenetration between the cultural field, state administration and market economy. This process, which has gone infinitely further today, puts an end to the classical Enlightenment forms of the legitimation of culture as a means of education and emancipation. In the present, the establishment of a type of cultural capitalism that makes culture an avenue of penetration and postcolonial control and a key tool in the process of the transformation of the economy of global cities, requires new forms of institutional critique, necessarily intertwined with cultural critique. In general terms, this involves going beyond the critique of the museum as the archetypal institutional space, in order to foster a broader criticism of the functions fulfilled by art and culture in the capitalism of semiotic production, and to encourage discourses and practices that are not in the service of the reproduction and renovation of the powerful culture-state-market machinery, though without refusing to generate conflicts within that sphere.

In this first section are collected texts that criticize neoliberal hegemony in the domain of art, that submit to discussion the present forms of legitimation of political art and of subaltern cultural practices, and that describe critical and politized experiences within cultural and artistic institutions. It presents a compendium of positions so heterogeneous that some appear only to share the rejection of a pre-established map that would simply trace the inner and outer frontier of institutions. It is certain that this minimal common denominator does not make them necessarily more compatible in practice.

When we speak of *new figures of engagement*, we are referring primarily to the internal analysis of antagonistic phenomena and of the forms of non-capitalist social organization as it has been put into practice by Colectivo Situaciones over the last few years – a model that has had great impact in the new spaces of autonomous politics. Rejecting the subject-object distinction that serves as a guarantee of objectivity in the analytic procedures of the social sciences, Situaciones open a way for us to conceive a new type of political "engagement" based in cultural and artistic practices that break with classic figures of the intellectual as a "fellow-traveller" of political movements. This model – always changing, shaped *in* context – proposes a kind of co-research that places intellectual and activist tools and diverse forms of knowledge in common, without any hierarchical order, in a type of practice that brings into circulation accounts and descriptions interior to the struggles and forms of autonomous social organization. Thus, Marta Malo de Molina uses the term *common notions* for her geneaology of a wide spectrum of experiments between investigation and activism, traversing the second half of the twentieth century up to the present.[7]

Rejecting out of hand a pre-established map that would simply trace the inner and outer frontiers of art institutions – a type of map instrumental to the interests of institutional renewal and reproduction – means completely re-thinking the question of autonomy in the face of the institution. In a recent publication, the French collective Bureau d'Études spoke almost heretically of *artistic autonomy*, although the intent was to refer, as Brian Holmes explains, not to the autonomy of works but to the autonomy of practices. The sections concerning *excess and exodus, autonomy and the non-state public sphere* consider diverse ideas on how to undertake new experiences that traverse the dichotomy of inside/outside the institution, in order to generate a type of *excessive* artistic-political practice whose urgency always resides in fostering the processes of social autonomy. Nevertheless, the texts that we reproduce here make a non-fetishized use of concepts such as exodus or the non-state public sphere, where the notion of autonomy does not correspond with a mystified "exterior" but refers instead to the always unfinished processes of collective self-institution. The critique of a possible fetishistic drift of certain terms in circulation today (exodus, multitude, autonomy ...) is explict in several cases.

Our seven sections should not be understood as hermetic, self-referential clusters. On the contrary, there are a series of themes, threads of discussion, subterranean currents of pivotal forces that run throughout them, interjecting contradictions, confrontations and latent or staged dialogues. Thus, to reconsider the concept of artistic autonomy, the significance of the theory of exodus and the non-state public sphere in the artistic field, or the importance that such concepts have for current recombinations of art-politics-activism, immediately brings the need to conceive how a type of experience that hails from the tradition of the politicized

artistic vanguards can filter through the forms of autonomous politics. It is well known how at the beginning of the 1990s the editorial group around the Italian journal *Luogo Comune* recovered the term *General Intellect* from a passage of Marx's *Grundrisse* in order to place the concept of "mass intellectuality" at the center of their analysis and critique of the most recent capitalist revolution. [8] With the idea of *cooperative work* we want to allude as much to the centrality of the forms of cooperation and exchange that are currently at the basis of social production as to the specific forms of collaboration and cooperation with new social movements that have unfolded since the 1990s. And there were many collectives – such as Grupo de Arte Callejero (GAC) or Etcétera in Argentina, La Fiambrera and Las Agencias in Spain, Ne pas plier or Aarrg in France – that began to carry out wildcat interventions into the circulation of signs within the channels and spaces of state-capitalist domination (mediums of communication, metropolitan centers) in order to slowly move on to explore the production of such signs and tools in collaborative and cooperative situations of collective production, hand-in-hand with the new social movements that emerged from inside the liberal hegemony or from inside the processes of growth of the global movement. This perspective is very different, as What, How & for Whom note, from inocently vindicating "the work of the group" as some type of idealized panacea; rather, it signifies thinking of artistic and cultural work as something linked to the present forms of mass intellectuality.

The final two sections attack the *descriptive* problem. They offer different models of observation (but never an "explanation") of the present forms of protest and the production of autonomous politics, thereby venturing types of narratives and descriptions that are closer *to the cartographic image of genealogies or diagrammatic*

histories. That which all of these models have in common is that they join knowledges and resources that are in themselves very heterogeneous. To put it briefly: in some cases, they add engaged, militant tools of investigation to descriptive models extracted from the tradition of artistic critique or from avant-garde aesthetics; in others, they short-circuit historiographies that isolate the history of art from the history of anti-systemic movements, establishing mixed geneologies in which the field of relations between art and politics is completely reformulated.

Coda. "Speaking clearly": towards a new politization of art[9]

The international conference *Klartext* was a singular event, a symptom of the centrality that politics and new forms of social protagonism have adquired in recent years. Forty artists, collectives, activists, cultural mediators and theorists were invited "to think the status of the political in present cultural and artistic practices," within the framework of the much-discussed and deeply contradictory "repoliticization of art."

The inagural session with Marius Babias, Brian Holmes and Hans Haacke triggered the lines of discussion that defined the conference, demonstrating at the same time the contradictions and tensions that afflict sectors of the artistic institution interested in valorizing the heterogenous field of new artistic, curatorial and critical practices which we can designate, conventionally, as "politized."

Marius Babias explained how the limits of the critique of the capitalist domination of culture have favored successive processes of the "aesthetization of the political": a deactivating aesthetization of the artistic-guerrilla phenomena that was seen as a reflection of

radicalized politics in the cultural field (Babias carried out an overview that wove together a heterogeneity of referents: the RAF, the Situacionist International and the postmodernism of resistance in the 1990s with Group Material or the Guerrilla Girls). The gordian knot of ”political art” would then reside in this uncertainty: does it always end up stabilizing the model criticized? And from this question spring three dilemmas: how to go beyond the self-absorption of criticism; how to develop alternative communitarian countermodels to the mode of individualist subjectization; how to generate effective participatory proceses that are not left trapped in a type of ”voluntary and romantic social service.”

The severe criticism of Babias did not avoid pointing towards an exit. The increasingly powerful forms of cooptation of critical practices in the service of cultural capitalism open a space for new critical phenomoma as well. He noted three: the updated forms of institutional critique, the cooperation with activism from inside the art system and the artistic practices that conceive themselves as a political and activist intervention.

The reasonable pessimism of Babias was compensated for by the wilfull optimism of Brian Holmes, who also went back to ‘68 (*Tucumán arde* and the artistic radicalization in Argentina in that period) in order to organize a more organic and less ideological account than the preceeding one, setting out from inside the phenomena and not from the rigors of an analysis that is meant to criticize them from an external position. Homes's conclusion , however, converged significantly with Babias. The ”deceptive transparency” of the current ”mediated democracies” has to be counteracted by an ”constituent exodus.” It is essential that the practices that operate in a territory simultaneously political and symbolic (irrigated by the constant transversal between political

and aesthetic practices from the urban movements of the 1990s to the global movements) set up autonomous spaces from which it will then be possible to influence the institutional mechanisms.

The hypothesis of ”exodus” expounded by Holmes (tacitly establishing a genealogy that runs from *zapatismo* to Paolo Virno, from Toni Negri to Colectivo Situaciones) denies the existence of ”a” system and ”an” exterior to it. It reveals the function that culture fulfills today in the capitalist production of value, it tenaciously uncovers the networks of the established but never absolute powers, and, above all, it makes visible the concrete forms in which the new autonomous practices exceed the capture devices of the systems of institutional mediation. This excees is produced at the cost of constant mutation: each time, the change of names and shifts in position require a reinvention of the strategies of affirmation and conflict after a tactical retirement into recomposition, disappearence or latency. This contradictory, conflictive and continuous process of self-instituted and self-invention practices is proposed as the very essence of political and aesthetic production.

Hans Haacke might have served as the cornerstone in the construction of a narrative of the current state of the political in art, a narrative able to grasp its own historical density, its relations with the 68 cycle and the politicized historical avant-gardes. But the result couldn’t have been more disappointing. The failure of his intervention was due, without a doubt, to the poorly handled interview by the historian Susanne von Falkenhausen. But above all this session failed to recognize in how many ways the tradition of continual overflow that Haacke represents, from minimalism to institutional critique, leads today to a spectrum of practices that call radically into question the character and limits of the critique

framed by the institution, something that Babias and Holmes brillantly demonstrated via their different approaches.

The interview wasn't just bad luck. The constant collision between ”self-contained” critique and the proposals of ”excess” and ”exodus” in aesthetic practices oriented towards new forms of political conflict caused tension throughout the conference. It’s essential to understand what blocks the compatibility *in practice* between the remarkable work of the Kleines postfordistisches Drama on the new figures of cultural production, and the necessary process of politically organizing precarious social subjects defended by Alex Folti of Chainworkers. Why eminent thinkers such as Chantal Mouffe or Jacques Rancière collide and withdraw before the communication guerrilla of the Yes Men or the immersion of the Grupo de Arte Callejero (GAC) in the Argentinian movements. And why many of the presented models of mediation fail to reinforce *effective* mixed dynamics between the space of art and the new social movements.

The final roundtable discussion, erroneously conceived as a trial-by-intellectuals of the fruitfulness of the practices seen on the previous days, constituted a lamentable attempt to paternistically brush off the current ”hunger for activism” (Irit Rogoff *dixit*). Various questions reverberated through the discussion from the first day: How to establish new alliances between art and activism? How far are we willing to go with the radicialization of the new cultural practices? These will continue to have no answer if we don’t recognize that the present centrality of the political and the questioning of the neoliberal hegemony didn’t fall from the sky: they arise out of the difficult recomposition *from below* of certain forms of social antagonism whose existence is now irrefutable. We can't just let them be scorned, or misinterpreted, from the ivory towers of cultural theory.

http://www.brumaria.net/publicacionbru5.htm

http://transform.eipcp.net/correspondence/1134816059

[1] See http://www.eipcp.net/transversal and http://www.republicart.net. At the website of *republicart* some of the materials included in this volume of *Brumaria* are be available in various languages, accessible on-line.

[2] *Klartext*, a conference on the status of the political in contemporary culture and art, http://www.klartext-konferenz.net/home.html; *Disobedience*, a video library in process about the representation of resistence since the 1970s, http://www.pushthebuttonplay.com/dlwd/scotini/disobedience/pdf/disobedience_press_en.pdf; *hack.it.art*, a panaroma of hacktivism in the context of art and media in Italy, http://www.ecn.org/aha/hackitart.htm. They took place simultaneously in Berlin in January of 2005.

[3] A complex project of investigation and exhibition realized by Alice Creischer and Andreas Siekmann, shown for the first time in the Ludwig Museum in Cologne in 2004 under the title *Pasos para huir del trabajo al hacer* http://www.exargentina.org. For a reflection concerning the project see http://transform.eipcp.net/transversal/0406/crs/en.

[4] Exhibition concerning the recent history and present existence of artistic-political collective practices organized by the Zagreb collective What, How & for Whom, which took place in 2005 in the Fridericianum of Kassel, http://www.fridericianum-kassel.de/ausst/ausst-kollektiv.html.

[5] The case of *Desacuerdos: Sobre arte, políticas y esfera pública en el Estado español* would merit its own extensive and detailled commentary, with the diversity of contradictions, failures, errors and tensions that unfolded in its original form, as it generated an extensive device of inter-institutional and extra-institutional work and, despite everything else, due to its significance as a space of experiment in the forms of artistic-political investigation that had been demonstrated to be simultaneously full of potential, limited and dangerous. See the publications en the series *Desacuerdos* 1 y 2, Arteleku/Macba/Unia, Barcelona, 2004 and 2005, accessible only in part at http://www.desacuerdos.org.

[6] A visibility which, despite being partial, restricted and indirect, has not ceased to be strongly attacked: observe the critical reception of Catherine David's Documenta X (1997) and Ute Meta Bauer's Berlin Biennial(2004). It seems as though the "political" in artistic institutions must forever endure the status of a foreign body. Alexander Alberro carried out an amazing analysis in this regard, using a wide sample of criticism of these two exhibitoins in the international art press and in unspecialized newspapers of wide circulation disecting their anti-political and anti-feminist substrate. Published in *How to look at Art - Talk, Aesthetics, Capitalism*, OCA (Office for Contemporary Art), Norway, 2004, http://www.oca.no/publications/verksted2_3_2005/verksted2_3_2005.html.

[7] For the first part of the text "Common Notions: workers-inquiry, co-research, consciousness-raising" see http://transform.eipcp.net/transversal/0406/malo/en

[8] See "The Republic of the Multitude", interview with Paolo Virno in *Brumaria*, nº 3, 2004, http://www.generation-online.org/t/republicmultitude.htm.

[9] ”Klartext”: speaking with clarity, as in the exercise of the *parrhesía* that Gerald Raunig vindicates as the base of a new type of institutional criticism in *The Double Criticism of Parrhesia: Answering the Question "What is a Progressive (Art) Institution?"* in this volume, http://www.republicart.net/disc/institution/raunig04_en.htm and http://eipcp.net/transversal/0504/raunig/en