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A Rising Tide of Contradiction

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Imagine a six-story multiplex with reception and ticketing facilities, cinemas, conference and performance halls, media and information centers, libraries, book and gift shop, cafeteria, restaurant/bar and, of course, exhibition galleries: it's the Pompidou Center in Paris. Distribute these functions inside a huge enclosed courtyard, with multiple buildings and all the attractions of an architectural promenade: it's the MuseumsQuartier in Vienna. Scatter them further within a renovated city whose traditional festivals and contemporary intellectual life can be reprogrammed as events in a tourist calendar: it's the entire municipality of Barcelona. The welfare states may be shrinking, but certainly not the museum. The latter is rather fragmenting, penetrating ever more deeply and organically into the complex mesh of semiotic production. Its spinoff products – design, fashion, multimedia spectacle, but also relational technologies and outside-the-box consulting – are among the driving forces of the contemporary economy. We are far from the modernist notion of the museum as a collection of great works, to be displayed as a public service. Instead, we are talking about proactive laboratories of social evolution. We are talking about museums that work, museums that form part of the dominant economy, and that change at an increasing rate of acceleration imposed by both the

market and the state. Is it impossible to use this vast development of cultural activity for anything other than the promotion of tourism, consumption, the batch-processing of human attention and emotion? The answer depends on the availability of two elusive commodities: confrontational practice and constructive critique.

The critique can begin from an understanding of the now almost completed "crisis of the welfare state." Its origin is wrongly attributed to the neoliberal turn in governance that began in the mid-1970s, with Chicago school economics and Thatcher's conservative revolution. But that was only the second phase. The cultural critique of the 1960s was anti-bureaucratic to the core. It sought to dissolve the industrial hierarchies that shaped one's most intimate being. The anthropologist Pierre Clastres summed up this aspiration in a phrase: "Society against the State." And here the neoliberals found their opportunity. They combined a change in economic organization (modular management of semi- or pseudo-autonomous "profit centers," against any vertical integration) with an ambitious new social policy (mobilization of the workforce, not through the promise of social guarantees, but through the personal implication of passion, ethics, subjectivity). Imagination takes command, above and beyond the fading importance of mechanization, while welfare (the guarantee of a certain "free time" away from the machines) is replaced by workfare (the recipe for total mobilization of the population). Art – or more broadly, "creativity" – has become the linchpin of the workfare system, in the financialized era of image and sign production. It is both the icon and the mode of inclusion to the present society, which attempts to drive everyone to constantly escalating levels of activity. Or to drive them into the margins, if they can't be made to fit. In this way, the cultural multiplex bears witness to a Hegelian ruse of history. Amidst the profusion of commercialized aesthetics, the

individual revolt of generations past has been integrated, as a vector and mask of repressive exclusion. But we shall not escape this fate by any return to state-run bureaucracies, to religiously silent modernist museums. What must be invented instead is a radically different form of governmentality – whereby, as Foucault said, free subjects seek to "conduct the conduct of others."

Of what does confrontational practice consist today? It consists of the autonomous, deliberately inefficient and de-normalized production of aesthetic devices, to disrupt and derail the attention-channeling techniques brought to bear by the partnerships of the workfare state and corporate capital. The Mayday parades of flexible workers, invented in Milan and now in Barcelona, are paradigmatic examples. They begin from the multiple forms of exclusion – the undocumented, the unemployed, squatters' movements, people without various forms of insurance, people without any possibility of collective bargaining – and attempt to build a political consciousness of the labor-and-living situation, while striking out at the most characteristic forms of oppression and exploitation. Their means are, of course, aesthetic: for this is how the members of our societies "conduct the conduct of others," at least in the relatively protected imperial centers. But this is an aesthetics of carnival, of chaos. The Mayday parades use cooperative, solidarity-based forms of organization to mobilize the energies of equals, joined in chaotic confrontation against the carefully calculated images of the brands and the touristic environments, which manage and channel behavior to foreclose any political speech. The image of pink-feathered dancers expressively disrupting the commerce of a Zara store in Milan sums up this new combat perfectly. But so does a Spanish video, "Desmantelando Indra," showing the entry of a group of protestors, dressed as weapons inspectors, to the offices of an arms manufactory, followed

by the deliberate disassembly of all the communications and computer equipment, left quarantined in sealed cardboard boxes which read "Danger: Weapons of Mass Destruction" (http://www.sindominio.net/mapas/es/accions_es.htm). Communications and corporate forms of social organization as deadly weapons in a global civil war: exactly what is hidden by the fashion industry's "Weapons of Mass Deception." At stake is the deconstruction of the war economy, and the creation of a collective basis for the voluntary forms of free cooperation (transformed housing, insurance, transportation, and labor regimes, new forms of socialized access to communications equipment, copyleft rights to the commons, the invention of collective forms of property, the expansion of subsidiarity and direct democratic procedures). And Mayday-style emergency activism is only the most obvious figure of the new spaces opening up for confrontational experimentation. All around us – but more modestly, slowly, discreetly – similar energies are in action, at softer, subtler, more intimate levels, where the psychic meets the artistic and the political.

What could a museum contribute to this kind of aesthetic activism? First, its genealogy, which runs in an unbroken line from the earliest dada experiments (developed amidst the butchery of the First World War) all way through the sequences of installationist practice, happenings, conceptual art, situationist intervention (themselves developed amidst the Vietnam War and the uproar of the '68 movements). A genealogy of art that seeks to go beyond itself, art for the outside. But second, the museum can also give the activist forms their opening to debate, not as dead corpses of the past for academic dissection, but as inspirations and reference-points for the development of new practices in the immediate future. The post-workfare institution, rather than grafting a repository of useless modern expertise onto an up-to-date

stimulator for consuming motivations, becomes a sensuous library of alternatives to the total capitalist mobilization of society. It's an archive that doesn't require silence from its users. In a third contribution, it projects certain resources beyond its walls, to engage in experimentation and exchange amidst the texture of competing aesthetics that is the contemporary city. It gathers traces of this and other autonomous activity. It works to connect spaces, both physical and electronic, in which such traces can become the object of open, prospective discussion. So doing it helps fulfill the ambitions of most contemporary art, all the claims to be a miniaturized model of social interactions, an undetermined field for their reinvention. But instead of sterilizing that promise within exclusive, highly class-determined boundaries, and instead of reducing its production to objects-for-contemplation, it recognizes the fundamental conflicts within society, and engages risky procedures which can help release those conflicts from confinement to violent dead ends, raising them instead to the political level where equals confront equals. The level where governmentality is a collective issue. Here is the public-service role of the new "museums." It is fulfilled, exemplarily, by a micro-institution such as Public Netbase, notably in the container-operations recently mounted on Vienna's Karlsplatz, and in all their electronic echoes. But it also exists as a virtuality, in the desire of thousands of institutional actors who are disappointed and revolted by the operations of the cultural multiplexes, and the failing model of public service as it was conceived by the welfare state.

How can the virtual become actual? What's lacking at this point is less the artistic practice, than a strong criticism that can inscribe criteria of value and decision within both the public and the professional debates. After five years of the most intense social and artistic activism, we have yet to develop a constructive critique. The

criticism of the magazines and curators remains pathetically servile ("affirmative," in Marcuse's phrase), while minority developments remain caught either in the trap of disillusionment and cynical observation of the disaster, or in the marginally preferable impasse of pure radicalism and refusal of anything that smacks of cooptation. It is true that critique, like confrontational practice, must take on the attributes of a commodity whenever it is accepted within the confines of the institutional market. And this is a problem, for real. But cooptation is also an open front of social struggle. The notion that this struggle could be won through the appeal to pure forms of democratic discussion and communicational reason (Habermas) has proven as illusory as perverse hopes in the ability of the market to translate popular aspirations (Cultural Studies). There is no "solution" for a leftist cultural position within a market society, but instead, an ongoing tension between the actors inside and outside the institutions, at the oft-crossed limits of the breaking-point. Today it seems that a continually problematic movement between what Diego Stzulwark and Miguel Benasayag once called "situations of resistance" and "situations of management" – seized in their irresolvable contradiction – offers the only chance of doing something with a plethora of aesthetic institutions captured by the rising tide of the contemporary workfare state.