Krisis

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MILITANT TRAINING CAMP AND THE AESTHETICS OF CIVIL
DISOBEDIENCE

'Crimes committed by small, mobile shock-groups, consisting of hooligans, should not be confused with morally based civil disobedient acts.'
– Jürgen Habermas (in Falcón y Tella, 2004: 88)

'[A] terrifying, sublime image of violence is still merely an image. An image of terror is also produced, staged – and can be aesthetically analyzed and criticized in terms of a critique of representation. This kind of criticism does not indicate any lack of moral sense. The moral sense comes in where it relates to the individual, empirical event that is documented by a certain image. But the moment an image begins to circulate in the media and acquires the symbolic value of a representation of the political sublime, it can be subjected to art criticism along with every other image.'
– Boris Groys (2008: 127)

Introduction: Militant Training Camp

What is the relationship between art and civil disobedience? This question has, in recent years, become increasingly pertinent, not only for social justice movements and protest groups who have employed the creative methods of artists in their campaigns, but also in the sense that social unrest – whether artistically involved or not – is an engagement in the dynamics of 'cultural production', and, as such, aesthetics therefore can and should be a medium through which civil disobedience is understood.

In March 2012, the Arcadia Missa Gallery in London hosted *Militant Training Camp*, (Bresolin, 2012) a social experimental performance camp designed to explore the idea of non-pacifist activity within wider social movements. Engaging not only with the tradition of anarchist activism, but also with more recent artistic involvement in acts of civil disobedience, the week-long performance-piece camp involved a residential ascetic 'training programme' followed by a series of violent performances open to the public. These took place in varied locations, from the gallery itself to other sites of protest, such as Occupy sites and Anarchist theatres. The project claimed to directly engage with both the successes and failings of militant art groups like King Mob, Black Mask, and Voina. Through physical and mental exercise, the camp promised to empower the group of artist-volunteers to be active and resistant to, in the words of the call for participants, the 'last desperate acts of capitalism.' In many senses, *Militant Training Camp*'s lofty aims – to understand the mind of the militant dissident – fell short. While at first appearing to be true to the claims of its own title – the participants slept and ate in the gallery space, embarked on rigorous exercise routines and plotted insurrectionary activities – a sceptic could accuse it of merely parading as 'direct' militant activism, of being a false representation of what we know to be direct action. As a 'symbolic' re-enactment, somewhere between Occupy protest and terrorist cell, the project was always going to be fundamentally mimetic, if not actually risking parody. This was combined, however, with visceral performances of genuinely violent acts and rehearsals of militant activity, which pressed the question: can art not contribute something *distinctive* to the act of protest? Was the 'militancy' of the project weakened by its mimetic qualities, or does this aesthetic condition offer an alternative insight into the structure of civil disobedience?

The underlying concern of any question regarding the aesthetics of civil disobedience is *from where* are we asking the question – socially or artistically? To this end, it would be fairly straightforward to criticise projects

such as *Militant Training Camp* for not being 'proper' social activism. However, in this paper we would argue, first, that any line between the political effect of civil disobedience and its aesthetic qualities are today increasingly blurred, a blurring documented by the rise of participatory, relational and socially engaged forms of 'art activism';[1] and, as such, the typical subordination of aesthetic practice to 'real' protest risks obscuring the complexities of disobedience as a cultural force. Nevertheless, when writers on art activism emphasise performance and resist the commodity-form of 'gallery art', they express scepticism at artists' claims to subversion and revolt which are not situated within agonistic contexts of real confrontation. Our second argument examines this idea in terms of Peter Sloterdijk's concept of 'rage banks', and suggests ways in which gallery space and aesthetics can yet be instructive elements of contemporary civil disobedience.

Two Aspects in the Rise of 'Art Activism'

It has by now been well documented that the idea of 'art activism' has emerged with a renewed intensity in recent times (see, for example, (Bishop, 2006; Firat & Kuryel, 2011b; Grindon, 2010; Sholette, 2002). But, given that the relationship between art and politics has a long history, why this re-invigoration of art's social conscience *now*? While a full answer to this question is well beyond the reaches of this paper, there are two components of particular note which are worth examining.

One of the obvious responses to the question of 'why now?' is to point to the increasing capabilities of, and spaces for, artistic or aesthetic production, coupled with the growing reconfiguring of the more traditional relationship between 'artist' and 'viewer' to performance-based collective processes, rooted in context-specific events (see Bishop, 2006)). Undoubtedly, increased media outlets and networked technologies have increased the possibilities for 'expressing dissent' via artistic means;[2] allowing, for example, high-profile acts of playful subversion by groups such as The Yes Men[3] and the Laboratory of Insurrectionary Imagination;[4] or the instant circulation of activities by groups such as Act Up.[5] Correspondingly, spaces for

informed theoretical discussion of the inherent possibilities of artistic practice to act as a catalyst for social intervention continue to emerge: whether in publications such as *The Journal of Aesthetics and Protest,* which has been published since 2001; physical spaces for discussion and production such as ABC No Rio;[6] or more institutional centres such as the Leonore Annenberg Prize for Art and Social Change,[7] inaugurated in 2009, or educational programmes such as the Provisions Learning Project, a research centre opened in 2011 for 'arts and social change'[8] based in George Mason University's School of Art, Washington.[9] As Gregory Sholette comments, in his study of the protest art collective Las Agencias:

'Certainly in the 1980s public protest was often infused with artistic elements yet this never reached the degree of saturation witnessed in recent mass demonstrations. High and low, pre and post modern now mingle as conspicuous, papier-maché puppets and digitally produced agit-prop imagery share a public stage that is as discontinuous as the movement itself appears to be.' (Sholette, 2003)

Naturally, the form that this 'art activism' takes is varied. We have, to be sure, come a long way (both politically and aesthetically) since Bakunin called for the rather literal interaction of art and politics, by taking paintings from the National Museum to be hung on the barricades of the 1849 Dresden insurgency. But in keeping with the tradition of 'de-skilled' practice which, as Ian Burn argued (Burn, 1999), characterised artists attempting to reject the commodification and pretensions of 'high art', recent subversive and absurdist collectives such as the Luther Blissett Project[10] of the late 1990s, or Guerrilla Communication of today, continue to channel the spirit of the twentieth century avant-garde – Dada, the Situationist International and so on – but with ready-to-hand access to a wealth of network communications which seem to bypass the traditional need for a gallery or curated exhibition to exist as 'art'. Likewise, organised protest events have utilised aesthetic features in order to attempt to subvert and undermine their regulation by the civil authorities, such as the *Bike Bloc* protest carried out in Copenhagen Climate Summit in 2009 (see, for example, Sniderman 2009). Today, as Gavin Grindon summarises, art activism ranges 'from ideologically critical practices within institutional art forms, to community-oriented art projects, to playful street art, to extra-

institutional practices of invisible theatre and tactical media within social movements.' (2010: 11) Nowhere are these variable approaches – along with the tensions that accompany them – more apparent than in the 2012 *Berlin Biennale*, entitled 'Forget Fear'.[11] Curated by Artur Zmijewski, with associate curators including the Russian anarcho-absurdist group Voina, the exhibition aimed to investigate the question of how contemporary art responds to political insurgency, and what its role might be in civil protest. The result was an invitation for Occupy protestors and other non-artist activist groups to share the gallery space – along with performance artists, participatory projects and video installation – to not only curate artistic interventions, but also to present 'activism' itself as a heterogeneous, yet identifiable, form.

The largely critical reaction to the *Berlin Biennale* is significant: for the result was in many senses a broader echo of the debate surrounding art's role in the political sphere. Above all, the exhibition was seen as noble, but confused, at times awkward, at times simply cacophonous.[12] There are, to be sure, reasons for wariness at the sheer polyvocality of art's 'social practice' (see Bishop, 2006). However, it might also be suggested that such variation is not simply the result of a complex and often tenuous history of engagement between art and politics – it is also rooted in the very energy which drives contemporary protest itself.

Indeed, if we are to see such art activism as distinctly 'contemporary', we can also suggest a second component of its emergence at this point in time. The impetus for such experimentation with civil protest must also be seen as connected to what might be termed a lingering post-ideological malaise: a situation described by Sloterdijk as arising from 'the loss of the function of symbolic institutions responsible for the political accumulation and transformation of dissident energies during two centuries of conflict' (2010: 190); a frustrated and deeply ambiguous energy capable of both creativity and nihilism, dissatisfied with traditional forms of political expression.[13] If the distinctiveness of this malaise is its lack of overarching political identity, the likes of Alain Badiou (2012), Slavoj Žižek (2012) and David Harvey (2012) are, nevertheless, currently making claims that the 'accumulations of rage' seen in events such as the London riots are fragmented signs of a utopian future.[14] Such thinkers argue that, while dispa-

rate, these activities from across the spectrum of violent activity can be read as symptomatic of a 'global struggle'; a struggle which incorporates, for Harvey, the protestors of Tahrir Square, the students of Chile, the workers striking in Greece and 'the militant opposition emerging all around the world, from London to Durban, Buenos Aires, Shenzhen, and Mumbai.' He concludes: 'the brutal dominions of big capital and sheer money power are everywhere on the defensive' (2012: 164).

It is not surprising, then, that in conjunction with such enthusiasm for the collective organisation and mobilization of 'street activity', via the dazzling array of available network technologies, a question is prompted which would seem to unite the aesthetic and the political concerns of art activism. Gregory Sholette thus inquires: 'does this counter-globalization imagination indicate that a new variation of left, cultural politics has emerged?' (2003). And such a question remains, for both theorists and activists alike, certainly seductive, difficult though it is not to see an idea (or, perhaps more accurately, a series of images) arising from protests such as the Wall Street Occupation, which suggests a re-imagined space for cultural politics emerging, whether through documentary photographs (usually guided by motifs of collectivism, or juxtapositions between peaceful resistance and heavy-handed state authority), satirical slogans on protest boards, or the seemingly endless range of text-over-image 'memes' circulated in social media.[15]

Effective Interventions: Art and Subversion

But perhaps the seduction of Sholette's question – and the apparent desire to answer affirmatively (*contra* Sholette himself) – can take us too far, too quickly. This risks ignoring two specific tensions within the idea of 'art activism', both inherently related to these twin aspects of the rise of art activism, and both illustrated by the *Militant Training Camp* project.

First, we must be aware that any response to Sholette's question would be primarily a rhetorical activity – if not a *curating* activity, not unlike Zmijewski's *Biennale* – involving the arrangement of visual and documentary

evidence to form a promise of emancipatory politics; an activity which would always simultaneously be involved in defending its arrangements of symbols, motifs and imaginary from a less accommodating mainstream media suspicious of the 'novelty' of such a movement.[16] This is really to say, in asking questions of the effects (or effectiveness) of artistic civil disobedience, we seem to be involved in an *aesthetic* question – possibly as much as we are a social one. Second, if these two components of art activism – the expansion of artistic production, and the simmering energy of post-ideological dissatisfaction – answer the question of 'why now?' it is important to see that these are not without friction. After all, the optimism with which collectivism, participation and protest are documented (from within protest movements, at least[17]) sits uneasily with the deeply ambiguous frustrations so often expressed as violent rage. And, just as the curators of the *Berlin Biennale* found, speaking of art in the moment of such rage can easily lead to charges of intellectual navel-gazing of the worst kind.[18]

It is in this sense that projects such as *Militant Training Camp*, far from an indication of some renewed ideological conscience, may well suggest a more anti-ideological, self-destructive and mildly narcissistic malaise in terms of the concepts and methods of political expression; less *99%*,[19] more *Fight Club*. Channelling the rage and frustration of non-ideological disobedience – in particular the August riots in London, 2011, images of which were used in several performances – the project attempted to confront their audience with forms of actual violence itself. For example, in 'Propaganda of the Deed', which took place on international women's day, lead artist Tom Bresolin repeatedly punched Gallery director Rozsa Farkas in the face, for five minutes. In 'Dog' Bresolin was stripped to the waist, tied to a chair, the sides of his head were shaved, and electrodes were attached to his head, arms, and chest while prison blues music wailed woefully in the background. He was then electrocuted for thirty minutes while a mix of images, news footage and movie-clips were projected onto his body. The projection featured a strange mix of politics, violence and consumerism: flitting from a policeman beating a protestor to an adorable puppy.

The 'reality' of such violence was, of course, questionable. The project remained heavily based on re-enactment, and most of the activities took place within the gallery, or at least, within the gallery *system*: audiences gathered, we presume, to witness performances and/or videos of performances, *as art*. As Gavin Grindon notes, art that substantively or formally challenges social hegemony often operates in a different, often subtle, context when compared to 'activism' *per se*. The reason is, of course, that the boundaries which identity 'art' from 'non-art' are, while rarely tangible or visible, certainly embedded in certain institutional frameworks. 'One can,' Grindon rightly points out, 'be as subversive and questioning of social relations as one wishes in a gallery' (2010: 11). While the language of struggle, subversion and critique has become a staple of artistic discourse throughout the last two centuries, this does not necessary equate to an *effective* form of disobedience: describing one's work as 'subversive' is not solely reserved for ideological calls-to-arms, it also tends to look rather good on institutional grant proposals. If art activism often only mimics 'real' social activism, as Grindon argues, then it remains within the boundaries of the gallery system with no real consequences. There is, it seems, a need for a confrontation: an *event* of disobedience, which renders the act political rather than merely aesthetic. In a similar vein, Firat and Kuryel note that while much cultural activism tends to exhibit an ironic and humorous character, this sense of subversive 'Bakhtinian carnival' (the form of protest, incidentally, which Grindon promotes) can, both historically and theoretically, give way to 'a contained and predictable parade fascinated by its own creativity,' particularly when such activism 'is not concerned with generating site and context specific situations sustaining a continuous political engagement' (2011a: 13). Likewise, for Claire Bishop (2012), while art has an obligation to respond to society's ills, effective art must be aimed at 'activating' its audience. It must antagonise, provoke, and challenge the passivity of spectator consumption. As such, Bishop rails against mere 'spectating' or contemplative artistic practice.

There is, undoubtedly, a general risk in any celebration of artistic subversion becoming so far immersed in seductive claims to 'expose' and 'reveal' implicit cultural relations, its effectiveness becomes all but impossible to gauge. That is to say, sure enough, when Firat and Kuryel duly go on to argue that there is a need for 'tactical confrontation' in order to create effective activist work, we find ourselves in the curiously predictable discourse which privileges *context*, *cultural awareness*, *tactical confronta-*

tion and so on; terms that are, by now, commonplace within critical discussions of activism as seemingly unquestioningly superior to the more traditional aesthetic activities of contemplation and spectatorship. Again, however, we must be careful of the haste with which such activities are dismissed. An over-reliance on, and reduction to, such motifs can easily conceal the complex ways in which a 'confrontation' might be constructed, encountered and revisited. Salient though Grindon's argument is – and echoed as it is by Firat and Kuryel, Bishop, Lucy Lippard (1997) before them, and so on – that art is effective only through a confrontational or agonistic event, it is also important to resist the converse and overly-simple move whereby artistic practice is subordinate to 'real' activism. This would be to presume, too hastily, that art and politics are inherently separable, and as such artistic protest is only effective when it is immediate and visceral, but also directed to some purpose within the political sphere; for as Bishop notes, when the performance of art activism is unattached to a lobby, it can quickly become merely symbolic (2004). However, it must not be forgotten that a converse condition of the interest in art's relationship to politics is the extent to which politics has itself embraced – if not overrun – the aesthetic. Indeed, as Boris Groys has argued, if there is a lack of *effective* political dissidence within contemporary art, this is not down to the ineffectiveness of the artist, but the far more effective intrusion into the aesthetic by the political (2008).

The Curating of the Political

For Groys, it is not simply the case that where art becomes subject to the rationality of political struggle, it loses its radical potential to liberate; as such, as Marcuse once argued, art cannot represent revolution, but only 'invoke it in another medium' (Marcuse, 1972: 104). Rather, Groys argues that the presumption that there is a clear disciplinary demarcation between the realm of politics (and its instrumental reason) and art (with its unlimited imagination) is at fault. For Marcuse, the problem for art to overcome when it engages with politics was one of *identity*: art must defend itself as art and not become subservient to other forces. Art is a medium to be safeguarded within the political sphere; its effectiveness depends on maintaining its autonomy in the face of that which would exploit it. This, of course, gives rise to the paradox of socially engaged art: the condition of the artist's autonomy has always, since Plato, been their *separation* from the social; their lack of 'usefulness'; their capacity for sustained, but disconnected, reflection (Sholette, 2002). But more importantly for Groys, this also misses the distinctly modern problem of identity that the artist faces.[20] It is not the case that art must find creative ways to enter into political debate. After all, from the nineteenth century onwards, Groys argues, art *has* entered the political sphere in many shapes and forms. However:

'The problem is not art's incapacity to become truly political. The problem is that today's political sphere has already become aestheticized. When art becomes political, it is forced to make the unpleasant discovery that politics has already become art – that politics has already situated itself in the aesthetic field.' (Groys, 2009)

As such, the *political* question of civil disobedience is necessarily an *aesthetic* one. Art activism is not something created in the safety of a white cube gallery and then 'entered into' the political domain. Rather, it is already embroiled within an aesthetic domain that has been ceded to the political. The space of 'confrontation' between the activist and the social reality they seek to change is one already organised and presented according to certain aesthetic guidelines. As de Certeau commented of civil disruption in *The Practice of Everyday Life*, 'European anti-nuclear demonstrations, German or Italian terrorism, ghetto riots, Khomeini, Carter, etc.: these fragments of history are organised into articles of doctrine' (1984: 186). Once narrated as *symbolic* of wider movements, the world is drawn into a particular structure of representation. 'What can you oppose to the facts? You can only give in, and obey what they "signify"...' (de Certeau, 1984: 186).[21] But whereas de Certeau's narrative analysis points to the need for coherence and the stabilising of signifiers (which, in itself, would open up the possibilities for deconstructive subversion), for Groys the legacy of the avant-garde and its assault on univocal meaning is not 'other' to late modern media representation, but inherent to it.[22] Twenty-first century media representation and circulation has far exceeded that of the Dadaists in terms of its accomplished dexterity at juxtaposition, mon-

tage, and presenting the 'shock of the new'. There is no better example, for Groys, than the representation of 'terror' itself, which constitutes an 'image-production machine' (2008: 126): the terrorist, Groys argues, consciously and artistically stages events that produce their own easily recognisable aesthetics, with no need of an artist to represent them in mediation. Osama Bin Laden, Groys argues, can be seen as a video artist (2008: 122). Conversely, images of the defeated terrorist – humiliated prisoners from Guantanamo or Abu-Ghraib – also bypass the need for an artist, whilst retaining iconographic similarities to the art and film of Viennese Actionism and Pasolini which should not be ignored.

Therefore, while Grindon is concerned that such art is merely representing versions of more extreme, real life politics but within the constraints of the gallery system, Groys suggests that the 'point is not that art should conquer the territory of politics, should be committed etc. Instead, it needs to find its way in the territory that is now being conquered massively by political and also economic forces' (Abdullah, Benzer, & Groys, 2011: 86). The necessity for art to 'find its way' in civil protest, and thus maintain an effectiveness which is distinctive to aesthetic practice, involves re-assessing how the event of disobedience relates to the institutional gallery space. Whereas this move may seem counter-intuitive (given the seemingly inherent rejection of galleries as forms of art activism), Groys suggests that once we understand the political sphere as 'outarting' the artists, there arises an opportunity to assess aspects of art practice; in short, what moves art, *as art*, to beyond the more immanent demands of what Matthew Fuller terms the 'media ecology':[23]

'In contrast to the mass media, art institutions are places of historical comparison between the past and present, between the original promise and the contemporary realisation of this promise and, thus, they possess the means and ability to be sites of critical discourse – because every such discourse needs a comparison, needs a framework and a technique of comparison.' (2008: 129)

As such, the mobilisation of terror which usurps 'subversive' art – be it a suicide bomber's video, or a media report on the rioting of 'feral youths' – holds one key aesthetic difference. Terrorist or antiterrorist, Groys says,

the non-art production of images and icons is geared towards the production of a truth beyond any criticism of representation. In short: the political usurpation of art is *iconophilic*, whereas the artist, and their surrounding gallery space (whether institutional or improvised) remains fundamentally *iconoclastic* (2008, pp. 124-126).

The reach of this iconoclasm would include, perhaps, a particular deconstruction of the 'event' of protest itself. If the violence of *Militant Training Camp* was contrived to an extent, its audience also witnessed the performances inside the camp itself, in situ. Participants had been stripped of their personal belongings and clothes on arrival; contact with the outside world was strictly regulated and limited; their time strictly controlled (both to avoid boredom and to maximise the effects of the camp through a militarised regime); and through very basic rations, daily exercise (often in the driving rain), and simple sleeping conditions, in order for there to be an 'actual experience' of militancy. But as the week went on – perhaps unintentionally – the nature of this experience became increasingly ambiguous. While spectators viewed not just the artistic performances, but also where and how the group were eating and sleeping, the violence of the deeds intermingled with a voyeuristic aesthetic. Both of these immediate relations between artist and audience seemed to trespass, albeit from different sides, on the boundaries of a 'real' event of violence. To this extent, the discomfort of the audience in witnessing a girl being punched in the face, or a young artist being electrocuted, that forms part of the work, may, of course, constitute an 'event' from the shared experience between the performers and spectators that could attempt to compete with acts of civil protest. It prompted reaction, and 'opened debate' (a ground which much militant art justifies its violence on). But if this was, indeed, the 'event' of protest, then it was clearly undirected; it lacked any criteria for civil disobedience, in the conventional sense, and would seem to be closer to the history of self-harming art (for example, the work of Chris Burden: a genre notably devoid of political overtones). However, the question which Groys' reappraisal of gallery spaces raises is whether such experience necessarily constitutes the 'event' *by itself*, in an artistic sense. It would seem, rather, that the curatorial placing of such an event was part of a wider constitution of 'protest'; one which involved not simply a synchronic moment of confrontation or performance, but also a

more laborious and repetitive diachronic arrangement of images and actions of 'rage', connecting the work not just to its militant forebears, but also to an image-saturated media context, competing to frame the iconography of 'activism'.

In this sense, if the repetition of the camp not only robbed the event of confrontation (whether by exposing its mimetic basis, or more literally reducing the severity of the violence[24]), it also reconstituted the event in a way that asked whether civil disobedience is not itself a mimetic, aesthetic event: a rehearsal which is re-rehearsed in media circulation and political discussion? This point of re-presentation is precisely where – as Groys indicates in the quote our paper began with – aesthetic criticism becomes once again applicable. Given its organiser's commitment to anarchist militancy, this curatorial point was perhaps not always clear in *Militant Training Camp* itself, and as such easily falls prey to the criticism of mimetic parody. In contrast, Alexis Milne's 'Riot (2008)', a film and performance piece at the Danielle Arnaud Gallery (a converted Georgian house in a residential area of Kennington, London), illustrated this 'stretching out' of the event. Made in response to the G20 demonstrations, it involved the artist (who was a participant in the *Militant Training Camp*) and an accomplice hurling chairs and other items at a further projection of actual riot footage. In many senses, the 'performance' of the piece, in terms of the contemporaneous event, was not the violence itself, but the juxtaposition of violent images with the otherwise sedate setting of the gallery itself. One might also think of art which is often disassociated from (or ambiguously related to) a wider social movement 'proper', but nevertheless takes protest as its subject matter. For example, Anna Eriksson's observational video installation *The Last Tenants* (2011), a four-screen looped narrative of tenants refusing to leave a Berlin apartment block; or Rabih Mróue's *The Pixelated Revolution* (2012), where the artist delivered a lecture on 'proper' activist film-making processes (as outlined by avant-garde film-makers *Dogme 95*), correcting amateur footage of protests in Syria for its failure to conform to such rules; or even Walid Raad's on-going exhibition project *Scratching on Things I Could Disavow* (2012).[25] In these works, the representation of acts of protest is certainly institutional rather than 'tactical' or 'real', and as such, is rendered 'art' rather than protest. But in doing so – in drawing attention to the institutionalisation of the

act, through the boundaries drawn around it, the collage of medias employed and the juxtaposition of action and space – the formation of the work as an exhibition itself is also put on view: forming a confrontation between the audience and the curatorial *conditions* of the more explicit 'confrontation' of the performance itself.

Sloterdijk's Banks of Rage

There must be a caveat to Groys' argument, however. We suggested previously that two aspects of art activism were the expansion of artistic production, and the frustrated energy of post-ideological malaise. We have argued that the first aspect can be misinterpreted to wrongfully situate the place of the artist in the event of civil disobedience, at the risk of leaving the artist redundant. But to simply revert to the art gallery as a site of exposition and understanding can easily risk simply stepping back into the safety of the white cube. Clearly, there needs to be more of a case for what specific role the gallery plays that an instantaneous media sphere cannot already fulfil; and to begin to identify this, we need to turn to the second aspect of art activism: the field of rage within which contemporary protest flourishes.

An effective aesthetics of civil disobedience in many senses seems to sit in between two extremes: on the one hand, artistic intellectualism that, as Grindon argues, robs protest of effectiveness, and on the other hand, the kind of senseless violence or mockery which Habermas famously dismisses as illegitimate crime rather than civil protest. In Grindon's view, it would seem that the potential to transform such energy into constructive social change seems to constitute a firm line of division between legitimate and illegitimate projects: *Bike Bloc's* communal and creative approach to protest is legitimate; Voina's setting fire to a police van and declaring it 'art' illegitimate.[26] However, this distinction seems only to defer the question of the grounds for such legitimacy, rather than address the specifically aesthetic dimension of protest we have discussed so far.

Such deferral is, again, in danger of moving too quickly, carried by the inherent optimism any such claim to legitimacy necessarily holds (the optimism that there is a clear line between legitimate and illegitimate protest, and that certain forms of collective activism occupy the former). But, as such, this kind of optimism is a form of investment: a point that Sloterdijk has elaborated upon in his book *Rage and Time*. For Sloterdijk, the transformative energy of protest (which he links to the broader historical concept of rage) is at risk of misrepresentation. Rage is too often treated as instrumental (or damaging, or pathological, etc.) to its users, which is to skip over (or purposefully defer from) the phenomenon of violence itself. If Groys interprets the 'artistic process' aspect of art activism as something which, often unknowingly, cedes its territory to a political sphere that has no need of an artist, Sloterdijk examines the corresponding aspect of 'rage' as something which has been domesticated, deferred and often misrepresented. Rage, he argues, must rather be understood as a form of *capital*: something which is spent (in acts of vengeful violence) or invested; and the treatment of such investment brings attention to the complex ways in which notions of 'legitimate' rage are assembled. As such, Sloterdijk claims, 'the violence of the twentieth century did not "erupt" at any point in time.' Rather, what at first 'appeared like the highest level of running amok in reality consisted of bureaucracy, party organisation, routine, and the effects of organisational reflection' (2010: 26).

It is tempting to argue, of course (alongside Badiou, Harvey et al.), that such an appraisal is rendered obsolete by the events of 2011, where 'spontaneous' protest seemed to resist such top-down organisation. But Sloterdijk's thesis suggests that one cannot understand these protests, let alone make optimistic predictions as to their symbolism, without theorising rage as an investment, and, more boldly, as a condition of historical change itself.[27] The most basic form of rage, Sloterdijk argues, is an exertion of pride, something the Ancient Greeks, and their idea of *thymos*, knew very well. But the history of Western culture beyond Athens is one of suppressing this thymotic instinct, not denying it, but rather storing or investing it in order to gain 'interest' until it is finally acted upon. For the most part such individual rage 'projects' – angry mobs, militant individuals, or even anarchist calls for violent protest – fail. But if individual, local rage projects are collected, centralised and stored, under the guidance of a 'single administration' – a Church, a party, an ideology – then they can form 'rage banks' (Sloterdijk, 2010: 62). Thus, a future world is promised through the eventual release of rage in collective form – revolution – and the destruction it brings. This, Sloterdijk argues, is a basic structure of meaning in life: 'rage projects' gear life towards the fulfilment of vengeance at a point in the future. Rage becomes a basic condition of history.

Ironically, however, this rationalisation of rage is also a form of domestication, meaning that while investment increases the potential effectiveness of rage, it also leads to a practical deferral from the thymotic impulse of the Greeks. This is seen from the two dominant models of 'rage bank' in the history of Europe. The 'metaphysical revenge bank' forms the centre of monotheistic religion; and the thymotic revolution of the 'world bank of rage' embodied in twentieth century Communism. In the first model, rage is transformed from an occasional action of the Greek Gods to a constitutive feature of the monotheistic God: that is, a God with the capacity to judge and enact revenge accordingly. Revenge is transformed from a form of thymotic rage to a complex judicial process. Of course, it follows that localised, individual rage is an assault on the divine itself (the believer should literally turn the other cheek, and invest the rage). Rage therefore develops from the simply revenge of hurt pride to a sophisticated system of interest and payback. In the second model, twentieth century communism, the management of rage is developed into a deadly system of self-harm. Disparate anxieties, angers and revenge projects are guided and united by a 'superior perspective', whose demands 'do not always coincide with the rhythms of local actors and actions' (Sloterdijk, 2010: 62). Both models harness rage by deferring it, ultimately endlessly, and 'totalitarian' is not a hegemonic form of power but rather 'the retransformation of the customer into a slave of the corporation' (Sloterdijk, 2010: 159). True to any monopolised market, when a rage bank is formed the more local or individual rage projects are condemned for their wasted expenditures without significant returns.

Today, Sloterdijk argues, despite the fall of the central banks of rage (Christianity and Communism), there is no 'real decrease of available quantities of rage among the excluded, ambitious, unsuccessful, and vengeful' (2010: 190). However, today's rage cannot be treated in the same

way. The post-1989 world, which sees the dominance of neoliberal capitalism, and with it the End of History (as Fukuyama famously expressed it (1992)) we are left with 'an era without rage collection points of a global perspective' (2010: 183). Whereas the workers' movements of the nineteenth and early twentieth centuries could invest in narratives which linked them across borders and localities, this world lacks any such convincing story.[28] The result, for Sloterdijk, is either a return to 'subcultural narratives' such as ethnicity, or, failing this:

'[insofar] as the dissatisfied of postmodernity cannot abreact their affects in different locations, the only available option is to escape to their own mirror image, which is provided by mass media as soon as scenes of violence attract public interest. […] However, it is in precisely such episodes that the medium wins over content.' (Sloterdijk 2010: 205)

Rage cannot thus be transformed into pride or hope, as the instruments of the mass media are situated within the 'democratic mission' of neoliberalism. This is why Sloterdijk is correct to account for the rage of protest movements through its conception within a wider system of market investiture: a world where, as Mark Fisher describes, 'capitalism seamlessly occupies the horizons of the thinkable' (2009: 8). The symbolism of protest is consumed as an image-icon: activities of civil disobedience, in many cases themselves re-enactments of earlier image-icons,[29] are uploaded to networked media and circulated through repetitive replaying, tagging and trending, all the while providing further audiences for the consumerism at the heart of internet media.

In this sense, the iconoclastic critique within art practice can easily become empty 'symbolism', parading as a political alternative whilst doing as little to address the fundamental structuring of rage as it does the political dominance of the aesthetic. Indeed, such 'symbolism' within protest and activist art cannot provide a point of investment, precisely because of its attachment to the older rage establishments. If the energy underlying contemporary rage bears little resemblance to the moral and political rage collectives of before, their available investment points continue to treat them in the same way. The political formations and ideologies available can appear as 'dysfunctional relics' in the current neoliberal context:

'condemned to struggle with ugly speeches against images of beautiful people and tables of solid numbers' (Sloterdijk 2010: 202). The protest movements of the new millennium may look for alternatives from the totalitarian systems of the past, but are too often based upon the same principle of rage investment. While rage remains a 'basic force in the ecosystem of affects' (p.227), this leads more and more to the kind of self-harming violence exhibited within the riots of Paris in 2005 – what Han Magnus Enzenberger describes as 'molecular civil war' (Enzenberger 1993, cited in Sloterdijk 2010: 210). In this sense, representatives of contemporary rage – the by-now familiar images of protest, riots, terrorism – do not necessarily signal some kind of challenge to Fukuyama's End of History thesis. *Contra* the likes of Badiou and Harvey, such phenomena do not simply re-introduce social consciousness, political activism or, indeed, 'history' into the vacuum of the post-ideological cultural malaise. *They remain post-historical*: existing 'when the rage of those who have been excluded connects to the infotainment industry of those who have been included, merging into a violent system-theatre of "last men"' (Sloterdijk 2010: 41).

It is entirely possible to argue, of course, that the financial crisis of 2008, and the breakdown of the global banking system central to it, provides a counterpoint to Sloterdijk's thesis. One may well argue that the 'credit crunch' and the subsequent rise of the Occupy protest movements, in fact, reintroduced history into the post-historical era. But given the specifically aesthetic issues that we have raised with the optimism of collective protest, we should be careful to note where the metaphorical and figurative aspect of rage investment remains at work in such civil disobedience. In effect, the cases of anti-capitalist protest (artistic or not) do not render Sloterdijk's argument obsolete, so much as ask the question which Sloterdijk himself (at least whilst writing *Rage and Time*) was unable to answer: what alternative *is* there to rage investment? Furthermore, given how much rage collection points depend, as we have seen, upon the aesthetic or curated dimension of the public sphere, does at least one possible alternative lie within the relationship between art and civil disobedience?

Art's Investment in Rage

We have argued in this paper that there must always be a place for caution in claiming any such possibility. In particular, while artistic practices may be derided for their mimetic qualities – that they can only repeat, impersonate or parody *actual* civil disobedience – it is precisely this reflective space which is needed within the seductive optimism of twenty-first century collectivist protest. This is clearer to see if we understand the art activism which privileges the event of confrontation, or context of dissidence (whilst rejecting gallery spaces and the introverted contemplations of art), as a form of local rage bank. By promoting an imminent form of rage at the expense of contemplative practice, this form of art activism thy-economises the channels of protest: it demands an investment in a political activity, 'cashed in' within visible public space. But such investment would seem to produce only two outcomes: either to result in a 'small craftsmanship of rage […] condemned to exhaust itself' (Sloterdijk 2010: 63); or, to attach itself to a larger rage bank (such as the ideologies rejuvenated in the work of Badiou), which only defers its anger by investing in a more global future that will never arrive. In both cases, we can make the following, tentative, argument: far from the art gallery sanitising the spirit of protest, the 'real' protest which supersedes it may well itself be a misplaced domestication of rage. Like violence, art without a lobby, a framework, an ideology – in short, that has become symbolic *of* something – is then seen as lacking any real effectiveness. Ironically, this means that in turn, the 'art' of art activism *remains* mimetic: a representative expression *of* a wider social discontent, in a Habermasian sense. The very rejoinder that is supposed to ensure the effectiveness of socially engaged art – its attachment to a cause and commitment to real confrontation and applied contexts – can thus end up moving further away from the raw energy of discontent and into the self-congratulating excesses of symbolic iconophilia. However anti-capitalist or symptomatic of a 'new' cultural politics, activist art may well be reduced to an advertising poster for another rage bank.

But what opportunities are there for an aesthetics of civil disobedience, that might move beyond the all-too predictable and inhibiting debates over mimicry and effective subversion? In this paper, we have attempted to suggest that what is at stake in this question can easily be misplaced. To subordinate art to an 'event' of confrontation is to ignore the way in which such events are themselves aesthetic constructs; and to separate performances of vengeance, resentment or protest from the institutions of exhibition is to ignore the way in which rage depends upon 'collection' points for effectiveness. With this in mind, we finish with the following suggestion regarding art's relationship to civil disobedience.

Artists have, and always will, act as provocateurs. The legacy of modernism within contemporary art is its close affiliation with the mechanisms of indignation, and as such, artistic projects can expose cultural relations, present grievances, and attempt to incite certain forms of rage – a thymotic rage based on pride, rather than a repressed desire for destruction – in others. At the same time, we should not be surprised if such projects are largely unsuccessful. 'Provoking discussion' depends upon mutual interlocutors, after all, and if we are to avoid simply forming a 'local bank' of limited effect – and small artistic projects such as Militant Training Camp invariably operate on such scales – we are also limited by the motifs available to reach extensive audiences. Voina, for example, may well be socially engaged *and* anarchically resistant to ideological order, but acts through the reductive language of shock tactics that can quickly become puerile.[30] True enough, such acts of civil disobedience reach a wide audience, but through the base qualities of their work, which often obscure any deeper references and meanings behind them.

But responding to such failure need not be limited to, on the one hand, over-emphasising the severely local context of any artistic practice, or, on the other, investing in a broader symbolic, and iconophilic – realm. In between these two extremes, there remains the possibility for artists to accumulate mass-media imagery of rage and violence, and process it through the gallery system, in what is not so much a rage bank (indeed, there is no promise of returns), but perhaps as more of an *archive* of rage. Embracing the contemplative aspect of artistic exhibition is, of course, the dyadic opposite of what much art activism works for. However, appeals for art activism to focus more on the context often rest at a call for art to simply be more immediate: to emphasise the 'event' or 'performance' of dissidence, from Firat and Kuryel's desire for 'tactical confrontation' to

the exhibitions such as *Berlin Biennale's* exhibiting of the production of art as well as the final piece. While *Militant Training Camp* remained party to this discourse, it also suggested ways of engaging with the underside of this: the planning before, rehearsing during, and repetition after of such 'events'. It reminds us that, for all the warnings over artists disengaging from the social when they ignore 'context', the nature of a dissident 'event' – whether violent or civil – is constituted by more than simply the immediate confrontation or experience. As such, when we read such appeals for a context in which antagonistic disobedience takes place, we should not forget that determining this context is not dictated by a political sphere separate from art, but is itself a curatorial process – perhaps ceded, as Groys argues, to political forces, but nonetheless an aesthetic concern – funded as it is by the presentation and arrangement of image-icons.

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[1] The term 'art activism' is not without difficulties: some writers, such as Pablo Helguera (2011) prefer the term 'socially engaged art'; whilst Nicholas Bourriaud famously emphasised the participatory aspect of such art in his theory of 'relational aesthetics' (2002).

[2] As well as – and far more seriously, in terms of consequences – allowing for the circulation of counter-media capable of responding to media blackouts in, for example, Syria (see Rich 2011).

[3] http://theyesmen.org/

[4] http://www.labofii.net/

[5] http://www.actupny.org/

[6] http://www.abcnorio.org/

[7] http://www.digicult.it/news/the-leonor-annenberg-prize-for-art-and-social-change/

[8] http://provisionslibrary.com/

[9] Even the art journal *Frieze* – proprietor of the Frieze Art Fair, perhaps one of the largest symbols of art's attachment to *laissez-faire* free market consumerism – recently dedicated a series of issues to art's role in changing society.

[10] See http://www.lutherblissett.net/

[11] http://www.berlinbiennale.de/blog/en/7th-biennale

[12] See, for example, Christy Lange's review at http://blog.frieze.com/art-meet-politics.-politics-meet-art.-a-preview-of-the-7th-berlin-biennale/

[13] By far the most concise and eloquent expression of this malaise can be read in Mark Fisher's *Capitalist Realism* (2009).

[14] Unpublished at the time of this paper's writing, the back cover of Žižek's *The Year of Dreaming Dangerously* promises that the 'subterranean work of dissatisfaction is continuing: rage is accumulating and a new wave of revolts will follow. Why? Because the events of 2011 were signs from the future: we should analyze them as limited, distorted (sometimes even perverted) fragments of a utopian future which lies dormant in the present as its hidden potential.'

[15] In broader representational terms, Badiou shapes these actions within a cultural history of revolt: while 'blind, naïve, scattered and lacking a powerful concept or durable organisation, it *naturally resembles* the first working-class insurrections of the nineteenth century.' We therefore, he argues, 'find ourselves in *a time of riots* wherein a rebirth of History, as opposed to the pure and simple repetition of the worst, is signalled and takes shape.' Badiou, A. (2012). *The rebirth of history: times of riots and uprisings* (G. Elliott, Trans.). London: New York: Verso.

[16] For example, James Kirchick's (2012) comment that one Occupy gathering depicted 'every 1960s leftist trope: groupthink, organizational incompetence, and the simultaneous hostility to legitimate authority while blindly following illegitimate authority that masks itself behind faux-democratic rhetoric.' http://www.worldaffairsjournal.org/article/over-there-occupiers-seen-europe (accessed 24/07/2012)

[17] As Grindon notes (2009), the pacifism of many protest groups is often overlooked in official reports or representation in the popular media.

[18] Žižek has warned over the tendency for symbols to become too reducible to cultural commodity, and thus lose their effectiveness. While the protests of May 1968 were aimed at a political change, for example, 'the "spirit of '68" transposed this into a depoliticised pseudo-activity (new lifestyles, etc.), the very form of social passivity.' (2009: 60). This seems to us to be a central concern for any kind of 'aesthetic' of civil disobedience; however, Žižek is characteristically quick to pass too hastily over the meaning of such a commodification of protest; a meaning which the work of Sloterdijk is particularly useful for unpacking.

[19] http://www.99percentfilm.com

20 One could also argue, *contra* Marcuse, that the independence of the artist can, paradoxically, lead precisely to their subservience to ideology. The Abstract Expressionists, for example, could well be argued to have allowed themselves to be controlled, to some extent, by dominant institutions (for example, Jackson Pollock's relationship to Clement Greenberg). Abstraction in thought (through submission to a particular cultural ideology) became manifested in abstract art.

21 More recently, Christian Salmon has documented the power of narrative to blur boundaries between computer simulation and real world imaging in his book *Storytelling: Bewitching the Modern Mind* (2010).

22 Of course, the association of art and terror is nothing new. Jean Paulhan, in his brilliantly irreverent but insightful work of the 1920s *The Flowers of Tarbes*, describes the process of aesthetic production and a constant tension between the (artistic) 'terrorist' and the 'rhetorician' who safeguards culture: the innovative and shocking against the systematising and codification of meaning. For both, the enemy is banality and cliché; but in the end, Paulhan argues, both sides inevitably collapse into each other, as the resistance to commonplaces inevitably forms a ritualistic cycle of innovation and circulation. Likewise, Peter Sloterdijk notes that the principle of revolution and resistance embedded within the shock tactics of modernist art, represented by a 'use of horror as violence against morality', not only 'explodes aesthetic and social latency, exposing the laws whereby societies and artworks are constructed', but also produces a correlative context: 'Permanent "revolution" demands permanent horror. It presumes a society that continually proves anew to be horrifable and revisable. The art of the new is steeped in the thrill of the latest novelty, because it emerges by mimicking terror and in a parallelism with war – often without being able to say whether it is declaring war on the war of societies or waging war on its own account. The artist is constantly faced with the decision of whether to advance as a saver of differences or as a warlord of innovation against the public.' (Sloterdijk 2009: 80).

23 See Fuller (2005). Fuller uses this term to refer to an environment where every occurrence is passed through processes of surveillance, recording and re-presentation, collapsing the distinction between simulation and original.

24 'Community Support', for example, saw a van being suddenly reversed into the gallery space during a public viewing. Participants in the camp, all wearing uniforms and balaclavas, jumped out, and were under instruction to beat up Bresolin for five minutes, then threw him into the van and drove away. But while the beating was real and performed with gusto, it did not last the full five minutes. Perhaps this signalled sympathy from the pre-established camaraderie of the participants in the camp; or perhaps a failure of the principle aims at extremist art (in any case, the speed with which the performance was executed in fact added to the shock factor; the audience was left baffled by what they had just witnessed).

25 Both Raad and Mroúe's works were recently exhibited at *dOCUMENTA (13)* (see http://d13.documenta.de/)

26 See http://www.artinfo.com/news/story/755205/voina-explains-why-firebombing-a-police-tank-is-a-piece-of-art

27 As such, Sloterdijk is not suggesting some kind of conspiracy theory at work (that all acts of militancy are, wittingly or unwittingly, playing out roles predetermined by higher powers). Rather, he is suggesting that what may appear to be a dyadic opposite to the mechanisms of law, order and stability is, in fact, very similar. To quote at length: '[It] does not make any sense to establish a relationship between self-confident hatred and concepts such as nihilism – despite their prevalence as popular explanatory models. […] Rage that has become reified as hatred is resolute good-will. Initially it appears as a pointed attach that brings about an intense local pain. Then it secures an allegedly necessary increase of pain in the world in order to persist in terrible reports and other media exaggerations. In light of this perspective, it is the subjective and passionate appearance of that which the penalising judiciary wants to embody objectively and without passion. Both rest on the axiom according to which the balance of the world after its disruption can only be recovered through an increase of pain at the right location.' (Sloterdijk 2010, pp.57-8).

28 This argument places Sloterdijk in direct disagreement with Badiou's alignment of civil disobedience and earlier workers revolt (see above, fn.15).

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[29] One thinks here of examples such as contemporary student sit-ins, aiming to replicate those of the 1960s; or Occupy camps imitating the 'spirit of Woodstock'. The work of Jeremy Deller offers a particular exploration of this re-enacting aspect of art's social practice; for example in his *Battle of Orgreave* (2001), a re-enactment, and subsequent documentation of the re-enactment, of the violent clash between police and striking miners in 1984.

[30] A full list of Voina's activities – including recreating hangings in Russian supermarkets, painting giant phalluses on bridges, and performing a live public orgy at the State Museum of Biology on the eve of the Russian elections – can be found at http://plucer.livejournal.com/266853.html.