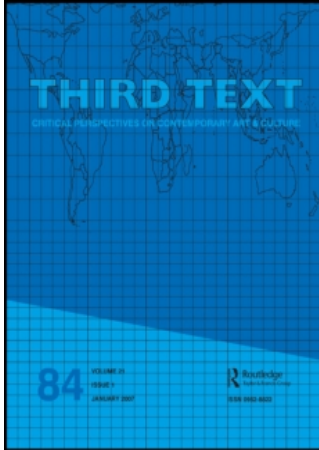


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Another (Art) World Is Possible Theorising Oppositional Convergence

Gene Ray

However we interpret the perpetual pre-emptive ‘war on terror’ and today’s politics of global crisis, there is no disputing that millions of people all over the planet – including many artists – have rejected the current world order and are busy contesting it, practically and symbolically.¹ To repose Sartre’s famous question, how do we understand the situation of the artist in 2004? In suggesting an answer, I will begin with a provisional sketch of some available theoretical terrain and end by proposing two broad directions of oppositional art practice, two ways of linking up with and contributing to what can be called the global justice movement.

Theorising art’s roles within a globalised anti-systemic or counter-hegemonic configuration necessarily involves theorising a relation between art and the political. For that we need both a theory of art and its powers and agencies and a theory of the ‘social given’ and the political agencies that can transform it. We have rich traditions of both, and the task is to recognise where those traditions still succeed in explaining the contemporary situation and where they begin to fail. Here I assume sufficient agreement about what is meant by ‘art’ to render unnecessary an extended discussion of inherited art theory. I focus instead on contemporary political theory and on how it can link up to art practices.

Today, the urgent theoretical challenge is the problem of globalisation. Politics is now clearly global, in the sense that everything that happens locally also happens and produces effects globally. But globalisation is not merely a phenomenon of communications technology, converging markets, or a shared ecological base, as crucial as such aspects are. On the level of theory and consciousness, it describes a paradigm shift in thinking, a qualitative leap in perspective we are all struggling today to come to terms with, in one way or another. To think the political globally – that is to say in a radically postcolonial, non-Eurocentric and ecological manner – is a project that will indeed transform and re-function nearly all of our traditional concepts and categories. No theory will be able to anticipate in advance the truly globalised practices that are now emerging.

1. An earlier version of this essay was delivered at the Radical Art Caucus session ‘Aesthetics, Politics, and the Counter-Globalization Movement’ at the College Art Association 92nd Annual Conference in Seattle in February 2004.

Again, the theoretical task is to try to recognise those points and sites of breakout and mutation where our inherited theory falls short, and to construct new explanatory concepts and categories.

If it is clear today that the appropriation of the Marxist tradition can only be selective and actively critical, it is no less clear that the antagonistic dynamics of globalisation can hardly be grasped without a Marxist conceptual heritage. (Like it or not, the current world order is a capitalist one.) From the theories of imperialism to the world systems theory of Immanuel Wallerstein and others, Marxism was and remains a theory of globalisation. But the task of processing the last century's catastrophic history includes the work of critiquing and rethinking traditional revolutionary theory, indeed of reconceiving our notions of political agency and transformational temporality. Today, this theoretical work is well under way. Ernesto Laclau and Chantal Mouffe have reframed identity politics through a critical return to Gramsci's notion of hegemony.² Jacques Derrida, rejecting party-based organisational forms, has developed a profound reflection on the structure of the revolutionary 'event' and of political commitment.³ But there can be little doubt that in Michael Hardt and Antonio Negri's *Empire* we have the most ambitious, powerful, and theoretically productive of the new attempts to rethink globalisation as a radically transformational cosmopolitics.⁴

Of the many concepts which Hardt and Negri propose and elaborate, one of the most crucial is that of global 'immanence'.⁵ Inflecting Gilles Deleuze and Felix Guattari, Michel Foucault, and others, Hardt and Negri describe a 'smooth world' equidistant at every point from a virtual centre.⁶ The old territorial outside has disappeared under the 'real subsumption', as they put it, of all societies under capital.⁷ The integration of global markets, intensified by the thickening of global communications and transportation networks, means that the whole planet has come under the 'biopolitical horizon' of a single society – a single and global social given in which differences and the production of differences are organised and managed as one planetary system of control and reproduction.⁸ Hardt and Negri endorse Foucault's notion of 'biopolitical' power but argue that, in the new emerging order, control has developed beyond the old regimes of discipline and punishment. Today, all the required forms of diligent and obedient subjectivity are increasingly being produced systemically. 'Empire' names the political subject that captures and regulates globalised flows and exchanges through the 'modulating networks of command' that are its 'decentered and deterritorialising apparatus of rule'.⁹ This does not mean that the nation-state is already gone or has ceased to be relevant, but that its days – this is the claim – are numbered. The historical tendency – or 'passage' as Hardt and Negri put it – is for power to operate increasingly across and indeed without regard for national borders, which as a result will continue to be progressively weakened.

The strategic implications of this argument are radical. For if Empire rules by organising and regulating the processes of globalisation, then the forces of opposition – the new collective subject Hardt and Negri call the 'multitude'¹⁰ – must seek not reactively to resist these processes but rather to deregulate and reorganise them. Indeed globalisation here becomes 'a condition of ... liberation'.¹¹ Hardt and Negri are insistent in their rejection of any nostalgia for the nation-state, localism, or the old

2. Ernesto Laclau and Chantal Mouffe, *Hegemony and Socialist Strategy: Towards a Radical Democratic Politics*, Verso, London, 1985.

3. Jacques Derrida, *Specters of Marx: The State of the Debt, the Work of Mourning, and the New International*, Routledge, London, 1994.

4. Michael Hardt and Antonio Negri, *Empire*, Harvard University Press, Cambridge, MA, 2000.

5. *Ibid.*, pp 23, 28, 42.

6. *Ibid.*, pp xiii, 50.

7. *Ibid.*, pp 255–6.

8. *Ibid.*, pp xiv–xv, 27–30.

9. *Ibid.*, p xii.

10. *Ibid.*, pp 102–3.

11. *Ibid.*, p 52.

forms of sovereignty and domination. Counter-Empire would not pine for the lost outside, but would construct itself as a 'new place in the non-place' of Empire itself.¹² It would redirect the force and energy of globalisation toward the empowerment of living labour as a constituent power, that is, as a capacity to desire, imagine, and create new forms of community and cooperation.¹³ Systemically produced forms of conformist and obedient subjectivity are not fail-safe or entirely stable; oppositional constituent power contests domination on the biopolitical level by exposing and constructively empowering the alternative subjectivities lurking negatively within the gaps and interstices of official subjectivity. As networks of alternative subjects link up in coalitions of resistance, and as these coalitions increasingly converge globally through their articulation of demands on a planetary level, counter-Empire emerges as a force of transformation – albeit transformation via disruption, mutation, and implosion rather than direct seizure of states and their apparatuses. It is of course too early to know if this reconception is the right one; but obviously this radically postcolonial revision of political agency and collective subjectivity is of enormous consequence for the still emerging 'movement of movements' virtually centred in Porto Alegre and, this year, in Mumbai.

Considering current art practices in light of this cursorily sketched map suggests that two kinds of oppositional art are now in play. The first is more traditional and involves opening sites of contestation within the established, conventionalised field of representation. The art world is one complex set of institutions among others in which images and representations are produced and disseminated. Under the culture industry, most of these representations tend to reinforce dominant identities, messages, and agendas. But we are all familiar with critical and resistant art practices that make use of their relative autonomy and institutional platforms to contest such dominant representations. This need not be limited to ideology critique. From a biopolitical perspective, Empire controls bodies by controlling the production of desires or 'imaginaries'. If, to do that, Empire and its apparatuses ceaselessly colonise the 'ether', as Hardt and Negri put it, then oppositional artists must just as ceaselessly decolonise it by producing other desires and other imaginaries.

Where theory still seems to need more work is in understanding more fully the processes of representation and the character of the visual in this televised, cyberspatialised 'ether'.¹⁴ Here theories of the political as a practice sited in the so-called public sphere – Hannah Arendt and Jürgen Habermas are the inherited landmarks – need to be rethought in the light of globalisation and the digital displacement of public space. In the recent debates over civil society and cosmopolitics, we have the beginnings of a reflection on the conditions for a new kind of global public sphere.¹⁵ Ether, or cyberspatialised public space, has its own forms, conventions and rhythms that do not necessarily translate directly from the old forms of public communication and which shape and constrain the visual practices that enter it. While what Derrida has called 'tele-techno-iconicity' still functions structurally like any other language, we need to clarify and analyse how the formal constraints and accelerated temporality of the new media and publicity both condition content and open up new modes of mobilisation and agency. Here, theory – under the guise of 'media studies' – is understandably struggling to keep up

12. Ibid, pp 216–17, 357.

13. Ibid, pp 357–61.

14. Ibid, pp 346–7.

15. See Susan Buck-Morss, *Thinking Past Terror: Islamism and Critical Theory on the Left*, Verso, London, 2003.

16. See Critical Art Ensemble, *Digital Resistance: Explorations in Tactical Media*, Autonomedia, Brooklyn, New York, 2001, also online at <http://www.critical-art.net>
17. See <http://www.nationalphilistine.com/baghdad/snapshots/index.html>
18. See Steve Wright's critical discussion of Negri's positions and arguments as they developed through the 1970s and especially as formulated in the 1976 *Proletari e Stato*. Wright, *Storming Heaven: Class Composition and Struggle in Italian Autonomist Marxism*, Pluto Press, London and Sterling, 2002, especially pp 162–71. Also Wright, 'Negri's Class Analysis: Italian Autonomist Theory in the Seventies', *Reconstructions*, 8, Winter/Spring 1996 and online at http://lists.village.virginia.edu/~spoons/aut_html/opsoc.html
19. I am thinking not only of the so-called 'organised' Autonomist groups but also of the *Autonomia creativa* (especially the 'Metropolitan Indians' and 'proletarian youth circles'). The Autonomist movement – in this broader sense – continues to have a profound influence on groups far beyond Italy of the 1970s, for example on the German *Autonomen*, even today. On Negri's relation to Autonomia, see Wright, op cit.
20. The lines are from Negri's 1998 interview video *Retour vers le futur*, trans Michael Hardt as 'Back to the Future' and posted on the 'Amnesty for Tony Negri' website: <http://lists.village.virginia.edu/~forks/exile.htm>

with new actual and emerging practices. The links between speed and politics, which Paul Virilio has taught us to recognise, would seem to be central for the needed analyses, and the collective Critical Art Ensemble is perhaps the most important group of artists engaged in actively theorising its own impressive experiments in developing oppositional practices from within new media and digital paradigms.¹⁶ In any case, critical visuality and performative intervention in the global field of representation will continue to be crucial forms of contestation. A recent example of an effective, if modest, intervention in response to the disastrous 'war on terror' would be the Internet project of the New York-based group Baghdad Snapshot Action Crew.¹⁷

In the run-up to the 2003 invasion of Iraq, the Baghdad Snapshot Action Crew pasted counter-stereotypical images of Iraqis (openly greeting the camera with friendly smiles) across Manhattan, in order to make visible 'the people who will get both liberty and death in one fatal blow if this war begins'. The images were made available for download from the group's website, and the action was repeated in dozens of cities across the US and worldwide.

It is in another direction of oppositional art practice, however, that we can begin to see compelling actualisations of Hardt and Negri's arguments about empowered living labour and constituent power. This second direction goes beyond contestation at the level of representation. In Negri's inflection of Marx's *Grundrisse*, living labour is the possibility of non-alienated productivity: a potentially direct re-appropriation of productive capacities that refuses reduction to the system of waged commodity production.¹⁸ While art, as we know, has not yet been able to escape the commodity form in any generalised or durable way, art-making remains a privileged model or pre-figuration of this kind of living labour. (As in the dialectical critiques of Herbert Marcuse and Theodor Adorno, the bourgeois aesthetic sphere – however enfeebled and corrupted by an affirmative and one-dimensional culture industry – nevertheless remains one of the last imaginable refuges of autonomous subjectivity.) But for art to succeed, even locally or temporarily, in actualising this promise at all, it must undo its own category by breaking out of the art ghetto. That is, art must devise practices that carry it beyond the policed boundaries of the institutionalised art world and into the conflictual field of 'real life'.

Negri has always emphasised the collective and political character of living labour. In this he is no doubt reflecting the rich abundance of creative projects developed by the Italian Autonomist movement of the 1970s: the impressive proliferation of events of price 'self-reduction' and 'proletarian' shopping, squat communities, youth and cultural centres, pirate radio stations, and so forth.¹⁹ The point is that living labour can only ever be realised with other people, as a collaborative activity within a specific social context. In the 1990s, Negri revised and deepened this notion by incorporating Foucault's notion of biopower and Deleuze and Guattari's notion of the 'rhizome', or lateral, non-hierarchical, and open group or network form. Living labour now becomes a site of 'constituent' power, a site for the constitution and production of subjectivities. By 1998, Negri was speaking of the 'biopolitical entrepreneur' as a 'militant within a biopolitical structure, and thus as a militant that brings wealth and equality'.²⁰ While capitalism seeks to absorb, integrate, and

neutralise all de-alienated forms of productivity, resistant biopolitical entrepreneurs ceaselessly scan the insides, as it were, of capitalist processes in order to develop new subjective forms and sophisticated strategies to elude and exceed reduction to the logic of wage–commodity–profit and normalised patterns of desire. This notion of empowered living labour can be recognised in the profusion of communal and counter-cultural experiments in self-organisation and ‘auto-valorisation’ that in the 1960s and early 1970s attempted to construct forms of everyday life beyond the work/leisure dyad of capital. And it can be recognised in many kinds of collaborative practices developed from the experience of this first wave of innovation, from Autonomia-style militancy to such justly admired groups and networks as Reclaim the Streets, Food Not Bombs, and ABC No Rio. ABC No Rio is a New York collective founded in 1980. Among other projects seeking to foster collaboration between artists and activists, ABC No Rio operates a ‘Books Through Bars’ programme that distributes donated books to prisoners and an NYC chapter of Food Not Bombs that serves free vegan food to the homeless in Tompkins Square Park twice a week.²¹ Beyond the immediate results of their projects, this kind of politicised activity also produces a rebellious, anti-capitalist subjectivity among its collaborators and participants and exposes spectators to alternatives to obedient accommodation and commodified desire. It produces anti-capitalist subjectivity as lived experience and productive power beyond and against the law of universalised reduction to exchange value.

But in the 1990s, what would seem to be a new hybrid form of artist-activist group began to emerge. In their practices these new groups exhibit highly developed historical and strategic consciousness. Having processed the practical and theoretical organisational innovations of the 1970s and 1980s, these groups experiment further with the forms of collaboration at the same time that they engage with specific social issues or problems. It is no exaggeration to say that they produce models of collective subjectivity, and that these models are their real product. As models, they show us not the one and only way a thing must be done, but rather ways in which it is now possible to do things. This is to say that they inspire further production, further productive experimentation. They demonstrate the possibilities of politicised living labour that has become theoretically self-aware to a high degree. Borrowing a term from artist Mel Chin, I call this direction ‘catalytic art’.

Explaining the complex collaborative experiments he has been helping to develop, Chin speaks of a ‘catalytic structure that allows us to break out of the art world into other areas’.²² The notion aptly describes Chin’s much-admired *Revival Fields* reclamation project, a collaboration with agronomist Rufus Chaney. But this catalytic strategy is even more clearly and fully at work in *In the Name of the Place*, a series of virus-like infiltrations of the television series *Melrose Place* carried out by Chin and other members of the collective GALA Committee from 1996 to 1999. The GALA Committee wanted to penetrate the ultra-commodified spectacle of this television soap opera about Southern California yuppies with coded props capable of subtly disrupting or even, in the right conditions, of exploding the closed, de-politicised reification of the TV image-world. They somehow persuaded the producers of *Melrose Place* to let them produce props, subject to approval, for their programme. To

21. See <http://www.abcnorio.org.html>

22. See Mel Chin, ‘My Relation to Joseph Beuys Is Overrated’, in *Joseph Beuys: Mapping the Legacy*, ed Gene Ray, DAP, Ringling Museum of Art, Sarasota, Florida and New York, 2001, especially pp 133–7.

do this, they set up a network of more than 80 collaborators, including, in addition to artists, students, teachers, and theorists. Receiving advance copies of the scripts, a core of artists working full time would develop ideas, bounce them by fax through the network, and eventually fabricate props. Many of those appearing on the show were not especially noticeable – at least to its primary audience. But the GALA Committee oriented its props toward future audiences and conditions not knowable in advance. They counted on the fact that *Melrose Place* will have a long afterlife on the rerun circuit and will be translated or over-dubbed into other languages for foreign markets. So, for example, the artists ‘détourned’ a bag of Chinese take-out food used in one episode, so that the red characters read *dong luan* – the term, combining the characters for ‘human rights’ and ‘turmoil’, used by the Chinese government to label and discredit the pro-democracy movement in Tiananmen Square. Obviously most American viewers would not have picked this up; but if and when *Melrose Place* reaches China, then the critical meanings of this displacement would be activated. More than a hundred such props were produced for the show and broadcast on prime time.

As the finale of the project, all of the props were exhibited at the Los Angeles Museum of Contemporary Art and auctioned off through Sotheby’s. The proceeds were donated to the Fulfillment Fund and the Jeannette Rankin Foundation, two non-profit organisations that assist unemployed and low-income young women (the same age and gender demographic targeted by *Melrose Place*). As a final twist, the exhibition itself was used as a set for one of the *Melrose Place* episodes. At one point in that programme, two of the characters – lovers – pause to consider a large black painting. What appear to be painted bursts and haloes of white light are distributed across the black ground. A veteran of the first Gulf War, the male character suddenly becomes solemn and remarks that it reminds him of the Battle of Baghdad. I recently saw Chin present a video-clip of this particular program to an audience in the Spring of 2003 – shortly after the so-called coalition of the willing, ignoring the protests of more than 17 million people worldwide, bombed and invaded Iraq. Having seen what is called ‘the political’ suddenly erupt from within this reified soap opera and reverberate through an audience, I can attest to the efficacy of the GALA Committee’s strategy. Like sleeping viruses, these props can be activated by events in unforeseen ways.

While these gestures may in themselves seem modest enough, they are more impressive when this ‘viral infection of the global electronic net’ is considered as a model of new collaborative forms and strategies.²³ A catalytic structure, in this sense, is a model for new forms of collaborative activity across social fields and cultural disciplines. It typically involves an openly inclusive or non-hierarchical network structure, risky cross-disciplinary role-shifting, and the production of new discourses in multiple fields and on multiple levels. The projects of groups such as GALA Committee, Critical Art Ensemble, Electronic Disturbance Theater, Superflex, Raqs Media Collective, Nettime, Institute for Applied Autonomy, and Bureau of Inverse Technology stake out complex relations to the institutionalised art world.²⁴ They all have artists among their members and make tactical claims to art status in order to tap funding sources, gain access to institutional platforms and publicity, and act under the cover or safe-house of artistic autonomy. Thus, they do not

23. The quotation is from the GALA Committee’s own description in Sotheby’s 1998 catalogue, *PRIMETIME Contemporary Art: Art by the GALA Committee As Seen on Melrose Place*.
24. On Superflex, see <http://www.superflex.dk>; on Raqs Media Collective, see <http://www.sanjitdas.com/vivan/raqs-bio.html>; on Nettime, see <http://www.nettime.org>; on Institute for Applied Autonomy, see <http://www.appliedautonomy.com>; on Bureau of Inverse Technology, see <http://www.bureauit.org>

completely break with the conventions of art. But the link is more of the order of camouflage or a new kind of cunning. In their structure and function, these collective projects push beyond the inherited paradigm of the bourgeois artwork or opus.

In Hardt and Negri's terms, catalytic art mobilises a 'constituent' power – the power to imagine and realise new forms of community and cooperative subjectivity. Such utopian capacities and intentions were, of course, not unknown in the historical avant-gardes. But these new artist groups do not waste time waging war on the art institutions. Recognising no doubt the relative autonomy such institutions offer as a condition of possibility they can use to advantage, these new groups keep their links to the art world open while at the same time siting their practices elsewhere. This complex strategy – at once doubling and masking – seems to put more faith in mutation as a form of agency than in the rigidly goal-oriented instrumental reason of conventional politics. The irony here is that these catalytic artistic models and practices seem to be mimicking the network strategies of capitalism itself. As Hardt and Negri's work clarifies, the flexible, rhizomatic, internally hybrid structures observable in catalytic art were already by the mid-1990s the new gospel of 'po-mo' corporate organisation theory.²⁵

So who is *détournant* or re-functioning whom? It may not matter. Under conditions of global immanence, everyone presumably *détourne* everyone continuously. This is one of the 'passages' that Hardt and Negri would have us see. In their idiom, radical qualitative change is 'immanent' in the sense that empowered living labour is materially produced from this same global plane of productivity upon which alienated wage labour is also anchored. But the possibilities of a counter-production of collective desires and subjectivities through constituent power are irreducible. By increasingly breaking up the old concentrations of labour in factories and distributing waged work among dispersed subjects of labour, capital has temporarily managed some of its contradictions and apparently neutralised the proletariat of classical Marxist theory. But, by doing so, capital has also unwittingly made these subjects more powerful and has created the conditions for them to eventually link up in rhizomatic networks of resistance, beyond and against the circuits of alienated labour and commodity exchange. By doing this, by overcoming their isolation through productive practices of collaboration based on solidarity, the subjects of postmodern work are actively producing the desires and forms of subjectivity that push beyond capitalism and can eventually destroy it. Ultimately, the 'machine of transformation' necessary to capital's management of its contradictions cannot itself be controlled.²⁶ What sets Empire apart from counter-Empire, then, is not the network form as such but rather the quality of the desire that animates it. On the one hand, a world of domination churns its surface ceaselessly in order to leave everything essentially the same. On the other, the promise of a globalised happiness gestures to the event of emergent collectivities.

If this theorisation is the right one, then Hardt and Negri's categories can help us to recognise two distinct currents of art practice converging with the activist networks of the global justice movement. One carries on the battle of images and representations. The other pushes beyond the more or less conventionalised field of that battle in

25. Hardt and Negri, *op cit*, pp 152–3.

26. Antonio Negri, 'Back to the Future', *op cit*.

order to develop new models of collaborative practices and collective agency. This second current or direction, which I am calling catalytic, is typically cross-disciplinary and rhizomatic in form and aims at local actualisations of Hardt and Negri's constituent power. These two currents are not mutually exclusive. Often they overlap – for example in the projects of Critical Art Ensemble – and certainly, at some important level, they are deeply imbricated. The strategic dissimulations and doublings of catalytic art, especially in its relation to art world institutions, would suggest – contrary to neoliberal common sense – that the struggle against capitalism is becoming subtler and more intensive at the same time that it is becoming more extensive, despite the appearance of resignation on the level of production. But even if this description is correct – and let us hope that it is – oppositional practices of all kinds will have to become much more militant and direct if the current crisis of neoliberal hegemony is to be pushed into a real crisis of global capitalism. After all, the forces of profitable domination will do all they can to capture every emerging desire and every fugitive productive practice before it acquires political consciousness or agency. If the new rhizomes of resistance are really to attract and inspire a massive or multitudinous desertion from capitalism – a qualitative conversion of alienated to living labour – then the radical left needs to stop speaking in codes. It needs to have courage in its critical processing of traditional revolutionary theory and now declare openly its commitment to a radical cosmopolitics that will accept nothing less than an end to capitalism as world system. That would mean breaking categorically with every kind of liberal apologetics for the misery of the global given. And it would mean working resolutely towards cutting all ties to the concept of the nation as a ground of identity. If we are ready for that, then another art world will be a walk in the park.