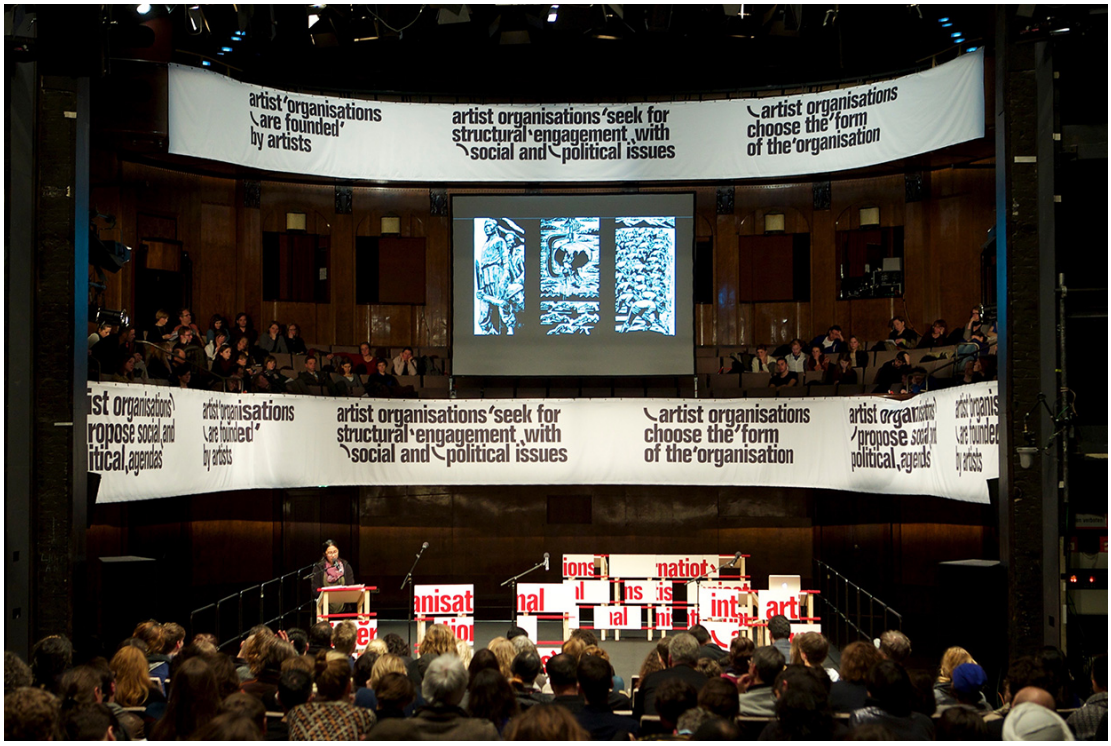
Beyond Socially Enraged Art

Marc James Léger

Essay – October 27, 2015

Canadian writer and artist Marc James Léger asserts that today's socially engaged art is mainly a socially *enraged* art. He reflects on a current meeting of Artist Organisations International (AOI) to ask what cultural revolution and avant-garde art might mean today. This essay is part of the research theme Commonist Aesthetics *[www.onlineopen.org/commonist-aesthetics]*.



Lisa Ito of Concerned Artists of the Philippines presenting on the panel "Propaganda & Counter-Propaganda" at Artist Organisations International, Hebbel am Ufer Theatre, Berlin, 9–11 January 2014. Initiated by Florian Malzacher, Jonas Staal and Joanna Warsza. Photo by: Lidia Rossner. Courtesy Artist Organisations International.

Over the last two decades, many of the art practices that were formerly implicit under the umbrella term of 'pluralism' have in one way or another become resources for a more comprehensive and vanguard socially engaged art. Despite the many different versions of social practice, as it is also known, its basic operative principle is that art can be used to bring about progressive social change and social justice. At the same time that this politicized art has expanded exponentially and taken root institutionally, leftist politics since the rise of resistance movements against neoliberalism call for radicalized constituent politics that displace to a great extent the 'cultural politics of representation' of postmodern cultural studies.[1] In this context it is simply not enough, as philosopher Jacques Rancière has it, to endlessly endorse art's 'weak' ability to change the world through the singularity of its objects and the transformation of attitudes.[2] There is a politics to aesthetics, but at the limits of that proposal the question remains: What politics?

For Rancière, such a politics should not be one of mass mobilization, as proposed for instance in Ben Davis's semi-Trotskyite call for a new cultural front.[3] Even Alain Badiou, a paradoxical figure in this art and politics equation, warns us about the ontological difference between an art of representation, which presumes that the result of political emancipation is present (official art), and an art that creates emancipatory change through its own presentation (militant art).[4] Such a militant art, however, connected as it may be to a 'stronger ideology' that is not compatible with neoliberal capitalism, presumes a difference from the category of politics, severed through Badiou's notion of truth procedure from the Marxist bedrock of political economy.[5]

In this context of praxis around the categories of art and politics, we might consider what remains of the idea of cultural revolution. From the side of politics, the idea of revolution is not one that is popular with today's prefigurative politics because of its assumption of a heavy-handed, top-down and violent imposition of change. In this respect, political theorist Susan Buck-Morss calls for a commonist rather than communist transition. In the terms of commonists, according to Buck-Morss, neither art nor politics has an ontological specificity: there is no particular way of being-in-the-world, only concrete contingencies and specific solidarities.[6] For communists, in contrast, the dialectical approach to autonomy makes art a fully historicized and contradictory category, pressured by the totality and the vicissitudes of class struggle. As cultural theorist Kim Charnley has correctly noted, activist art often relies on the prestige of 'art' in order to open a political space.[7] In contrast to thinkers like Grant Kester and Rancière, according to Charnley, an art whose self-understanding confronts its social reality is one that does not abandon the notion of avant-garde confrontation.[8] The populist assumption within socially engaged art that the 99% is directly confronted by the various ideological state apparatuses, plutocracy and corporate domination is one that can suppress politics rather than deepen it. As Badiou puts it:

> *The Occupy Wall Street movement's slogan "We are the 99%," with its supposed capacity to unite people, is completely empty. The truth is that what we call the West is full of people who though not constituting part of the 10% that make up the ruling aristocracy, do however provide globalized capitalism with a petty-bourgeois support troop, the famous middle class, without which the democratic oasis would have no chance of survival.*[9]

Badiou calls on people in the West to engage in cultural revolution by shaking off the false contradiction that the current struggle is between the economic calculations of Western regimes and reactive fundamentalisms and fascisms; the true contradiction is between these two options and the missing third: the free association of egalitarian symbolization based on common rules.[10] In this sense, I have proposed that we can move beyond the closed loop of power and resistance, or resistance and reaction, by reintroducing the concept of the avant-garde.[11] In these terms, today's socially engaged art could be turned toward the task of cultural revolution.

As a theoretical presupposition to cultural revolution, I would suggest that the most helpful definition of avant-garde art we have today, one that is adequate to contemporary forms of socially engaged art in the context of the real subsumption of labour, is that proposed by John Roberts in *Revolutionary Time and the Avant-Garde*.[12] While Roberts's theory has some affinity with Rancière in the sense that he first distinguishes between the ontology of art and the heteronomy of non-art, he further proposes that art's worldly materials are added to art's 'ontology of conceptualization,' defined as an end of art historicity that understands art as not only a-disciplinary and non-identitarian, but reflexive and experimental, a *post-art* condition that opens radical avant-garde art practices to knowledge of its history, its failures and to mass techniques of production. Such theory does not build its concepts through ethnographies of activist self-conception; rather, it questions the separation of art and theory for the sake of pragmatic effectivity insofar as

naive approaches to social reality allow art institutions and funding bodies to more easily tolerate social projects in the traditional terms of bourgeois reformism, petty bourgeois goodwill, and 'apolitical' neoliberal governmentality. In contrast, the post-art condition of the avant-garde implies collective struggle and oppositionality as the basis of real democratization and communization.

I begin my essay with the current context of social practice in art and suggest that rather than socially engaged art, the predominant modality among artists today is an activist-oriented socially *enraged* art that corresponds by and large to an end of ideology post-politics. From here I suggest that Badiou's study of Maoism has something to offer those who wish to confront the limits of today's art activism. I bring these thoughts to bear on the January 2015 symposium of Artist Organisations International (AOI), an event designed to propose the confederation of engaged art collectives around the world. With this I hope to provide a glimpse into the prospects for cultural revolution at today's artistic and political conjuncture.

Socially Enraged Art

We don't know what the new communism will be, it seems, except to say that it will not be the old one of Soviet modernism. But so much was already part of the programme of the Situationist International, whose neither Moscow nor Washington approach has today made those anti-Washington factions nostalgic for the other missing limb. Cultural theorist Gerald Raunig opened a once timely essay in *Artforum* with the reflections forty years after the fact of Gilles Deleuze on May '68.[13] For Deleuze, the last great irruption of Western Europe was the opposite of a Leninist rupture and separation from capitalist society, paradigmatically announcing the beginning of a new sequence. In terms of a metaphysical materialism, this 'event' corresponds to a multiplicity of becomings rather than linear striations and fixities, least of all, French philosopher André Glucksmann's view that Nicolas Sarkozy was somehow an heir of '68.[14] How then to capture the ambiguities of becoming, in particular, against 'hasty journalism,' and the 'repressive order' of 'academic historicism'? For Raunig, the importance of this event is its 'potential for recompositions and uncustomary concatenations' beyond the state and beyond constituted efforts to take power, to transform sites like the university, the factory and the street into non-places where change becomes possible.[15] This rebellious disabling of institutions, according to Raunig's reading of political philosopher Claude Lefort's contribution to the multi-authored book *La Brèche. Premières réflexions sur les événements*, is one of emotional outburst: 'Instead of being "engaged," they were, famously, "enraged."'[16] On this most crucial question with regard to programme, leadership and organization, Raunig reduces Situationist dialectics to anarchist dualism: 'They refused to channel their rage into the available political parties or labor unions and instead used Situationist and other artistic-*cum*-political methods to call for a thoroughly political objective: "*L'imagination au pouvoir.*"'[17] The rest reads like a legacy of disorder and disagreement on the left: for Lefort a breach, for sure, but one without lasting effects; for the official polity something best forgotten; and for Raunig, a process of becoming within the commercial regimes of post-Fordist, neoliberal governance: enraged self-organization rather than engaged organization, leading to new breaches. In these terms, even if revamped with transversal complexity, most of what today goes by the term socially engaged art should adopt the more accurate moniker of *socially enraged art*.

Cultural Revolution Is Ordinary

In an essay on 'cultural revolution,' art theorist Sven Lütticken wonders how the Leninist call for a socialist culture has been transformed since Guy Debord appropriated this idea in the 1960s and shifted the terms of discussion from the takeover of state power to that of an avant-garde excavation of the promise of communism.[18] His concern is to address the idea of 'cultural revolution' as a problematic term but also as a productive concept with the potential to shift the discussion on contemporary political art away from both institutional critique and art activism. Lütticken proposes that a new class composition comprised of students, intellectuals, artists and bohemians might serve as a catalyst for new forms of revolutionary action. He follows Herbert Marcuse, who argued that even though the working class has now been absorbed into a white-collar class of salaried employees, technicians and service workers, and tends to integrate the sphere of cultural production into the sphere of the capitalist structural revolution, the popular forms of rebellion might nevertheless be useful in 'preparing the soil' for political revolution.[19]

Lütticken begins his essay with the somewhat humorous assertion that the avant-gardes of the 1960s took up the term cultural revolution, which by 1967 and 1968 had acquired Maoist connotations. This tainted the concept for some, he writes, while increasing its appeal for others.[20] In his work on Badiou's post-Maoism, literary critic Bruno Bosteels explains that the culturalization of politics that Lütticken describes was in fact possible since the cultural and ideological freedom afforded artists in the 1970s and 1980s was largely due to 'the perceived ineffectiveness of the overall movement as a *political* phenomenon.'[21] Bosteels adds: 'few commentators fail to recognize the astonishing expansion to which the political playing field is subject in the late sixties and early seventies, with the result that "cultural revolution" becomes a generic term to a large extent cut loose from its concrete moorings in the sequence of events in China.'[22] It is as such worth examining this sequence for further indications of what is at stake in this concept.

In an essay from 2002 titled 'The Cultural Revolution: The Last Revolution?' Badiou provides a detailed analysis of the 'disturbances' that shocked Communist China between the years 1965 and 1976, and more specifically, from the period May 1966 to September 1967.[23] The term 'cultural', as it is defined in the 'Sixteen Points Decision' that was drafted by the Central Committee of the Cultural Revolution Group (GPCR), which was led by Mao Zedong in his attacks against conservative bureaucratic forces within the Communist Party and which was recognized by the student-led Red Guards, asserted that the Cultural Revolution sought to 'change people in what is most profound' and that the term 'cultural' in this case referred broadly to the concepts civilization, ideology and superstructure.[24] For Badiou, the Cultural Revolution in China is the last revolution insofar as it is the last effort, after the invention of the Leninist vanguard party, to invent a new form of politics that could be defined in terms of proletarian class struggle. This particular sequence of what he elsewhere refers to as the communist hypothesis is an important lesson in the failure to revolutionize the party-state and whose consequences must be understood not as a failure of the idea of communism and of the political activity of the working masses. It is significant for communism especially as it represented a critique of Stalinism, the forced collectivization of peasants and the litany of purges and executions within the party. In contrast, the Cultural Revolution represents both a real struggle between the party-state and the masses and within the party-state itself, a struggle in relation to which those forces that were loyal to Mao and Maoism acknowledged the legitimacy of autonomous political organizations outside the party-state apparatus. By condoning revolts in universities and factories, and within the party itself, Mao roused the masses to continue the proletarian class struggle against the reconstitution of the bourgeoisie at the level of the communist party apparatus.

It is clear from this that the Mao cult of personality provided the conditions for radicalization at the base rather than the kind of top-down oppression that communist leadership is commonly associated with. It is significant in this regard that Maoism was more pronounced among the anarchistic elements of the student extreme left than among labour groups, even though these too in late 1966 followed Mao in opposing 'economism' and 'material incentives' in favour of political consciousness. [25] For all this, however, Mao was also very critical of the student extremists insofar as their outrage did not, according to Badiou, create an affirmative space for the positive creation of a new politics. [26] The limit of Maoism, on the other hand, was its contradictory association of political mobilization at the base with the stabilization of the party-state as the representative of the working class. Mao's effectiveness as cult leader, paradoxically, was this very contradictoriness with regard to the notion of guarantees and assurances. Mao, Badiou says, is the political leader who struggles against conservative elements within the establishment, who speaks truths and encourages dissent. He represents not a known source of political authority and vested interests but an irreducible element. As Badiou puts it: '"Mao" is the name of a paradox: the rebel in power, the dialectician put to the test by the continuing needs of "development," the emblem of the party-state in search of its overcoming, the military chief preaching disobedience to the authorities.' [27]

While Badiou is today convinced that emancipatory politics calls for the elimination of the party-state, anarchism for him remains a shadow of the former communisms in which politics were tied to class struggle. If socially enraged art is anything on the order of politics, it is a refraction of the more generalized dualism of masses versus state. Still, it remains a task for all workers to struggle against the semblance of antagonism – the kinds of adventurist politics that seek empowerment [*embourgeoisement*] for only some kinds of individuals and specific groups. [28] If the Chinese Cultural Revolution was truly the last revolution to invent a new political situation because its politics was effective at the level of the nation and beyond, what social experiments do today's autonomous mass movements contribute to the politics of class struggle? Politics, as Bosteels says of Badiou's suspension of the party-system and consequent search for an adequate form of political organization, must be more than sporadic protests and demonstrations.

One More Effort, Comrades

As a thought experiment into what cultural revolution and avant-garde art might mean today, I would like to offer some reflections on the January 2015 meeting of AOI *[www.onlineopen.org/reflections-on-artist-organisations-international]*, which to my mind is one of the most significant art world events since the 2010 Creative Time Summit. I say this very specifically with regard to Roberts's emphasis on the notion of art's ontology of conceptualization and end of art historicity since this event as well as the proposed umbrella group AOI, organized by artist Jonas Staal along with curator Joanna Warsza and dramaturge Florian Malzacher, could in some respects be considered a form of experimental artwork. In fact, the worry that Staal and the organizers would act as unacknowledged leaders caused participants to question the city and country in which the event took place, the theatre in which it was held, the agit-prop look of the stage design and the sources of funding involved. Sensitive to the use of the term 'international' in the founding gesture of AOI, Dmitry Vilensky of the artist collective Chto Delat coyly asked if the organizers were thinking of AOI as some new kind of Trotskyite party. There should have been no need to worry about this, however, since the frameworks of proletarian politics, socialism and communism were rarely mentioned. Indeed, despite the use of the organization term international, the organizers and participants avoided any call for artists to come together under a unifying political or ideological banner.

So what was proposed at this symposium that would make it different from the corporate model of Creative Time and from the various biennales that have adapted to artists'

demands for social engagement? One of the purposes of AOI was to address the shift from ephemeral project work – the type of institution-based projects that were discussed by artist Andrea Fraser in the mid-1990s as 'service work,' and characterized by artist Gregory Sholette and curator Nato Thompson as 'interventionist art' – to the development of long-term structures, and thus the name Artist Organisations.[29] This tendency toward extradisciplinary self-institutionalization explains the choice of artists who were invited: Concerned Artists of the Philippines, Immigrant Movement International, Jewish Renaissance Movement in Poland, Zentrum für Politische Schönheit, Artist Association of Azawad, Chto Delat, School for Engaged Art, Office for Anti-Propaganda, Performing Arts Forum, Artists of Rojava, Forensic Architecture, Silent University, Gulf Labor, HudRada, International Institute of Political Murder, Laboratory of Insurrectionary Imagination, Etcétera (Errorist International), Haben und Brauchen, Institute for Human Activities, Schoon Gonoegl! and WochenKlausur. It could be said that the substance of the event came from the presentation of the various social struggles involved, the development of methods to engage creatively and effectively with social reality, and the lively interaction between the moderators, the presenters, the respondents and the audience. It is not possible in this context to address all of this material and all of the different refractions of the subjects that occurred through the discussions, which are available online.[30] On the whole, the different themes that were chosen for the panels – Propaganda and Counter-Propaganda, State and Statelessness, Violence and Non-Violence, Solidarity and Unionising – proved to be somewhat apposite as organizing concepts and tended to function as they do in art magazines and biennales as a way to avoid discussing the ideological framework of the proposed organization. In this regard, some of the moderators were very helpful, but some others, who are more invested in so-called 'criticality,' were quite obviously unable and possibly unwilling to offer constructive insights. In this respect, curator Charles Esche was indeed very effective as the vanishing mediator of the Final Debate, helping to keep the focus on the political potential of this event rather than dwelling on post-structural indeterminacy and the ostensible dangers of cooptation.

There is one particular organizational feature of AOI that would allow us to consider this work as avant-garde, and that is its distinction between activist anti-institutionality on the one hand, referred to here as socially enraged art, and institutional affirmation on the other, in relation to which most major institutional spaces have become neoliberalized in one way or another. AOI performs what Roberts refers to as a 'metastasis' of art and politics, escaping neither the demands of art nor of politicization. Roberts provides a very elaborate account of metastasis as specific to conditions of labour within capitalism. In contrast to those who consider autonomy to be a luxury that is unwarranted in a 'permanent state of emergency,' or as many of the AOI participants indicated, in the pressing context of climate change, Roberts holds that political praxis and art praxis, in the productive form of metastasis, 'offer[s] a place of memory, a set of relations, modes of cognition and learning and mapping that provides a different space of encounter between praxis, critique and truth – a place that sustains an open and reflective encounter between art and the totalizing critique of capitalism.'[31] In the words of the organizers, who are equally concerned with collective objectification and intellectual labour, 'artist organizations bring forward a social / political agenda that connects the fields of ethics and aesthetics. Rather than a medium merely "questioning" and "confronting" the world, the artist organization situates itself in the field of daily political struggle.'[32] Neither a political party, nor an artist's union, AOI would work to demand that institutions adopt the ethical stances of engaged artists, building a 'structural solidarity' that would allow for meaningful engagement with other existing organizations and envisioning the ideal of a 'common world' (Staal).

It should be said that the common refrain among both participants and audience members about changing 'the world' is by and large ameliorist and reformist insofar as it is not more specific about already existing radical left critiques. In this regard it becomes possible for

art world commentator Andrea Liu, the founder of a social practice fellowship programme in New York, to write that 'the strengths of the conference were its openness to critique, dissensus, and agonism to the point of uncivil hostility at times from audience members, and its incessant self-examination and deconstruction of the premise of the event itself,' only to congratulate moderator Margarita Tsomou for suggesting that the notion of an 'organization' seemed, in Liu's words (and not Tsomou's, based on my interpretation), 'an old-fashioned classical leftist conception of the rational centered subject that has been surpassed by the Occupy Wall Street post-representative trope of the "swarm" and the nameless, formeless "multitude" catalyzed by social media.'[33] Liu reiterates in the epigraph to her review moderator Maria Hlavajova's citation of the somewhat cliché statement by Antonio Gramsci that the old is dying and the new cannot be born, with the chaser: now is the time of monsters. The review fails to remark that quite unlike Gramsci, she and Hlavajova are using this statement against the radical left. To her credit, Hlavajova knows enough about what is happening in social practice to see that the new creative class 'recompositioning' that is underway requires more than the openness of relational politics and that collaboration and participation today function as neoliberal imperatives. But Liu seems to think like moderator Ekaterina Degot that the participants in the event are, in Degot's words, 'in the wrong play,' 'reluctant to repeat some sort of left-wing political rhetoric' since 'the situation has changed' and 'it's time to find some different language.' Because of this, Liu fails to notice that Tsomou in fact spoke of preventing solidarity from being a strictly artistic gesture and that although swarms explode the concept of organization, there is a real need for sustainability, as noticed in Greece and Spain with the reorientation of social movements around leftist political party organizations. Syriza and Podemos are perhaps the kinds of monsters that Gramsci and Tsomou are talking about. In this regard Tsomou suggested that artists' organizations were in fact questioning the more fashionable concepts of multiplicity and intersectionality. Her questions were: How do we organize? How do we become protagonists who are able to suggest organizational tools? This echoes the writing of art critic Yates McKee, who argues that the novelty of today's post-contemporary politicized art is its conceptualization of the artist as an organizer, someone who facilitates assemblies, devises strategies and tactics, designs propaganda, stages performances, delivers workshops, cultivates alliances and administers media platforms.[34]

Given the range of positions presented during the symposium, it is not impossible to imagine that Liu genuinely came away with an overall view of it as the collective endorsement of a leaderless and formless multitude. All the talk about artists 'making a world' rather than 'questioning the world' (Staal) risks a discursive overinflation of knowledge in terms of the production of subjectivity through 'social construction.' On the whole this was not a problem for the organizers, but it does point to certain over-determinations of the project that I have tried to account for by addressing Badiou's critique of massism. In this regard, many of the assembled and someone like Liu would have much to learn from Lisa Ito of the Concerned Artists of the Philippines (CAP), who defined it as the organizational result of cultural revolution. However, if I was to do like Liu and take away from this event my own view of it, I would emphasize not only the Zentrum für Politische Schönheit [Center for Political Beauty] project of over-identification with activist NGO art – *Kindertransporthilfe des Bundes* – and not only curator Christoph Gurk's critique of the limitations of the AOI paradigm, which was based on a critique of activist 'anti-intellectualism' and an emphasis on the 'fantasmatic character' of 'real politics,' but I would do so in order to emphasize how both these presentations gave an indication of the limitations of the ontological frame of 'art' that is the supposition of much of today's art activism. Refusing to instrumentalize aesthetics, Zentrum für Politische Schönheit and Gurk were nevertheless unable to provide an adequately framed rationale for their rejection of artistic political organization. In other words, not only did they appear unable to reach across the aisle to their activist comrades, but they failed to further demonstrate how

fantasy underscores the structure of both 'art' and politics. With this in mind, they could have acknowledged how the petit a of engaged artists' organizations has no social guarantees, neither from the art world nor from the radical tradition. If Liu's activist multitude finds an ally in the technocratic moderators' Discourse of the University, the Germans' Discourse of the Master of Art has its counterpart in the AOI's avant-garde as Analyst, since, to put things in Lacanian terms, the organizer, or curator-Father (invoked during the proceedings), is always a castrated Father. The analyst, more than the Master, not only confronts you with your freedom, but helps you to realize that if you don't do it, if you don't organize yourselves, no one will. [35]

If an artist organizations international was not a presupposition of the conference, the presentations by Zentrum für Politische Schönheit and Gurk did a great deal to show that the meetings were indeed oriented toward such an outcome, as Vilensky was correct to point out. They also demonstrated, however unintentionally, some of the finer points of revolutionary struggle. On the one hand, Zentrum für Politische Schönheit's refusal of the status of activists reminded participants of what is otherwise the status quo in the institutionalized art world. On the other, Gurk's critical institutional or 'discursive' orientation – even if these were couched in a kind of Oskar Negt and Alexander Kluge notion of resistance to 'production public spheres' and political parties – echoed the concerns of what we might refer to as the bourgeois and petty bourgeois bureaucratic elements within the AOI meetings and outside of it in the greater art world.

In an essay that discusses the organizational situation faced by the American antiwar movement in 1968, cultural theorist Brian Holmes mentions the theory of the revolutionary leader Amílcar Cabral, who argued that petty bourgeois functionaries should be allowed to develop in the direction of their natural inclination as an intermediary bourgeoisie, eventually committing suicide as a class so that it can be reborn in its popular aspirations. [36] It is good then that art world functionaries were invited to the event, so that they too could learn from the experience but also so that they could react and pronounce themselves. Citing the research of sociologists Barbara and John Ehrenreich on the professional-managerial class (PMC), Holmes mentions that the PMC tends to be subordinate to the capitalist imperative of accumulation, but it also establishes its own autonomy, generating hostilities to both the capitalist and the working classes. Its professional aspirations, educational destinies, ethical standards and commitment to public service have nevertheless been significant to the development of the New Left and activist movements since the 1960s. [37] Despite this, we should point out that such cadres within and around social practice circles are hardly well-trained trade unionist factions or 'radicals-in-the-professions,' but somewhat disorganized elements. Their objections to leftist ideology defy the purpose of an event that proposes the name International.

At the outset, the local or specific struggles of each of these artist organizations may also represent different political and ideological interests, with links to bourgeois state power, NGO's, social movements or popular struggles. According to revolutionary theorist Régis Debray, the Trotskyite notion of 'dual power,' which links popular actions – agitations, protests, strikes, occupations – through a network of committees (in this case, a confederation of artist organizations), can place added pressure on the resources of such groups (a problem mentioned by the delegates from Azawad and that artist Noel Douglas argued could be addressed through design intelligence) and it can also divert attention from already existing activity into ineffective organizational busyness. The point of any added organizational effort, then, must emphasize the socialist character of cultural revolution, from control of the means of production to challenging state power, and such a confederation would no doubt risk setbacks to local efforts. [38] Given the conflicting class aspirations and the local nature of the various organizational structures, an artist organizations international would presume that a challenge to ruling class control is even possible at this moment. In the words of Debray, who wrote about the coordination of

guerrilla cells during the Cuban Revolution, the 'dual power' proposed by Trotskyism leads by exploiting the weaknesses of local struggles. [39] The example of Fidel Castro in Cuba, in contrast, was to challenge orthodoxy by proposing that a vanguard can act independently of a Marxist-Leninist party.

If anything of value to AOI can de derived from Debray's study of guerrilla warfare in Latin America, it would be that independent organizations should not become dependent on an umbrella group, but that such a group, nevertheless useful, should have a solid leadership structure and a plan of action (due to the potential need and inevitability of change in elected leaders). Whereas member groups would carry on their local, autonomous struggles, the umbrella group would provide ad hoc solidarity, educational and communicational assistance, and political influence among establishment institutions, as Debray says, 'to raise one's voice and to impose oneself on the stage of power.' [40] All strategy, political analysis, and direct action, however, would depend on a shared ideological horizon. For the time being, given the reluctance of cadres to support radical leftist ideology, it might be enough to follow the lead of the Zapatistas and expand the points of struggle against neoliberal capitalism, while at the same time discussing deeper philosophical questions. In certain circumstances, it may well be that local, autonomous struggles, like that of the Kurdish PKK, will act as the unofficial leadership of the International. However, it should be kept in mind that a politics that does impact national and state politics is destined to encounter state repression. A further consideration is that in the case of institutional cooptation or backlash, the creation of an AOI could temporarily hamper the proliferation of artist organizations. In the long run, however, the goal is to encourage the proliferation of social engagement, both artistic and non-artistic.

Another resulting problem could be, as Debray describes, 'rivalry among competing organizations or a petty bourgeois sentiment of frustration in the face of an established vanguard,' leading to 'ineffectual dispersion.' [41] In contrast to Debray's study, the particular advantage that artist organizations have in comparison with guerrilla forces is that they do not require a common (military / artistic) doctrine and training and so the notion of a central command alters radically. Strikes against Empire can more easily be a part of local efforts and offer a diversity of types of action where dispersion or organizational initiatives strengthen the common struggle rather than lead to problems of control and command. Further, the phenomenon of art world 'personalities' (or even artists who work independently) can be an added benefit to political influence since we are concerned here with morale and propaganda rather than warfare. And because these are not electoral platforms, there is no need to worry about the manipulation of appearances. Unlike street protests, for instance, there is no need for martyrs getting arrested as a demonstration of either civil disobedience or constituent direct action. The confused mixture of class interests in the age of biopolitical protest does not change the fact that all classes have a stake in the destruction of neoliberal capitalism, a reality that should nullify the need for endless and excessive deliberation and propose some 'diagonal' forms and methods of organization as well as the tactical independence of member groups.

The challenge for an AOI therefore would be to establish campaigns and actions that transcend the specific interests of various member organizations. The interest in an AOI is that member groups would have more to think about than their own survival, a question that extends beyond the revolutionary's motto of 'Patria o Muerte' to that of the Situationist notion of living underground. [42] The question in the 1960s in Asia and in Latin America was therefore the same one we could ask today: How do we think revolution with or without a party? Before this question can be answered, the question of class alliance and class politics must be acknowledged and it is clear that an AOI cannot function effectively under bourgeois and petty bourgeois leadership. The petty bourgeois class must, in Cabral's terminology, and as cited by both Debray and Holmes: 'commit suicide as a class in order to be restored to life as revolutionary workers.' [43]

If the characteristic of the now hegemonic class of the global petty bourgeoisie is to refuse not only national but all class belonging, it would indeed be difficult to identify forms of hijacking, blackmail, provocation and sectarianism, but we can for the time being consider unproductive those aspects of consensus decision-making that play to the whims of cranks and malcontents, as for example those audience members who most hysterically claimed that they want to 'change the world' without offering useful and principled points of action. Lorenzo Pezzani of Forensic Architecture made the valid point, based on the ideas of activist Rodrigo Nunes, that vanguard functions can be achieved by striking a balance between openness and enclosure, without attempting absolute horizontality.[44] As Negri now also says, 'it's really urgent that we organise politically' and that 'we bring a political vertical out of the horizontality of the movements: one that's able to express strength and political programmes.'[45] Such opportunistic animosity, as was found for instance in many Occupy Wall Street (OWS) camps, leads to dead-ends. It is easily exploited by castes and provocateurs that seek to delay negotiations with polemics that do not raise the level of class struggle. Solutions to serious structural problems such as those based on gender and race inequality need therefore to be universally agreed upon and made into explicit principles of the organization as a whole or otherwise abandoned or deferred.

Another aspect of petty bourgeois opportunism that ignores the class aspects of struggle is technocratic managerialism. With regard to the question of political organization and cultural revolution, we could refer to the technocratic attitude as 'right deviationism.' An example of this is architecture theorist Felicity Dale Scott's recent essay '"vanguards."'[46] The point of her use of scare quotes around the word 'vanguards' is to caution against, as she puts it, heroic narratives on the left that have a naive approach to social issues. The example she gives is the contrast at the Yale School of Art and Architecture in the late 1960s between the design solutions of idealistic students and the protocols of new computer and information technologies. The students' protest activities against white privilege and urban renewal schemes eventually led to the suspension of classes and the closure of the programme. Scott interprets this in Foucauldian terms to propose that the idealistic, 'socially enraged' students were not realistic enough about the matrix of power within which architecture is imbricated. Rather than 'silence such troubles' as 'the rules of law,' 'management techniques' and 'morality,' Scott proposes that they should rather have learned to 'engage with' those forces of power that inform architecture's ideological, economic and technological parameters.[47]

Scott either misses or ignores the fact that the purpose of vanguards is precisely to interrupt the cycle of power and resistance that Michel Foucault instrumentalized in his theory of power / knowledge. Her example of politically effective organization is therefore blinkered.[48] In this regard we could also propose a critique of 'left deviationism,' which in similar terms limits what is imaginable as leftist organization. The anarchist anthropologist David Graeber makes the interesting claim that Foucault's equation of power with knowledge fails to consider how power, in the form of bureaucracies that abscond from the 'interpretive labour' of knowing and understanding people, are agencies of violence. Bureaucratic power is therefore synonymous with absurdity, stupidity, and non-knowledge, avoiding debate, clarification and negotiation.[49] For Graeber, rather than embrace bureaucracy, as Scott suggests, the left needs to develop a critique of bureaucracy that is substantially different from that of the right, which simply serves to expand the scope of neoliberal ideology's collapse of private capital and the public interest. His practical suggestion comes from his experience with the global justice movement and its elaboration of new forms of democratic process based on assemblies and spokescouncils that carry out collective projects. He considers such anarchist organizing 'the first major leftist antibureaucratic movement,' and proposes that the Arab Spring, Indignados and OWS are the best examples of the May '68 slogan 'l'imagination au pouvoir' come to life.[50]

The point of such movements from below, according to Graeber, is that they have understood the Situationist lesson of lowering one's ambition and scope to the level of everyday acts of creative subversion, avoiding the seizure of state power and thus avoiding the creation of new rules and regulations. For Graeber, the cultural revolution will not be a single moment of rupture, like a civil war for example, but a slow-building cumulative movement toward a world without capitalism, which he argues requires overcoming habituated laziness and the violent stupidity of bureaucracy. Graeber echoes Žižek's often repeated statement that what is important is not the day of carnivalesque protest, but what happens the morning after, in other words, the more or less enduring characteristics of new social infrastructures and values. Graeber leaves us to understand, however, that May '68, the Arab Spring and OWS are more radical and lasting events in terms of social experience than events like the Chinese Cultural Revolution or Cuban Revolution, which resorted to violent armed struggle and which eventually led to state centralism. He proposes that the 'new, emerging conception of revolution' that comes from insurrectionary moments makes use of imagination to throw open the horizons of possibility. [51] Graeber's version of relative structurelessness, however, leads to a politics of bad infinity (or bad affinity) insofar as issues like climate change, the socialization of capital, employment policy, energy policy, health care, and so on, require enormous organizational systems and planning and in some cases can imply that local production is inadequate and even wasteful. [52] It serves no one to castigate the collective intelligence and struggles that produced something like the welfare state in terms of violence, stupidity, laziness or 'fear of play.' Graeber is aware of this but he nevertheless wants to promote a political theory based in small autonomous movements and collectives, and in the case of AOI, he would perhaps recommend that everyone should go their separate ways. What I would like to suggest is that although Graeber's approach would reverse Scott's opportunistic '*problématique*,' which is simply imposed by the state of things (being highly exploitative and therefore unacceptable), his ontologized Manichaeism of subversion and counter-cultural anti-bureaucracy mostly plays the alternative new left against the radical old left and precludes a supersession of organizational programme. It leaves out, for instance, the programme of social critic Cornelius Castoriadis and the group Socialisme ou Barbarie who did not call for the dissolution of revolutionary parties but for a change in their bureaucratic mechanisms so that they could become open to direct election and subject to instant recall, so that they could better serve the principle of equality rather than, as Graeber would have it, greater transparency within a 'Marxist-Leninist' administration. But of course Graeber is concerned with the avoidance of state power. This is not necessarily an issue for an artists' organization and even he admits the need for autonomous spaces to engage with larger social systems.

It seems inevitable that a confederated organization would avoid the fetishization of consensus-based horizontality, that it would adopt organizational instruments, structures of decision making (which could for example involve majority vote) within an anti-capitalist politics, opening up new possibilities for the mobilization of collective political power. One of the concerns at the AOI event was with the term International, evoking for some the spectre of nationalism. It could be worth retaining this term, however, as it relates very specifically to the major success of the First International, the 1871 Paris Commune, an event that most leftists have not too much difficulty agreeing about. Despite the fact that the word International is rooted in the word nation, there is, according to cultural theorist Kristin Ross's recent study, nothing about the frame of the nation-state that characterizes this popular insurrection. 'Under the Commune,' she argues, 'Paris wanted to be not the capital of France but an autonomous collective in a universal federation of peoples. It did not wish to be a state but rather an element, a unit in a federation of communes that was ultimately international in scale.' [53] The social and political ideals that permeated the days of the Commune were the result of years of popular discussions and debates within associations, committees, meetings, reunions and clubs during the last days of the Second

Empire. Their purpose was to coordinate social intelligences against a government of corrupt traitors. Disidentifying with the imperialist nation-state and its middle-class authority, these meetings were international, with participants from around the globe who were admitted into the ranks of commune citizenship. The decentralized and multi-tiered structure of the Commune affirmed a politics directed against the state and in favour of a Universal Republic set against liberal parliamentary bureaucracy and its apparatus of state violence. The Commune was also the first widespread movement to combat gender-based inequality, creating jobs for women and instituting equal pay for equal work. What at that time stood in the way of even the word International was counter-revolution, which associated the cultural revolution with the misery it struggled against.

In this sense, to return to the AOI event, Gurk's wariness about the pragmatism that he hears coming from socially engaged artist 'good guys' is not one that should be separated from his 'dialectics of real and reality.' The call for action coming from artists effects a very real call from the big Other of today's art scene. This is not simply a missed encounter. To understand the fantasmatic character of the real in the form of engaged art refers not only to the promise and 'suturing' of meaning as something through which artists 'elude their own ambitions and privileges' within the 'self-imagination of neoliberal capitalism.' Where, Gurk asks, 'is the fantasy in the political and the political in fantasy?' The answer is more troubling than he seems to imply since there is no safe place from which to ask such questions. And this is why pragmatism is not necessarily the best description of a genuinely socially engaged art and why terms like cultural revolution, International, vanguard and avant-garde retain their traumatic quality, even and especially to the ears of today's post-traumatic and academic left. Such terms, as opposed to the socially enraged art that often assumes it operates outside of ideological parameters, aim directly at the symptom and its repressed signifiers.

Marc James Léger is an independent scholar living in Montreal. He is editor of *The Idea of the Avant Garde – And What It Means Today* (2014) and *Culture and Contestation in the New Century* (2011). He is author of *Drive in Cinema: Essays on Film, Theory and Politics* (2015), *The Neoliberal Undead* (2013) as well as *Brave New Avant Garde* (2012).

Footnotes

1. See for example Judith Butler, Ernesto Laclau and Slavoj Žižek, *Contingency, Hegemony, Universality: Contemporary Dialogues on the Left* (London: Verso, 2000) and Alain Badiou, *Ethics: An Essay on the Understanding of Evil*, trans. Peter Hallward (London: Verso, 2001 [1993]).
2. Jacques Rancière, *Aesthetics and Its Discontents*, trans. Steven Corcoran (Malden: Polity Press, 2009[2004]), 21. For an example of theory that reduces the social and political significance of art to that of heterodox singularities, see Nathalie Heinich, *Le Paradigme de l'art contemporain: Structures d'une révolution artistique* (Paris: Gallimard, 2014). See also, in this vein of writings on contemporaneity, Peter Osborne's notion of post-conceptual art in "The Postconceptual Condition: Or, the Cultural Logic of High Capitalism Today," *Radical Philosophy* 184 (March / April 2014): 19–27.
3. See Ben Davis, 9.5 *Theses on Art and Class* (Chicago: Haymarket Books, 2013).
4. See Alain Badiou, 'Does the Notion of Activist Art Still Have a Meaning?,' A Lacanian Ink Event, Miguel Abreu Gallery, New York, 13 October 2010, transcript available at lacan.com.
5. See Alain Badiou, *Handbook of Inaesthetics*, trans. Alberto Toscano (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 2005 [1998]).
6. See Susan Buck-Morss, 'A Commonist Ethics,' in Slavoj Žižek, ed. *The Idea of Communism 2: The New York Conference* (London: Verso, 2013), 60–61.
7. Kim Charnley, 'Dissensus and the Politics of Collaborative Practice,' *Art and the Public Sphere* 1, no. 1 (2011): 50.
8. Ibid., 51. See Grant Kester, *The One and the Many: Contemporary Collaborative Art in a Global Context* (Durham: Duke University Press, 2011); 'The Sound of Breaking Glass, Part I: Spontaneity and Consciousness in Revolutionary Theory,' *e-flux Journal* 30, no. 12 (December 2011), e-flux.com; and 'The Sound of Breaking Glass, Part II: Agonism and the Taming of Dissent,' *e-flux Journal* 31, no. 1 (January 2012), e-flux.com.
9. Alain Badiou, 'True and False Contradictions of the Crisis,' Verso Blog, 29 May 2015, versobooks.com.
10. Alain Badiou, 'La crise: vraie et fausse contradiction du monde contemporain,' *Libération*, 13 April 2015, liberation.fr.
11. Marc James Léger, 'Introduction: 1 + 1 + a,' in *Drive in Cinema: Essays on Film, Theory and Politics* (Bristol: Intellect, 2015), 1–25.
12. See John Roberts, *Revolutionary Time and the Avant-Garde* (London: Verso, 2015).
13. Gerald Raunig, 'On the Breach,' *Artforum*, May 2008, 341–343.
14. Ibid., 342.
15. Ibid.
16. Ibid. See Cornelius Castoriadis, Claude Lefort and Edgar Morin, *La Brèche. Premières Réflexions sur les événements* (Paris: Fayard, 1968). See also Situationist International, 'The Beginning of an Era,' in *Situationist International Anthology*, ed. Ken Knabb (Berkeley: Bureau of Public Secrets, 1995 [1981]), 225–256 and René Viénet, *Enragés et situationnistes dans le mouvement étudiant* (Paris: Gallimard, 1968).
17. Raunig, 'On the Breach,' 342.
18. Sven Lütticken, 'Cultural Revolution: From Punk to the New Provotariat,' *New Left Review* 87 (May / June 2014): 115–131.
19. See Herbert Marcuse, 'Cultural Revolution,' [c. 1970] discussed in Lütticken, 'Cultural Revolution,' 117.
20. Lütticken, 'Cultural Revolution,' 115.
21. Bruno Bosteels, 'Post-Maoism: Badiou and Politics,' *Positions* 13, no. 3 (Winter 2005): 586.
22. Bosteels, 'Post-Maoism,' 589.
23. Alain Badiou, 'The Cultural Revolution: The Last Revolution?,' *Positions* 13, no. 3 (Winter 2005): 481–514.
24. Ibid., 489 and 494.
25. Ibid., 496.
26. Ibid., 495.
27. Ibid., 506.

28. See for example, Badiou's axiom according to which '[t]he universality of truths rests on subjective forms that cannot be either individual or communitarian,' 'Democratic Materialism and Materialist Dialectic,' in *Logic of Worlds (Being and Event, 2)*, trans. Alberto Toscano (London: Continuum, 2009 [2006]), 9.
29. See Andrea Fraser, *Museum Highlights: The Writings of Andrea Fraser*, ed. Alexander Alberro (Cambridge, Massachusetts: MIT Press, 2005) as well as Nato Thompson and Gregory Sholette, eds., *The Interventionists: Users' Manual for the Creative Disruption of Everyday Life* (Cambridge, Massachusetts: MIT Press / MASS MoCA, 2004).
30. The proceedings of the event from 9–11 January 2015, which took place at Hebbel am Ufer Theatre, Berlin, Germany are available at artistorganizationsinternational.org and vimeo.com.
31. Roberts, *Revolutionary Time and the Avant-Garde*, 35.
32. From the website artistorganizationsinternational.org.
33. Andrea Liu, 'Report: Artist Organisations International Conference,' *Afterimage* 42, no. 6 (May / June 2015): 3.
34. See Yates McKee, 'DEBT: Occupy, Postcontemporary Art, and the Aesthetics of Debt Resistance,' *The South Atlantic Quarterly* 112, no. 4 (Fall 2013): 784.
35. For more on the Lacanian Discourse of the Master in relation to political action, see Slavoj Žižek, *Absolute Recoil: Towards a New Foundation of Dialectical Materialism* (London: Verso, 2014) and *Trouble in Paradise: From the End of History to the End of Capitalism* (London: Allen Lane, 2014). In an earlier moment, Žižek associates the party with the Discourse of the Analyst and the function of truth. See Žižek, 'Afterword: Lenin's Choice,' in *Revolution at the Gates: A Selection of Writings from February to October 1917*, ed. Slavoj Žižek (London: Verso, 2002), 167–336.
36. See Brian Holmes, '1968: Political Crisis in the Keynesian-Fordist Economy,' *Continental Drift: The Other Side of Neoliberal Globalization*, 8 November 2011, brianholmes.wordpress.com.
37. See Ibid.
38. See Régis Debray, *Revolution in the Revolution? Armed Struggle and Political Struggle In Latin America*, trans. Bobbye Ortiz (New York: Grove Press, 1967), 37–38.
39. Ibid., 39.
40. Ibid., 80.
41. Ibid., 80.
42. See Raoul Vaneigem, *The Revolution of Everyday Life*, trans. Donald Nicholson-Smith (London: Rebel Press, 2001 [1967]) and Alain Badiou, *Philosophy for Militants*, trans. Bruno Bosteels (London: Verso, 2012).
43. Debray, *Revolution in the Revolution?,* 112.
44. On this matter, see Rodrigo Nunes, 'Organisation of the Organisationless: Collective Action After Networks,' Mute, 20 May 2014, metamute.org.
45. See Antonio Negri, 'Charlie Hebdo, fear and world war: two questions for Toni Negri,' *Verso Blog*, 21 January 2015, translated from a 23 January article in *Dinamo Press*, versobooks.com; see also Antonio Negri, 'An Interview with Toni Negri: From the refusal of labour to the seizure of power,' *Roar Magazine*, January 2015, roarmag.org; and thanks to Marc Herbst for his suggestion of the Spanish *Fundación de los Communes* as an example of 'diagonal' or 'federated' autonomous spaces.
46. See Felicity Dale Scott, '"Vanguards,"' *e-flux Journal* 64, no. 4 (April 2015), e-flux.com.
47. See Scott, '"Vanguards."'
48. For a critique of the ways in which Foucault's late work approaches neoliberal ideology, see Daniel Zamora, 'Can We Criticize Foucault?' *Jacobin*, 10 December 2014, jacobinmag.com.
49. David Graeber, *The Utopia of Rules: On Technology, Stupidity and the Secret Joys of Bureaucracy* (Brooklyn: Melville House, 2015), 65–66.
50. Graeber, *The Utopia of Rules*, 31, 82, and 100.
51. Graeber, *The Utopia of Rules*, 97–100. Graeber approvingly refers to the work of the collective Crimethink, a group that David Harvey associates with Murray Bookchin's notion of 'lifestyle anarchism.' In contrast to Graeber, Harvey mentions that most of the mutual aid

societies that gave birth to anarchism were based on shared commons, rules and codes of behaviour. See David Harvey, 'Listen, Anarchist!' davidharvey.org, 10 June 2015.
52. See Greg Sharzer, *No Local: Why Small-Scale Alternatives Won't Change the World* (Winchester: Zero Books, 2012).
53. Kristin Ross, *Communal Luxury: The Political Imaginary of the Paris Commune* (London: Verso, 2015), 11–12.

Crosslinks

Reflections on Artist Organisations International: www.onlineopen.org/reflections-on-artist-organisations-international
Commonist Aesthetics: www.onlineopen.org/commonist-aesthetics

Tags

Activism, Aesthetics, Art Discourse, Autonomy

This text was downloaded on November 28, 2026 from
Open! Platform for Art, Culture & the Public Domain
www.onlineopen.org/beyond-socially-enraged-art