

Utopias In-Progress

Seven Brief Theses on Art, Autonomy and Revolution

By Gita Hashemi

Recounting the G20 events in Toronto in June, 2010, in an article in the last issue of Fuse I suggested that, as our working class and marginalized communities face increasingly militarized policing and economic austerity measures, more than symbolic expressions of discontent, we need to imagine, create and sustain self-determined economic and social institutions. Here, I continue with some reflections on the roles and functions of the arts in relation to activism and social transformation.

I.

As we conceptualize the intersections of the arts and the anti/alter-globalization movements, it is necessary to historicize the terrain of resistance to neoliberal globalization. This history obviously predates the “Battle In Seattle.” For most of the world, the 1960s and 1970s were periods of a renewed global mobilization against new forms of Western fascism (defined most accurately in a Black Panther Party’s poster as “the power of finance capitalism”). The 1960s and 1970s generations of radical activists were keenly aware of how white Western capitalism was reformulating itself on the one hand through export of capital, creating dependent economies and expanding consumerism, and on the other through brutal military intervention and occupation, military coups d’etat and installing puppet regimes.

While earlier generations had strong nationalist tendencies, the 1960s and 1970s generations situated their local struggles within a global perspective. Radical movements in Africa, Asia and South and Central America were thought of as local expressions of a global revolutionary

consciousness ideologically inspired as much by Fanon's writings as by those of Marx, Lenin and Mao. The Cuban Revolution, the Algerian War of Independence, the war of liberation in Vietnam and the Palestinian liberation movement provided both theoretical and practical role models for "Third World" revolutionaries as well as their European and North American counterparts. Many guerilla and underground groups formed in these two decades and operated both inside and outside their countries of origin. They were mostly driven by students who were radicalized during liberation and nationalization movements in the "Third World." Connected to a vast and highly active network of "Third World" groups comprised of students, political exiles and émigrés, particularly in Europe, these radical groups were keenly aware of anti-imperialist struggles around the world.

In this period, the interconnections between artistic practices and revolutionary activism were significant. There were many artists active in guerilla and underground groups or somehow connected to them. Poems, songs, stories and political graphics in particular, because of relatively easy, accessible and cheap print and audio reproduction and distribution technologies were carriers of revolutionary poetics and politics. Along with encouraging nation-based revolutions, these practices collectively fostered a transnational culture of solidarity and struggle. Their function was ritualistic, communicative and instructive. They memorialized events that the tightly controlled and censored mainstream media left invisible or else highly distorted; they carried identity-building ideals; they rallied their audiences' sentiments in support of revolutionary engagement; and they spread the movement's ideology as well as strategic and tactical messages. They were primarily produced autonomously and repeatedly reproduced by others. Their main channels of distribution were mostly underground activist and intellectual

networks. As such, they were far from commodities and intellectual properties.

II.

Parallel to this, in North American and European art context anti-capitalism and radical activism were introduced thematically through topical political events and formally through wide rejection of object-based or otherwise commodifiable art practices. The latter is most often theorized, remembered and celebrated in relationship to the work of Situationists International and other white avant-garde groups and their subsequent and many spin-offs. It is important to remember however that many more artists were situating their work outside the art system and in the context of racialized and otherwise marginalized communities and their radical socio-political struggles, most notably in North America in the context of the Black Power, Red Power and Brown Power movements. These artists aimed to create sovereign and autonomous aesthetics that – at once utopian, radical, tactical and accessible – mobilized their communities and closely corresponded with the developing politics of radical movements.

It is in this diverse context and in the period between mid-1960s and late-1970s that most autonomous art structures – including we call today the parallel or the artist-run system – were created, by necessity, by design and by way of rejecting the politics and the aesthetics of the dominant capitalist art establishment. These autonomous structures in turn enabled a variety of non-commodity and community art practices and radicalized the sphere of the arts, either by making visible the politics of the art sector itself (institutional critique as activism before it became a genre), or by making art about radical politics and political subjects (labeled “political

art,” the kind of art that triggered – and still triggers – a disdainful smirk in elitist art circles).

Later, during the 1980s to mid-1990s, along with the world-wide suppression and co-optation of radical movements and already under the spell of neoliberal economy/culture policies, the art systems in Europe and North America appropriated, co-opted and otherwise defused their opposition. Emptied of their anti-capitalist and liberationist charge, aesthetic radicalisms of this period were mostly oriented in relation to politics of race, gender and/or sexuality (dismissively labeled by those they antagonized as “identity politics”). These were of course highly contested grounds. But, although the artists’ demands were radical for the white, heterosexual, male dominated art system, they fell short of revolutionary demands as they were mostly limited to opening up the mainstream spaces to gender, cultural, “racial” and/or sexual diversity. Token artists and practices were allowed into the art establishment but only to add colour to the offerings, ultimately expanding the art market without changing its power structures, its socio-cultural dynamics or its political roles. This process culminated in depolarizing and fragmenting contesting communities, trivialization of their demands and co-optation of their rhetorics and methods. (In Canada, we call this multiculturalism.)

III.

Barely over a decade old, the current trends in activist art/media bloomed initially in the space of anti-racist, anti-oppression, anti-colonialist, anti-imperialist, anti/alter-globalization activist and fringe circles. In North America since 2000-2001 and in response to the Bush administration, its Canadian and Mexican allies, and the so-called “War on Terror” and “Security and Prosperity

Agenda,” the radicalization of resistant politics and action has also been accompanied by an increase in activist art/media production as an integrated part of resistance. Increasingly, this resistance is being formulated as an anti-imperialist movement characterized in theory and practice by transnational solidarity and organizing.

This surge was no doubt partly inspired by the Chiapas Uprising (1994-) and the ways in which the Zapatistas incorporated and mobilized indigenous cultural methodologies and new technologies to open a highly effective media front and activate transnational solidarity and action. Similarly, soon after the start of the Second Intifada (2000-), Palestine solidarity activists waged a campaign to “globalize the Intifada” through transnational solidarity actions in tandem with independent art/media production. These examples arose out of intense necessities on the ground and corresponded (sometimes through the same organizations and groups) with the anti/alter-globalization movement’s convergence and use of creative methodologies and independent media in advance of, on the way to, during and after Vancouver (against APEC, 1997), Seattle (against WTO, 1999), Quebec City (against Summit of the Americas, 2001), Genoa (against G8, 2001), and the successive anti/alter-globalization convergences including the World Social Forums and regional and local social forums.

Echoing their historical precedents in their transnational ethos and solidarity across various borders and levels of separation, current media/art activisms produce a variety of media/art objects/projects not just alongside with but as forms of engagement in social and political struggles. Anti-war, immigrant rights, queer rights, indigenous rights, trans-national and/or cross-community solidarity, anti-racist and anti-gentrification movements are vibrant

environments where activist art/media play essential and integrated roles in the development of the movements' theories and practices, as well as in their cultural and pragmatic networks and modalities of popular education and solidarity action.

IV.

With the proliferation of cheap digital media technologies and networks, it is now given that the revolution does not have to be televised because it will be facebooked, youtubed, flickred, blogged, twitted, text-messaged, streamed and podcasted. Since the 1970s, media production and distribution have been ever-widening and inclusive domains with an exponential growth since the mid-1990s. Today's citizen journalist does not have to be a media artist to reach a large audience beyond her/his own immediate circle. The balance of power in the field of representation has decidedly and irrevocably shifted from the professional to the everywo/man, suggesting that, to continue to function critically, artist now need to position themselves primarily as theorists and organizers.

In addition to cameras and mobile devices, what is also visible in anti/alter-globalization convergences as well as in day-to-day activism in every milieu is the integral utility of creative approaches in community building and in direct actions and protests. Theatre, music, visual and performance techniques often merge with popular education methodologies to motivate and animate broader participation and/or to stage spectacles and public interventions. *Détournement*, parody, intervention, appropriation, collage and *décollage*, guerilla art, multimedia and intermedia techniques are all in the activist toolboxes. Beyond signifying a class of artists and/or

activists, the term activism may indeed be more useful in highlighting the porous boundaries of what is oppositional and/or transformative social practice and what is art.

Further complicating the scene, a rapid scan of programs, statements, mandates and curricula shows that art education, funding, production and dissemination institutions are now not only friendly to “political art” (a.k.a. “socially relevant” or “socially engaged” art) but indeed capitalize on it. Once fringe and radical, today community art, participatory art, relational art and that broad and ambiguous field called new genre public art have been successively institutionalized and academicized. These now-disciplines incorporate conceptual, rhetorical and methodological frameworks that sometimes seem akin to social/political activism. What is promoted however is a transient form of engagement that quite often parachutes in, voyeurizes, colonizes and ultimately commodifies communities and their struggles (and stamps them with the Scotia Bank or some other corporation’s logo).

V.

In 1936 Walter Benjamin argued that capitalism transforms the function of the arts (their use value) from serving in communal rituals and traditions to becoming objects of exhibition, subjects of speculation and industries of mass distraction (i.e. consumption without critical attention). The capitalist mode of operation is indeed engrained and visible in the very mechanisms and relations between the arts, the politics and the economy. Art events – whether they are international such as big biennials or local such as nuit blanche events that have started in many urban centres – are where art agents and private and institutional art clients and collectors

meet and discuss contracts and prices; where art, drinks, t-shirts, catalogues, political cache and public approval are on sale.

Over the past decades the art system has developed in tandem with neoliberal schemes that inflate the surplus value of cultural commodities while maintaining a tight grip on the distribution of the capital gain and ownership of the art/culture infrastructures whose sustainability is entirely dependent on corporate underwriting and state funding, as well as their ideological whims. [For example, when the Conservatives came to power in 1995 in Ontario, among the first moves by Mike Harris' government was to reduce drastically the provincial funding to the arts, sending Ontario Arts Council and the then Ontario Film Development Corporation and all the art organizations, artists and productions that were in turn funded by these down the rabbit hole where the alternative reality we discovered included bingo nights and corporate logos.]

In this landscape, art events are the loci where the arts apparatus meets corporate machinery and state bureaucracy, and together they assign a market value for the arts in relation to the latter's capacity to attract tourists, animate businesses and sell art to audiences and audiences to advertisers and sponsors. And, not surprisingly, with the exception of art stars, culture celebrities and higher echelons of arts/culture management, the majority of artists and cultural workers who produce what the art system trades remain on the fringes and at the lower end of the economic boom they help to create; they are often strapped for cash and barred from the presumably bustling economy of the creative city that cashes in on their labour.

This dynamic is present regardless of the stated intentions, aspirations, objectives, themes and concepts brought in by artistic directors, curators, artists, administrators, educators and organizers. So although increasingly we see the art institutions adopt some forms and instances of "socially relevant" art/media, the move neither inverts the art system's inherent hierarchies and power relations, nor radicalizes its politics and modes of social operation and reception. Rather, the appropriation of a seemingly radical/resistant rhetoric/aesthetic more often helps boost the institutions' (and artists') claim to aesthetic vanguardism, exhibit their desire for renewal/renovation and/or expand their audience base. It is not a surprise then that under the veneer of artistic standards, public accountability, corporate acceptance and/or popular appeal, this form of "politically-engaged art" tones down the social critique, decontextualizes the radical aesthetic and practice and sanitizes the political expression.

VI.

It should be obvious that the revolution is not an art/media practice/object and, certainly, not an art/media festival, event, biennial, symposium or conference. The revolution will not unfold in the convivial clink of wine glasses and cozy conversations. The revolution is not professional, collegial, administrative. The revolution will not attend opening nights, galas, dinner parties, gallery or city tours. The revolution does not apply for government, foundation and corporation grants and residencies.

The revolution is not cynical, ironic, ambivalent, fashionable, hip. It does not hang out in cafes in gentrified urbanscapes and combine art tourism with eco consumerism. The revolution is not a

monolithic unity. It is not a t-shirt with an iconic face on its front or a slogan on the back. The revolution does not have a pre-planned duration or a pre-ordained recipe. It is not a one-time engagement. It is not a campaign. The revolution is not a directed social research or a contained social experiment. It does not fit into any frames or scripts. It is not individualistic and does not celebrate celebrities.

The revolution is exposed and risky. It is loud, messy, chaotic, dangerous, unpredictable, uncontrollable, frightening, exhilarating, demanding and exhausting. The revolution takes place on the street across from barricades, fences, walls, checkpoints, prisons, facing guns, tanks, bulldozers, tear gas, surveillance technology, paddy wagons, mounted cops, riot cops, the army, anti-insurgency units, intelligence agents and crowds of people who are indifferent to it or have vested interest in maintaining the existing order. The revolution is personal and collective to the same extent that it is political. The revolution is a self-defined co-operative and it runs on the active participation of the “masses,” the marginalized, racialized, working-class people who engage in conscious activity toward transforming their lives and challenging the dominant power relations, systems and institutions.

The revolution’s space is that of conflict and its aesthetics antagonistic and utopian. The revolution, like conflict, is historical, embodied and spatialized. Its collectivity and language are improvised, contested and remains open to negotiation. The revolution’s relationality is in ongoing negation of relations of dominance and exploitation; its sociality guided by enduring, never-renting utopian ideals; its utopias always in-progress. The revolution is a political aesthetic. Its representational field is populated by real people in real time and space engaged in

real action.

VII.

For anti-capitalist activist art/media practices to be meaningful and to function effectively – that is, to maintain their radical ethos and aesthetic rigor – they must remain in dialogue with channels of community mobilization, collective action and communal distribution. In other words, they cannot be limited to nor address themselves to the demands of the existing art system because activist art practices ultimately find their meaning and their use value in the extent to which they intersect, commingle, collaborate, coincide with, are inspired by, challenge and/or contribute to the theory and practice of the movement they originate in. It is only in such a dynamic and symbiotic existence that they cross the limits of contemporary art/media, transcend their exhibition-oriented nature and commodity function, and take on a sustainable critical and revolutionary role.

The continuation of critical and resistant discourse in art/media of social transformation seems to demand creation, however temporarily, of autonomous spheres. Such autonomy has to be conceived in relation to mainstream capitalist channels as well as vis-a-vis ideologically and pragmatically rigid leftist formations that have outdated understanding of the relations between art and resistant politics. If the former sees in art and media primarily their commodity and market potentials, the latter limits their function to re-presenting information within a hierarchical ideological structure. While activist art/media projects inevitably perform both communicative and instructive functions, they also and most importantly have the potential to

open up critical spaces for experimentation and collaboration in radical theorizing and organizing.

It is important to mention that an autonomous sphere does not necessarily have to be envisioned as completely outside the existing systems and formations. Such exteriority, however desirable, is not entirely possible and we cannot assume a position that is fundamentally outside the present order. But the ideal does not have to adhere to the limits of the existent. Utopia, the no-place of imagination, is not a place of complicity, complacency and compromise.

In the logic of social change what is at question is not *what is* but *what we demand of what is*. In other words, what is crucial is the willingness and ability to imagine and materialize alternatives and the degree to which these alternatives are substantially different from the dominant capitalist models. The autonomy then may manifest itself as differences in the potentials, possibilities, types of relations, modes of engagement and/or critical spaces and practices that we draw upon and enable. As transnational citizens and cultural producers who are interested in fundamentally transforming our social order, it is, as Brecht advocated, “not at all our job to renovate ideological institutions on the basis of the existing social order by means of innovations. Instead our innovations must force them to surrender that basis.” At issue is precisely what concerned Benjamin at the moment of rise of fascism – that is, corporate capitalism boosted by state investment, public policy, militarist machinery, racist ideology, colonialist geo-politics and domestic populism – and should concern us today for the same reasons: *What revolutionary demands can we formulate in the politics of art?*

Gita Hashemi is an Iranian-born artist, writer and activist and a contributing editor to Fuse Magazine. She is based in Toronto, Canada. <http://gitaha.net>