

# **Ecstasy, Fear & Number**

## **From the “Man of the Crowd” to the Myths of the Self-Organizing Multitude**

Brian Holmes

All demands for justice and all theories of equality ultimately derive their energy from the actual experience of equality familiar to anyone who has been part of a crowd.

Elias Canetti, *Crowds and Power*

*“Multitude, solitude: identical terms, and interchangeable by the active and fertile poet... The poet enjoys the incomparable privilege of being himself and someone else, as he sees fit. Like those wandering souls who go looking for a body, he enters another person whenever he wishes. For him alone everything is vacant; and if certain places seem closed to him, it is only because in his eyes they are not worth visiting.... What people call love is quite small, quite limited, and quite feeble, compared with this holy prostitution of the soul which gives itself over entirely, poetry and charity, to the unexpected that appears, to the unknown that passes.”*

These were the words of Charles Baudelaire in a prose poem entitled “The Man of the Crowd,” published in 1869. They express an historically specific, yet still widely practiced version of the artist’s relation to the urban environment. As a poet on the loose in the industrial city, with its freedom of commerce, its claims to democracy and its gaping class divides, Baudelaire adopted the liminal position of the strolling *flâneur*, with the leisure to feast his gaze on the endless displays of commodities and to furtively penetrate the anonymous lives of other wanderers on the streets. Conceiving himself as a dandy and a quintessentially singular individual, Baudelaire was fascinated with the mobile and fleeting multiplicity of urban life, or what he referred to as the element of “number.” This fascination was an artistic technique: the capacity to let oneself dissolve, to be swept away in a perceptual and imaginary flux, then to recover and concentrate oneself again in the moment of writing. “On the vaporization and the centralization of the self. That’s everything,” he wrote in his *Intimate Journals*.

The crowd, as Elias Canetti observes, is a primordial experience of equality: a chance to abandon the strictly policed limits of the self and to merge into the flesh of the other. But a cultural critic might also read this free exchange of *self* for *other* as a subjective reflection of the economic relation dominating life in the metropolis: the relation of general equivalence, whereby every thing and every warm body can be exchanged for any other thing or body, via the intermediary of cool hard cash. Walter Benjamin developed that kind of reading, interpreting the poet’s claim to become everyone he desired as a subjective translation of the commodity’s power to attract everyone with money to spend. However, Benjamin’s philological research also showed how Baudelaire fed on the raw energy, linguistic inventions and obstinate popular resistance of the lumpen proletariat on the outskirts of Paris. The *flâneur* drawn into the nocturnal crevices of the sprawling city was able to unearth new vocabularies and rhythms for poetic language. Thus the German writer defined the potential of art under capitalism by its openness to abnormalizing seductions. Yet Benjamin also criticized Baudelaire for engaging in what he called “the overtaxing of the productive person in the name of a principle, the principle of ‘creativity.’” Echoing Marx, he saw the exaltation of creativity as a self-administered trap for the bohemian artist: “This overtaxing is all the more dangerous because as it flatters the self-esteem of the productive person, it effectively guards the interests of a social order that is hostile to him.”<sup>1</sup>

The social blindness fostered by a self-centered creativity remains part of our common experience – precisely to the extent that the gentrified city is still a world of the *flâneur*. But if Baudelaire critiqued his own practice, it was not for self-centeredness but rather for an excess of dispersal, of vaporization: the terrifying loss of the centered self in the element of number.

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1 Walter Benjamin, *Charles Baudelaire, A Lyric Poet in the Era of High Capitalism* (London: New Left Books, 1973/German text 1938), p. 71.

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"Inspiration always comes when a man wants it, but doesn't always leave when he wants it," he wrote in his *Intimate Journals*. He was fascinated by prostitution, by the figure of the author as prostitute, because his own embrace of the anonymous other left ineradicable traces in his memory and in his sense of identity. In an early poem conflating the figures of poet and streetwalker ("Je n'ai pas pour maîtresse une lionne illustre"), he writes these verses about his venal mistress:

In the cruelty of night her big restless eyes  
See the alleyways glitter with two other eyes,  
For having opened her heart to all her hosts  
She's afraid of the dark and believes in ghosts.

Which means she keeps more candles alight  
Than a scholar in bed with his books day and night,  
And she worries less about hunger's shudders  
Than about the return of her defunct lovers.

What kinds of traces have been left on our personal and political lives by the long history of ecstasy and fear, of anxiety and desire, that structures the relation between the democratic individual and the urban multitude? What kind of traps and dead-ends have been built into the very fabric of the city, and indeed into human skins and psyches, in order to stanch this fear and quell this anxiety? And what possibilities do we still have to open up a politicized public space in the metropolis – at the risk of ecstatic self-dissolution in the element of number, or even self-destruction in the violent clashes of the streets? To go further with these questions I will examine a series of artistic and political proposals gathered together in a remarkable exhibition of contemporary art entitled *No More Reality [Crowd and Performance]*, curated by Jelena Vesić and Claire Staebler and recently shown at DEPO in Istanbul.<sup>2</sup> What these artworks reveal is that our experience of the city as an urban theater of subversive gesture, political speech and direct action continues to be informed by a matrix of three major figures, or three open possibilities of fear and ecstatic desire for the incarnations of equality.



Exhibition View, *No More Reality [Crowd and Performance]*, DEPO, İstanbul, January 2009

2 For documentation of the exhibition, see [http://www.depoistanbul.net/en/activites\\_detail.asp?ac=10](http://www.depoistanbul.net/en/activites_detail.asp?ac=10)

Let's review the three figures in advance, before turning to the artworks. First there is the relation of the nineteenth-century individual to the crowd, structured by the principle of general equivalence, offering its positive face in the willful metamorphoses of the *flâneur* and its negative double in the sudden swirl of the mob, which sweeps the onlooker into a violent and unpredictable explosion of panic. The second possibility is that of the twentieth-century mass, ruled by the quasi-hypnotic absorption of biological drives into the larger-than-life body of a disciplinary leader, whether in the image of constructive promise that we recall from the agit-prop posters of the Soviet Constructivists, or in the overwhelming threat of total abnegation and submission now irremediably associated with the historical memory of Hitler and the cinema of Leni Riefenstahl. Finally, the third figure is the contemporary multitude, governed by a principle of self-organization that appears either in the positive guise of emergent collective intelligence that writers like Paolo Virno and Antonio Negri have celebrated in recent years, or in the vacuous, aimless construct of a hyperindividualized consuming population organized into infinite differences through the ever-present ramifications of the urban spectacle – which, as Jean Baudrillard insisted, are nothing less than myths made to order, and indeed, increasingly *made by ourselves*, through processes of manipulated participation at a micro-individual scale. So we have the crowd, the mass and the multitude: three figures which form a matrix of possibilities, all alive and active, all continuing to haunt the anxiety and the ecstasy of political life in the present.

### **Paradox of the Choreographer**

It is a sunny afternoon on an animated city street in the Croatian capital of Zagreb. A dancer in a yellow shirt gestures to the sky, turns gracefully around on his heels – then falls suddenly and violently to the ground. He gets up, twirls gracefully again, weaves sinuously through the traffic – then lashes out, kicking savagely, attacking the air while consternated passers-by make an effort not to see him. Like the Baudelairean poet, this is a man who knows how to be alone in a bustling crowd; and even more, he knows how to populate his own solitude. His gestures are those of a fight, if not a riot. But where are his opponents or victims? And what can it possibly mean, to struggle with no one in the bright light of day?

The great actor is a “cool and tranquil spectator,” writes the eighteenth-century philosophe Diderot, in a text entitled *Paradoxe sur le comédien* (1773). To succeed on stage the actor must have “penetration and no sensibility,” he must be incisive and aloof, so that he can take on “all kinds of character and roles.” What’s called for is not passionate involvement or hysterical mimesis but distanced precision and self-mastery: the artist’s consummate ability to be anyone at any time, expressing any emotion in any style, like an instrument from which a virtuoso musician can call forth an astonishing variety of tones, timbres and hues.<sup>3</sup> The dancers on the streets of Zagreb perform this coolness, this imperturbable poise amid outbursts of violence. The artist Igor Grubić has underscored their self-control by placing a series of stills next to the video that records their gestures. It's almost uncanny to see them in this way, like statues frozen in a moment of extreme mobility. But what makes their reserve so unnerving is the source from which the artist-choreographer has excerpted their gestures. For the figures whose passion he has asked his dancers to mimic within their bubbles of strange, distanced solitude are those of neo-fascist hecklers attacking and beating the marchers at Gay Pride demonstrations in Belgrade and in Zagreb itself, where the violent acts were restaged.

What resounds in the indifferent atmosphere of normative liberal tolerance are cries from another era: homophobic attacks carried out in the name of masculine identities whose claims to moral right are based on service to the nation in the recent wars. Fists fly, shots echo in the air, blood flows from the faces of the marchers whom the police rush to protect, but always too late, after the assailants have discharged their irrepressible collective rage. The videos are shown together, forming a diptych of extreme tension.

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3 Also see the commentary on this text by Philippe Lacoue-Labarthe, “Diderot: Paradox and Mimesis,” in *Typography: mimesis, philosophy, politics* (Stanford University Press, 1998).



*East Side Story*, Igor Grubić, 2008

The piece, entitled *East Side Story*, is a protest against the continuing right-wing violence of Balkan society, but also a question addressed to the West (which begins in Croatia, with its pending candidacy for entry into the EU). The question Grubić asks, through an *overidentification* with the cool spectatorship of the classical Enlightenment actor, concerns the capacity of liberal society to master the aggressive and self-defensive passions that are periodically unleashed by the infinite exchangeability of persons and places under the reign of the general equivalent. What does the modern *flâneur* forget while parading every day past the shops of gentrified cities such as Zagreb and Belgrade? What violence lurks in the smooth flow of traffic and the reflected image of oneself among the designer goods in a storefront window? What ghosts haunt our streets, and even our own gestures, under the noonday sun?

### **Mass and Mythos**

The French psychologist Gustave Le Bon wrote about the hypnotic suggestibility of the crowd, where the individual "is no longer himself, but has become an automaton who has ceased to be guided by his will." Le Bon exemplifies the anxiety and premonitory fear that gripped European intellectuals in the face of early manifestations of the mass, conceived as the antithesis but also the apotheosis of the atomized individual: "An isolated individual knows well enough that alone he cannot set fire to a palace or loot a shop, and should he be tempted to do so, he will easily resist the temptation. Making part of a crowd, he is conscious of the power given him by number, and it is sufficient to suggest to him ideas of murder or pillage for him to yield immediately to temptation. An unexpected obstacle will be destroyed with frenzied rage."<sup>4</sup>

Freud quotes Le Bon at length in *Group Psychology and the Analysis of the Ego*, and disagrees only with the vague notion of "suggestibility" used by turn-of-the-century psychologists to explain the absorption of individual consciousness into the mesmerizing personality of the leader. In its place he installs the myth of Eros and the unifying power of libido as it appears in the

4 Gustave Le Bon, *The Crowd: A Study of the Popular Mind* (London: Unwin, 1903/1<sup>st</sup> French ed. 1895), pp. 36 and 43. English edition available at <http://tinyurl.com/Le-Bon-pdf>.

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clinical phenomenon of hypnosis:

From being in love to hypnosis is evidently only a short step. The respects in which the two agree are obvious. There is the same humble subjection, the same compliance, the same absence of criticism, towards the hypnotist as towards the loved object. There is the same sapping of the subject's own initiative; no one can doubt that the hypnotist has stepped into the place of the ego ideal.... The hypnotic relation is the unlimited devotion of someone in love, but with sexual satisfaction excluded.<sup>5</sup>

Interestingly, Baudelaire's relation to the crowd has been almost perfectly inverted in Freud's portrayal of mass psychology. Instead of the poet's vaporization into the element of number, there is a centralization of the dispersed crowd in the mythic figure of the leader, conceived as a force of attraction and a love-object. The leader now haunts the crowd, organizing and unifying the sea of faces. Apart from the neofascist demonstrators of Igor Grubić's piece, there are no direct representations of this kind of aggressive totalitarian mass in the exhibition *No More Reality*. What you do see, however, are the waving arms and pleasure-seeking female faces of the silent video *50,000,000 Can't Be Wrong* by the German artist Susanne Bürner, who combed the archives of 1950s fandom to splice together liberal democracy's answer to the terrible scenes of Nuremberg filmed by Leni Riefenstahl. These are the Fordist masses whose ecstasy Theodor Adorno and Max Horkheimer had already witnessed in Hollywood in the 1940s: the pure emotional plasticity of consuming subjects, whom the artist shows only in themselves, without ever revealing the identity of their desired object. It is as though the invisible leader were now only a cipher, a meaningless simulacrum or a force of capitalist nature.



*50,000,000 Can't Be Wrong*, Susanne Bürner, 2006

This reduction of mankind to a natural material, ripe for manipulation, was seen by Adorno and Horkheimer as the culmination of what they called "the dialectic of Enlightenment": "Ruthlessly,

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<sup>5</sup> Sigmund Freud, *Group Psychology and the Analysis of the Ego* (New York: Norton, 1959/1<sup>st</sup> German ed. 1922), pp. 58-59.

in despite of itself, the Enlightenment has extinguished any trace of its own self-consciousness. The only kind of thinking that is sufficiently hard to shatter myths is ultimately self-destructive." They attributed this self-destruction of society not to the singularity of the leader but to the relation of general equivalence between commodities: "The identity of everything with everything else is paid for in that nothing may at the same time be identical with itself." Through its relentless quest to emancipate itself from nature through production, they believed, mankind ultimately recreated itself – its body, its culture, its political relations – as a de-individualized image of the machine: "The regression of the masses today is their inability to hear the unheard of with their own ears, to touch the unapprehended with their own hands... Through the mediation of the total society which embraces all relations and emotions, men are once again made to be that against which the evolutionary law of society, the principle of self, had turned: mere species beings, exactly like one another through isolation in the forcibly united collectivity."<sup>6</sup>

The irony is that Adorno and Horkheimer's protest against industrialized culture in all its forms – or against what Lewis Mumford would later call "the myth of the machine" – was destined to become the very norm of neoliberal society from the 1980s onward. This norm was already implicit in the conduct of world wars to make the world safe for liberal democracy; and it was reinforced by the critique of the "authoritarian personality" which the Frankfurt School carried out in the early 1950s.<sup>7</sup> But the mass culture of the 1950s and the very standardization of the Hollywood dream factory remained as a kind of collective ambiguity within the fold of liberal individualism, all the way to the great rebellious rock concerts of the 1960s and early 1970s. The industrial machine was the structural principle of postwar Fordist society. Only when flexible accumulation – and with it, Japanese micromedia – had finally triumphed in the 1980s, could the Frankfurt School's rejection of mass culture become the unquestioned norm and dogma of middlebrow cultural formations, and particularly of contemporary art. For the planetary petty bourgeoisie that emerged from the postwar industrial boom and then began hoping to make some small profit off its own human capital, the rejection of anything that smacks of the mass is *de rigueur*.

I am not sure that the relation to collectivity in pieces like Johanna Billing's *Project for Revolution* or Fia Backström's *Herd Instinct 360°* can be described with such strong words as "fear" or even "anxiety." Rather they appear as the recital of an obligatory lesson whose contexts and teachers have been forgotten. The former work is a restaging of a celebrated scene from the opening of Antonioni's *Zabriskie Point*, which shows a meeting in a college classroom rising to a fever pitch of revolution. But in the art video, nothing happens amid the strained uncertainty of a typically self-conscious and alienated postmodern social encounter, and at the end of the short piece, the photocopier does not churn out incendiary tracts but blank sheets of paper. Fia Backström's far more elaborate work takes the form of a lecture complete with PowerPoint slideshow, delivered, she explains, as a kind of sermon at communal gatherings that she organized in New York, and projected in the exhibition space between two red flags, just to make sure that you understand which collective politics she wishes to ridicule. Referring to yet another of the turn-of-the-century psychologists – the Englishman Wilfred Trotter – *Herd Instinct* takes you through 360 degrees of abject community, culminating with Nazism before ending in an account of adultery and murder out in some banal Swedish suburb. All this is apparently supposed to convince us that Freud was right, and that behind the drama of Le Bon's authoritarian crowd there is really only a sordid story of regressive sexual fascination: the zero degree of collectivity in pointless death. It's at this point – the low point of post-Fordist nihilism – that the title of the exhibition seems to take on its full meaning.

In fact, the title evokes a video work done by the French artist Philippe Parreno in 1991. The piece shows a miniature crowd of children marching under a forest of signs that proclaim "No

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6 Max Horkheimer and Theodor W. Adorno, *Dialectic of Enlightenment* (New York: Continuum, 1988/1<sup>st</sup> German ed. 1947), pp. 4, 12, 36.

7 On this critique of authoritarianism and its normative consequences, see my text "The Flexible Personality," available at <http://transform.eipcp.net/transversal/1106/holmes/en>.

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More Reality." The implications of regression, infantilization and disempowerment in the image-society are clear. But Parreno's piece does not appear in the exhibition. Instead, the title marks the site of a cultural and political challenge, like a line drawn in the sand, defining the entry to our own period. It is here that the really interesting things begin.



*Herd Instinct 360°, Fia Backström, 2005-2006*

**Postmodern Crystals**

If there's no more reality, then what is there? After 1989, the gnawing anxiety that filled Jean Baudrillard's postmodern theories – the suspicion that the spectacle of life unfolding before our eyes might be no more than a precession of simulacra – began to spill out from the saturated consumer paradises of capitalist Europe to the former East. A decade before, Baudrillard had evoked the Borgesian fable of a map coextensive with the imperial territory it depicts, and he pointed beyond this excess of representation to a new, generative role of the model in computerized processes of simulation:

Today abstraction is no longer that of the map, the double, the mirror, or the concept. Simulation is no longer that of a territory, a referential being, or a substance. It is the generation by models of a real without origin or reality: a hyperreal. The territory no longer precedes the map, nor does it survive it. It is nevertheless the map that precedes the territory – *precession of simulacra* – that engenders the territory, and if one must return to the fable, today it is the territory whose shreds slowly rot across the extent of the map. It is the real, and not the map, whose vestiges persist here and there in the deserts that are no longer those of the Empire, but ours. *The desert of the real itself.*<sup>8</sup>

Millions of citizens of the formerly communist societies gratefully followed the Anglo-American map to democracy, only to discover that their entry into consumer capitalism had been calculated and organized in advance, forestalling any genuine exercise of political self-

<sup>8</sup> Jean Baudrillard, "The Precession of Simulacra," in *Simulacra and Simulation* (Michigan University Press, 1994), p. 1.

determination. Thus a powerful doubt hangs over the photographs of popular protest shot by Olga Kisseleva in the cities of Paris, New York and Kiev, under the title *(In)visible*. Always in black and white, with the banners and placards blurred or erased, these images ask for our enthusiasm, our democratic love of the people in the street; but they also make us wonder what invisible social forces may lie behind the exuberance of the image. The case of Kiev, in particular, raises questions: because it is now well known that as in the other "color revolutions" in former Soviet republics, the Ukrainian elections that brought Viktor Yushchenko to power in 2005 were anything but spontaneous, grassroots events. As Ian Traynor writes in the *Guardian*, "while the gains of the orange-bedecked 'chestnut revolution' are Ukraine's, the campaign is an American creation, a sophisticated and brilliantly conceived exercise in Western branding and mass marketing that, in four countries in four years, has been used to try to salvage rigged elections and topple unsavory regimes."<sup>9</sup>

Behind the images of grassroots social movements are a panoply of American civil and governmental organizations: the National Endowment for Democracy, Freedom House, the Albert Einstein Institute, the International Center on Nonviolent Conflicts, etc. With their slogans, stickers, color codes and posters of a raised fist borrowed from the Serbian resistance movement Otpor, it is as though these organizations were seeding the crowd for democracy, the way the Air Force seeds the clouds in the sky with tiny crystals to provoke rain. At stake here is the introduction of an idealized model with powerfully generative capacities.

Very few serious studies have yet been done on this capacity to "wage peace" through the strategic application of finely hewn behavioral cues and patterns. In a fascinating speech at the US State Department's Open Forum on June 29, 2004, Peter Ackerman, chair of the International Center on Nonviolent Conflicts, said this among other things:

We've hired a firm, called Breakaway Games, that has done civilization games, and has also worked for the Department of Defense on conflict issues.... And we have been working with them now for a year on simulations of nonviolent resistance movements. So you'll be able to take your own country and basically recreate it in this game. It's demography, it's geography, it's key institutions, the predilections of every member in that society you can identify. You can lay all that out, and then you could actually sort of choose up sides, and one side would play the regime and one side would play those who were in the resistance, and continuously work through a variety of tactics and to see what the impact is on... hundreds of variables.... Now, the importance of that is not just to transfer knowledge about what might work or what might not work, but also to create cohesion and to create a sense of possibilities amongst people who basically have difficulty seeing the next steps. This game will be generally distributed throughout the world. It will be in open architecture form. It will be usable on paper or on computer. And we think it will be incredibly important for those who are working to free themselves from oppression.<sup>10</sup>

The democracy game is an educational/propaganda tool designed to naturalize an entire way of thinking, an operational logic, a set of reflexes. It would be hard to find a more literal illustration of Michel Foucault's dictum that liberal strategies of control operate "on the rules of the game rather than on the players."<sup>11</sup> But what if *you* are the one who has been handed freedom's

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9 Ian Traynor, "US campaign behind the turmoil in Kiev," *The Guardian*, Nov. 26, 2004, available at <http://www.guardian.co.uk/world/2004/nov/26/ukraine.usa>.

10 Peter Ackerman, "Between Hard and Soft Power: The Rise of Civilian-Based Struggle and Democratic Change," Remarks to the Secretary's Open Forum, Department of State, Washington, DC, June 29, 2004. The text has been removed from the State Department website but is available at <http://web.archive.org/web/20080306095926/http://www.state.gov/s/p/of/proc/34285.htm>.

11 Michel Foucault, *The Birth of Biopolitics: Lectures at the College de France, 1978-1979* (New York: Palgrave-Macmillan, 2008), p. 260. For an understanding of how this mod of control is brought into play in contemporary societies of surveillance and simulation, see my text "Future Map," available at



joystick? A new, fully cybernetic version of the Great Game for the control of the Eurasian Continent is the very pragmatic context in which the R.E.P. group began their work, in the fall of 2004 during the Orange Revolution in the Ukraine. And so they rushed into the public space with signs, slogans, loudspeakers – demanding attention for a famous New York artist.

What should we make of this activist group and their bizarre black-and-white costumed performance, where they invite the protesting Ukrainians to *become* Andy Warhol? Should we condemn them as manipulated subjects, "swarming adolescents" engaged in "rebellious hysteria," as the reporter Jonathan Mowat puts in a trenchant article on the strategies of what he calls the "postmodern coup"?<sup>12</sup> Are these Ukrainian Warholians really no more than remote-controlled insurgents of the American dream? Or is this merely a ploy to enter the international art market, one more classic case of what Walter Benjamin called the "overtaxing" of the "principle of creativity" – which, as he noted, "is all the more dangerous because as it flatters the self-esteem of the productive person, it effectively guards the interests of a social order that is hostile to him"?

The ambiguities of democracy and public space under postmodern conditions are endless. Yet two can play at changing the rules of society's game. In other words, the meta level of conflict-production strategy can itself become a theater of conflict, open to grassroots experimentation. This is what the R.E.P. group came together to do, since the name means Revolutionary Experimental Space. What can be glimpsed here, in the gestures and actions of this tightly knit artistic group, is a contemporary form of what Canetti called a *crowd crystal*:

The clarity, isolation and constancy of the crystal form an uncanny contrast with the excited flux of the surrounding crowd. The process of rapid, uncontrollable growth, and the threat of disintegration, which together give the crowd its particular restlessness, do not operate within the crystal. Even in the midst of the greatest excitement the crystal stands out against it. Whatever the nature of the crowd it gives birth to, and however much it may appear to merge with it, it never completely loses the sense of its own identity and always recombines again after the disintegration of the crowd.<sup>13</sup>

The urge to form such a crystal – similarly evident in the performance *Coagulum – a momentary clot in the heart of commerce*, by the Inventory group in London in the year 2000 – stems from a root desire for the embodied experience of equality, through a problematic or interruptive presence amid the ordinary flows of public space. But the troubling question raised and left unanswered by the R.E.P. performance is how to operate within the postmodern image-worlds, with their generative models and all-pervasive simulacra of democracy. When popular play has been incorporated as a technique of power, can the subversive strategies of the 1960s have any more effect on the managed transformations of the status quo? Or must we all accept to simply play the roles of freedom and democracy?

### **Gaming the System**

Over the last twenty years, the Italian Autonomia philosophers have provided a language to conceive of grassroots strategies of intervention in the control society. Their work has culminated in the widespread diffusion of the figure of the multitude, which arises, in their view, when the directly productive activity of the former working class becomes permeated with "immaterial" or intellectual labor. To legitimate this notion of "intellectual labor," so totally heretical in the Marxist tradition, Paolo Virno calls upon the notion of "General Intellect" used by Marx in the *Grundrisse* to designate the accumulated scientific and technical knowledge which increasingly makes physical labor power obsolete. Yet as Virno explains:

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<http://brianholmes.wordpress.com/2007/09/09/future-map>.

12 Jonathan Mowat, "The new Gladio in action?," available at [http://www.onlinejournal.com/artman/publish/article\\_308.shtml](http://www.onlinejournal.com/artman/publish/article_308.shtml).

13 Elias Canetti, *Crowds and Power* (New York: Farrar, Strauss and Giroux, 1984/1<sup>st</sup> German ed. 1960), p. 74.

Marx conceives general intellect as "a scientific capacity" objectified within the system of machines, and thus as fixed capital. He thereby reduces the external or public quality of intellect to the technological application of natural sciences to the process of production. The crucial step consists rather in highlighting to the full the way in which general intellect comes to present itself as a direct attribute of living labor, as a repertoire of a diffuse intelligentsia, as a "score" that creates a common bond among the members of a multitude.<sup>14</sup>

The key thing, then – the action that brings the multitude into existence *as such* – is the capacity of a dispersed but communicating network to coordinate or orchestrate its own behavior. Yet this capacity is always threatened by a particularly insidious form of alienation, which demands that the members of the multitude use their coordinating capacities in a predatory way, in order to actually *create* the simulated environments of postmodern consumption and control. As Virno explains: "The excess cooperation of Intellect, however, rather than eliminating the coercions of capitalist production, figures as capital's most eminent resource. Its heterogeneity has neither voice nor visibility...." His conclusion is exactly the one that has led so many politically engaged artists to shift their terrain from the fictional sphere of suspended disbelief that defines the space of artistic production in the liberal societies, to the directly conflictual space of the street. Virno writes this: "'Civil disobedience' is today the sine qua non of political action. Through myths that may be its single manifestations, the radical Disobedience that interests me here must bring into question the State's very faculty of command."<sup>15</sup>

You can see exactly this transition toward disobedience in the activity of an artist like John Jordan, one of the coordinating figures of London Reclaim the Streets in the late 1990s. He is interviewed by Marcelo Expósito in a video called *Carnivals of Resistance*, which forms part of Expósito's larger cycle of films devoted to the unwritten history of the new organizational forms and grassroots practices of political struggle.<sup>16</sup> At a key point in this long and detailed interview, Jordan focuses on the potential ambiguities of the carnivalesque demonstration:

Of course, it was a political action: we were reclaiming space from motor cars, we were creating different forms of social relationships between people, there was no money in exchange, we were reclaiming that public space, and so on. But to some extent, a lot of people simply saw it as a party. So we really thought, by placing this carnival in the least carnivalesque of places – in the City of London, one of the key nodes of global capital, of the financial system – it would really push the message that we are anti-capitalists, we're not just against cars and we're not just party people.

The speaker's face, filmed in extreme close-up, periodically gives way to a montage perception of the event. Knitting together sequences from many different cameras wandering loose on the streets of the City of London on June 18, 1999, the video offers composite four-image views of the performative interventions (some would say the wild and uncontrollable riot) that helped catalyze a networked social movement, relayed in November 1999 by five days of urban insurrection at the WTO summit in Seattle. By shifting from a single, retrospective narrative to a multiplicity of simultaneous and divergent perspectives, Expósito translates the complex interactive mesh of the counter-globalization protests, where carefully elaborated plans must be reshaped or abandoned in an instant. Only the willingness to combine highly reflected strategies with spur-of-the-moment tactics allowed the protesters to move fluidly through the grid of control, realizing embodied collective gestures that could resonate through proliferating media

14 Paolo Virno, "Virtuosity and Revolution: The Political Theory of Exodus," in Paolo Virno and Michael Hardt, eds. *Radical Thought in Italy: A Potential Politics* (University of Minnesota Press, 2006), p. 193.

15 Ibid., pp. 194, 196.

16 For a more thorough treatment of this work see my text "Marcelo Expósito's *Entre Sueños*: Towards the New Body," in *Open 17*, Summer 2009; available at <http://brianholmes.wordpress.com/2009/01/19/marcelo-exposito-entre-suenos>.

channels to inspire a new generation of activists. And the images spun off in this way were as powerful as the events themselves: they became the myths and multi-faceted mirrors of the cycle of global protest that exploded from 1997 to 2003. At the urban sites where global decisions are taken – and expropriated from any democratic process – acts and images of radical disobedience helped to bring the “personally political” dimensions of everyday life into antagonistic contact with the formal and institutional spheres of politics.

### **Tomorrow in the City**

The strength of this exhibition is to privilege neither the proactive interventions of the multitude, nor the analysis of simulation and simulacra in the control society, but instead to play both against each other under the historical shadows of the earlier figures of the self-dissolving *flâneur* and the amalgamated urban mass. The contrasting choices of the present only take on their full meaning in their opposition to each other and in a shared relation to the past from which both spring. As the current economic crisis unfolds, one can expect new combinations to arise from this historical matrix, or maybe even a new figure of existential fear and egalitarian desire.

As for the show itself – its walls decorated with the strange imagistic codes of the R.E.P. group's hieroglyphic visual language – it seems to reach its conclusion with the highly problematic *Radioballet* of the Ligna group, who sought to “haunt” a privatized Leipzig train station with the banished gestures of common modes of existence (sitting, sleeping, loitering, begging, saying goodbye). A performance script broadcast by pirate radio allowed a crowd of interventionists to coordinate subversive movements in a situation of extreme dispersal, flush with the disjointed everyday realities of atomized populations moving through the neutralized hygienic space. In this way Ligna claims to realize the Brechtian promise of radio, whose two-way potential is not manifest here as sending/receiving, but instead as centralized broadcast/dispersed performance. The gestures are ghostly, graceful, strained and at times quite hilarious.



*Patriotism*, R.E.P. Group, 2007-2009

*Ecstasy, Fear & Number*

*From the "Man of the Crowd" to the Myths of the Self-Organizing Multitude*

Brian Holmes

This staged protest – visibly carried out with the permission of the authorities – appears at first glance to add a new layer of perversity to the postmodern spectacle of self-administered control. Yet it simultaneously appears as a fresh and unusual act of experimentation.<sup>17</sup> Do these strangely docile-looking dissidents really succeed in haunting the slick and cool spaces of the station with the everyday behaviors repressed by the patrols of a typical neoliberal security firm? Or are they themselves more deeply haunted by the fascist order-speech of radio propaganda in the 1930s and 1940s? What kind of forgotten loves and unutterable drives could return to the polished floors and sterile corridors of circulation and commerce, where the consumer's lack is reflected in the overfullness of the contemporary void?

Cast back into the default role of the *flâneur* in the post-social spaces of the contemporary city, we will all have plenty of time to ponder this enigma on our daily rounds through the urban environment. Until the pressure of crisis finally breaks through the omnipresent spell of the commodity, and we find out which collective experiments – which fears and desires – we ourselves are ready to welcome into flesh.

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17 It should be noted that an earlier performance in Hamburg was done without permission. To form your own idea of this unusual and fascinating performance, see the video at <http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=qI3pfa5QNZI> and <http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=rpT-wb3TPXk>.