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Delirium and Resistance: activist art and the crisis of capitalism

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Fig. 17 Greg Sholette “Darker,” ink, acrylic, paper frieze (after the Pergamon Alterpiece), 63.5 X 266.5 cm., 2016 (Image courtesy the author).

508 This postscript was necessitated by the outcome of the 2016 U.S. presidential elections.

The neoliberal era in the United States ended with a neofascist bang. The political triumph of Donald Trump shattered the establishments in the Democratic and Republican parties – both wedded to the rule of Big Money and to the reign of meretricious politicians.

Cornel West⁵⁰⁹

All around us the bodies rose out of the stone, crowded into groups, intertwined, or shattered into fragments, hinting at their shapes with a torso, a propped-up arm, a burst hip, a scabbed shard, always in warlike gestures, dodging, rebounding, attacking, shielding themselves, stretched high or crooked, some of them snuffed out, but with freestanding, forward-pressing foot, a twisted back, the contour of a calf harnessed into a single common motion.

Peter Weiss, *The Aesthetics of Resistance*⁵¹⁰

The delirium and crisis of capitalism –as well as of art– is now the delirium and crisis of liberal democracy. From India, Turkey, to the Philippines and the Gulf Region, from Hungary to Austria and France, from the U.S. to parts of Central America and the U.K., it appears that both developed and developing nations are being equally afflicted with a global contagion of nationalistic and authoritarian sentiment grounded in fear, hatred and, above all, pessimism about any government or politician’s promise to provide a stable and secure future. Neoliberalism’s postponement of crisis through consumer credit expansion has run its course. In its place we find a narrative invoking wealthy male leadership, military capacity, and warnings of retribution towards one’s perceived competitors, be they other militarized states, homeless refugees, migrant workers, or even one’s own disaffected surplus populace. On the positive side, the rascals previously hiding in the bushes have no more need for camouflage. The stakes have become that much clearer and more urgent.

Meanwhile, art’s quarantine from everyday life, already made improbable under the conditions

509 Cornel West, “Goodbye, American neoliberalism. A new era is here,” *The Guardian*, November 17, 2016: <https://www.theguardian.com/commentisfree/2016/nov/17/american-neoliberalism-cornel-west-2016-election>

510 In this opening passage the book’s anti-Fascist protagonist discovers parallels between the ancient battle depicted on the Pergamon Frieze in Berlin, and the partisan struggle he and his comrades are waging against German National Socialism in 1930s. Peter Weiss’ *The Aesthetics of Resistance, Volume 1*, trans. Joachim Neugroschel, with a foreword by Fredric Jameson, Durham NC: Duke University Press, 2005, p 3.

of bare art, is clearly no longer viable in light of the gestating political crisis we now face. At this moment culture cannot serve as a salve for nervous souls, even if the president elect tweets his disapproval of Broadway actors for using the theater to communicate their doubts about his future administration.⁵¹¹ Art's peculiar license to speak up, to misbehave, mock and imitate reality, to blur genres and disciplines, this freedom, as long as it lasts, must be deployed to prevent the normalization of the emerging authoritarian paradigm. And if it is blocked, it must then move underground to continue its mission, by retrieving its status as dark matter or what Fred Moten and Stefano Harney call *the undercommons*.⁵¹² Still, as discussed in this thesis, socially engaged art is entwined with the rise of a hyper-financialized, totally spectacularized society, the raw condition of bare art, which is the negative counterpart of an increasingly politicized, militant artworld, as a constant reminder of the fragility of that same social reality. This is the greatest paradox with which activist artists must come to terms at the theoretical, political, and artistic levels: how to invent, or how to reinvent, a progressive, partisan art praxis as capitalist crisis propels the society that it has so badly undermined towards authoritarian solutions.

But I suspect we already bear witness to the outlines of this process in groups and actions such as Black Lives Matter, Occupy Wall Street, the Arab Uprisings and the Movement of the Squares. Mobilized with the assistance of modern communications technologies, swarms of bodies erupt into public spaces, actively interrupting and deregulating police ordinances segregating those who have access to visibility from those who have little or none. And yet more than one paradox inevitably arises here. Along with the social antagonism networked culture fosters with its panoptic vulnerability to surveillance and self-obsessive tendencies, there is also nothing that prevents assemblies of authoritarian and white supremacist bodies from similarly gathering in an effort to eclipse (or to affirm) their own dark matter obscurity.⁵¹³ We have already begun to see this disturbing

511 President-elect Donald Trump used Twitter to chastise the cast of the Broadway musical *Hamilton* after troupe-members read a collective statement from the stage to Vice President-elect Mike Pence who was attending their performance in which they expressed concerns about the future administration's potential intolerance of minority populations, thus indirectly criticizing Trump's notorious association with white supremacist groups. See: Chris Matyszczyk, "Trump takes to Twitter to shame cast of 'Hamilton,'" Cnet.com, November 19, 2016: <https://www.cnet.com/news/donald-trump-hamilton-apology-twitter-tweet/>

512 Undercommons is a term coined by theorists Fred Moten and Stefano Harney to describe a space of suppressed social antagonism constituted by the black diaspora. *The Undercommons: Fugitive Planning & Black Study*, Minor Compositions, 2013.

513 An example of the Internet's counter-democratic uses is found in the hacking of a Gulf Labor Coalition member's email that lead to an embargo on her research travel in the Middle East, see Kristina Borgos, "American Universities in a Gulf of Hypocrisy," *The New York Times Opinion Pages*, December 15, 2016: http://www.nytimes.com/2016/12/15/opinion/american-univisities-nyu-georgetown-in-a-gulf-of-hypocrisy.html?ref=opinion&_r=0

display in the months leading up to the American election, but also in other nations following the 2008 global financial collapse. Nonetheless, what ridged bodies framed by authoritarian ideology cannot conceal is their fidelity to dogmatic first-principals and a fundamentally undemocratic idea of biopolitical sovereignty. In contrast to such fantasies of imperial restoration, movements such as BLM or OWS, celebrate a critical plurality, and the essential uncertainty of an archive “from below” made concrete through their collective labors of mass protest, regardless of how motley, ungainly or informal in appearance.

Two essentially contrasting utopian impulses, therefore, confront one another, producing in turn contrasting corporeal, visual and narrative public manifestations. One understands history, and “whiteness,” as a rigid and unchanging guarantee of political dominance. The other recognizes the lacuna of the archive as their inheritance of a struggle “from below,” but also as a crucial constituent necessary for opening a space for an entirely different social horizon.

Whether or not the coming battlefield, where these conflicted notions of history, politics and aesthetics will inevitably soon clash, might also give birth to its own generation of chroniclers, depictees, poets and archivists, is an intriguing possibility. If so, thanks in part to the totally aestheticized society, they will at long last undoubtedly fulfill the sentiments of Joseph Beuys by proving that “everyone is an artist.” In the meantime, what is called for is a grammar of cultural dissent that does not turn innocently away from the chaotic and delirious state of contemporary social realities, or the contradictions of bare art, but recognizes this moment – and the confrontation that rises immediately before us – as ultimately historical in nature, and, therefore, also as a time and conflict that will one day be displaced, as all such moments are. To reiterate Derrida’s previously cited comment: when it comes to the archive, “[w]e will only know tomorrow. Perhaps”.⁵¹⁴ However, for now, our obligation is also clear. It calls on us to make certain that any future displacement also reclaims the ghostly presence not only of the current conflict, but also of all preceding struggles, no matter how dark or difficult to visualize, no matter how epically everyday in outer appearance.

514 Derrida, *Archive Fever*, op. cit.