Poking holes in reality. On bodies, images and squares

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From the Financial Crisis to a Crisis of Political Representation: They Don't Represent Us

On 15 September 2008, Lehman Brothers went bankrupt. That date will be remembered as the beginning of the financial crisis we are now experiencing -the second worst in history, or so they say. From that moment on, the discourse on which our current system of debt and precariousness is predicated began to spread, and many people subscribed to the belief that this crisis would be our end or, at the very least, would leave us seriously wounded, as if it were impossible to glimpse alternatives outside of that enforced reality. It became clear that our nation-states are colluding with the markets to globalize speculation, and as citizens we felt abandoned: we were up for sale.

It took us a while to react, still reeling from the shock of waking up one morning to find ourselves on the verge of bankruptcy. The disorientation that followed the shock was accentuated by our scepticism about the effectiveness of traditional forms of protest and our inability to imagine other possible worlds. We felt as though we were in a free fall [1], inhabitants of a world that no longer belonged to us, plunged into a severe crisis of meaning brought on by the realization that the only real truth is that of capital, and "when meaning is singular a crisis of meaning is inevitable, for meaning is always plural" (López Petit, 2010). This crisis of meaning was the crisis of a drugged society, the society of phantasmagoria and anaesthesia (Buck-Morss, 1992) -the same society that drowned us in desire while holding out tiny oases of satisfaction that vanished like mirages, leaving us with nothing but a confirmation of our solitude. For we did feel alone, financially and emotionally mortgaged to the hilt.

Such was our situation when the widespread indignation over the state of affairs finally found an outlet for expression in the May 15 movement, the occupation of the Plaza de Sol in Madrid and all the other tent villages that sprang up across Spain in its wake. At each rally and assembly held in the streets and squares, we heard hundreds, even thousands, of people chanting words that still ring in our ears: "No, no, they don't represent us". The financial crisis had become a crisis of political representation which publicly decried the absence of true representation in the political sphere and demanded other forms of democracy. This crisis did not just affect politicians; mainstream media, trade unions and other social agents also came in for their share of criticism. Shoulder to shoulder, thousands of us marched into the streets to express our rejection of our supposed representatives with one simple statement: "They don't represent us". This simple linguistic gesture has outlined a new form of social organization which clearly distinguishes between them and us, an inside and an outside that has poked holes in the capitalist reality we inhabit.

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Puerta del Sol, Madrid, 20 May 2011

This distinction brings to mind the workers' autonomy movement in the 1970s, whose leaders also rejected all forms of representation and instead advocated an organizational formalism (assembly, elected delegates whose powers could be revoked, etc.) that prefigured another kind of society. That labour movement generated, just as we are generating today in the public squares, an us-versus-them dichotomy and dared to dream of other forms of autonomy beyond the imposed structures. It also prioritized the event over continuity and posited a non-institutional definition of the political sphere that advocated the complete politicization of life itself. In recalling the 1970s workers' autonomy movement, we implicitly bring into the present, with the help of our imagination, each of the parties that played a role at that political moment; this act of approximation inevitably invites comparisons with the present. It is at this point that our doubts begin to surface; we wonder if we are doomed to repeat history, if this state of autonomy we enunciate in the squares -and now not only in the squares but also in our homes, in the classroom, among friends- will be followed by another failure in our struggle. This time around, will we be able to muster the tools we need to avoid being robbed of our autonomy yet again?

On occasion, however, it almost seems as though this autonomy of the cognitariat had successfully severed the chains that bound us to production. For some time, we had been constantly meditating on the best way to free our subjectivities from the relentless production process imposed by Post-Fordist production systems: taking joy in our work and finding that this inevitably entailed working at times reserved for enjoyment; capitalizing on each one of our experiences so thoroughly that we had no time to even ponder resistance. Yet is this really a protest of subjectivities against the domination of thought? Are we fully aware that the town square has become the place where our productive life stops? Or will these learning experiences in the square later be reabsorbed by production? The truth is that, at present, we are using our time and our training to obtain experiences that reap no benefits. Is this really the new era of politics? How long will it last? A barrage of questions pummels us as we gaze into a future of which we have finally dared to dream, even though sometimes all we can see is uncertainty.

Participation Experiences

The highly accurate diagnosis of reality encapsulated in that "No, no, they don't represent us" forces us to reflect on the

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concepts of event and multiplicity in connection with the artistic praxes of the present [2]. If no one can represent anyone, because each social entity defends its autonomy and is not willing to objectify it or entrust it to others, many creators will begin to carve out a space they can share with the spectators, as opposed to the spectator-consumer space of the neoliberal experience. In these cases, art no longer seeks to construct new representations but rather to produce new ways of life and encourage the creation of other relationships.

In recent decades, a significant number of artistic practices have attempted to generate a public sphere using situations of dissent and have created new spaces of resistance for stimulating impulses linked to experience, knowledge and affect. In eschewing the more comfortable prevailing forms, they have reached out to spectators from other places and drawn them into the configuration of their work by making them active participants. This was their way of responding to a democracy whose existence as a political form at the service of neoliberal globalisation was being called into question, and they offered new, imaginative re-significations of the world for escaping from an increasingly privatised and impoverished common space.

At this point, I would like to expand on some of the issues by examining two chronologically distant artistic practices, which I believe can help us understand what happens to us in the square. To this end, I will analyze their explicit and implicit political philosophy, focusing on the type of experience they were able to create for the subjects who participated in them. The first was devised by Helio Oiticica, who had an abiding interest in sketching a world to come, in close proximity to those viewed as marginal elements of society, although giving the disinherited a voice or narrowing the social rift was never his primary intention. Oiticica believed that, in order to transform society, we must first change our culture; knowing this, we can examine his artistic and cultural project and find evidence of a desire to replace ordinary existence with another more participative, creative, egalitarian model. We see some of his preoccupations reflected in his parangolés, which he began producing in 1964. Those garments made of different fabrics in a variety of colours, designed to be worn as capes or robes, were a kind of transportable device that became part of the body and offered wearers a multisensory experience involving values that went beyond the purely visual.

Parangolé, Helio Oiticica, 1964

In Ivan Cardoso's video H.O. [3], which paints a portrait of the artist, Oiticica defined the nature of his parangolés: "The parangolé was not something to be donned and exhibited. The experience of the person wearing a parangolé, that of the person who sees another wearing it, or that of several people dressed in a parangolé are simultaneous experiences, multi-experiences. Therefore, it is not about interpreting the body as the support surface of the work. Quite the contrary -it is an absolute incorporation, the incorporation of the body in the work and of the work in the body. I call it 'in-corporation' […] it is not a purely visual thing. These are works that defy interpretation and go out in search of interpretation. All that

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has already become passé: interpretation, the attempt to search for meanings and experience meaningful structures, we are past all that. What remains is actually nothing more than the proposal of the great invention, something that motivates the participant, the former spectator who is now also a participant -something that prompts him to attain a state of invention. For this reason, the concept of the artist does not exist. The artist can only be an inventor; otherwise, he is not an artist. The task of the artist is to provoke the participant, who is the former spectator". We can therefore view these parangolés as part of a project that goes beyond the merely formal plane and attempts to generate aesthetic experiences that redefine our conception of the perceptible world -a political project in which the work is understood as a transforming element that drives the creative process towards vital emotions.

Parangolé, Helio Oiticica, 1964

The underlying ambition of Oiticica's proposal seems to be to transform how we understand and experience art in order to elicit enduring sensations in those who participate in his works, sensations which affect them so profoundly that they feel empowered to play an active role in the world around them. These works appeal directly to the sensory self, without intellectual digressions, showing us that it is possible to construct knowledge using parts of the body other than the rational mind; they impact directly on our subjectivity, activating dormant impulses. In fact, we cannot deny that the invention, experience and rediscovery of impulses and affects resulting from the activation of his proposals had a destabilizing effect on the participants and motivated them to produce new forms of subjectivity.

The other practice I would like to analyse pertains to the Madrid-based artists' collective Fast Gallery, whose work frequently involves strategies for transforming the ordinary and creating situations in which we can detect the subtle influence of Situationism. During the flag parade they organised in July 2010 in Móstoles [4], Fast Gallery invited people to take to the streets and participate in a collective form of expression and a mobilisation of the affects. The initial scope of the event expanded as the event progressed, and any passer-by who felt a sudden urge to contribute his/her own improvised 'flag' was invited to spontaneously join in the demonstration. This meant that the action was operating on different levels of participation and involvement, while also generating a shared experience that revolved around a proposed situation. Just as the Situationists sought to revive the radical political potential of Surrealism, so the actions of Fast Gallery activate new poetics by allowing imagination to find release through our bodies, opening our eyes to new and hitherto unimagined forms of radical politics. This circumstance hinges on the use of détournement as a strategy for extracting objects from the capitalist system in order to twist their meaning and achieve a critical effect (in the sense of opening up new possibilities).

Flags Parade, Fast Gallery, 2010

This mobile flag exhibition ended up being a celebration, a takeover of the streets, a liberation of desires and a free outpouring of subjectivities. It was a time of playful rebellion and vibrating bodies in which the participants were not seen as objects but as agents capable of constructing meaning and generating new worlds from their subjectivities. On that occasion, as in other similar practices, the boundary between the person doing and the person watching, the one who arranges and the one who must decode meanings, was blurred. In this context, improvisation and indeterminacy are fundamental elements that stand in sharp contrast to the homogenizing intentions of the establishment, creating situations that seek to alter the order imposed by the agenda of state apparatuses. While Oiticica offered us a work of art that could be worn, Fast Gallery invited us to make our body part of the flag and stroll through the city in a whole new way, turning it into a vast stage on which our presence suddenly becomes essential.

Obviously, we cannot ignore the way in which this action effectively took possession of the public sphere. Unlike conventional demonstrations, this Fast Gallery event had no apparent adversary; it was not based on antagonism towards a system to be overthrown or an enemy to be defeated, for it had no message to proclaim about the country's economic situation, nor did it aim to protest the financial crisis, the lack of jobs or the lack of alternatives to the misery of capital. But -and this is crucial- neither was it the exact opposite; it was not a nihilist demonstration, though there was no shortage of Dadaist and absurd elements.

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Flags Parade, Fast Gallery, 2010

This procession through the streets of Móstoles might have been an uprising to express a new way of life. The demonstration was both subjective and aesthetic. And here we see another link between Oiticica and Fast Gallery, for both engaged in non-activist practices -in other words, they did not use direct action- but, as projects that unfolded in a community and on the street, they proposed a certain activation of the senses and spaces that made them -and, as we recall them today, still makes them- radically political. As Suely Rolnik (2007, p. 107) wrote, what certain artistic practices can elicit "in those who receive [them] is not simply the consciousness of domination and exploitation in its visible, macro-political side, which activism brings. What it can elicit is, instead, the experience of these relations in one's own body, its invisible, unconscious, micro-political side, which intervenes in the process of subjectivation exactly where it becomes captive". And some political practices, such as those in the square, have a similar effect on us.

Like these two examples, many other proposals of recent decades were motivated by an interest in restoring our lost perception, as well as the type of involvement required for new, more participatory, less spectral forms of democracy than the existing version to flourish. If the aesthetic act is always an act of suspension, producing defamiliarization and capable of generating novel forms of political subjectivity and agency (Rancière, 2006), then it might be a way of escaping from that phantasmagorical world described by Marx in the first chapter of Das Kapital (Fernández-Polanco, 2009). In this respect, in this analysis we cannot ignore the call made by protestors demanding "real democracy NOW", as if a large segment of the population had suddenly realized that our political forms are outside the realm of reality.

One of the most frequently voiced criticisms of the May 15 movement is that it lacks an intellectual basis, that it is purely emotional -as if the emotions produced by the vibration of our bodies in the square were not capable of altering our experiences and later spilling over into our relationships outside the square. This raises an interesting question: Are emotions and affects not forms of thought? Do they not condition how we live in the world? On this point, we might find it helpful to think of democracy as a political form that does not resolve the issue of conflict, antagonism and decision. And if we accept that the existence of multiplicity, plurality and conflict is the raison d'être of politics (Mouffe, 2005), then we find ourselves faced with a public sphere capable of stirring up passions once more. This in turn would increase the importance of artistic practices, for in a radical democracy the boundary between passions and politics is less clearly defined, and we cannot deny that one of art's greatest poetic -and political- powers is its ability to mobilize affects.

Images in Conflict: New Currents for Representations

But let us return to the square, to that public square filled with jostling bodies that vibrate and construct a sphere of reality separate from that of capital. Here bodies congregate, move and converse, and in the process they generate experiences of togetherness, of 'being with', that are more sensory than rational but nevertheless still political experiences. As Arendt pointed out, and Butler (2011) has reminded us, the true political space is that which emerges amid those bodies, in that "between the people"; in order for politics to take place, the body must first appear. The emergence of the political depends upon the appearance of bodies -and not just physical bodies, but their images as well.

The square has become a place of anonymity, a crowd that has managed to snatch and appropriate part of capital's social domain. Perhaps this is what those who want to preserve the established order find most irritating, because that perfectly disorganised multitude challenges the conventional ways of acting and speaking, of enunciating and negotiating -probably because the people in that crowd have embraced the new episteme of networking, Twitter and

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open-source software which creates anonymously, enriches the global commons and slowly but steadily transforms the code, generating forms of democratic collaboration that go far beyond the simple concept of 'one person, one vote'. Quantum physics revolutionised our concept of life, opened the doors to relative thinking, multiplied what is potentially possible and blurred the dividing line between matter and energy, thereby shattering the rigid theories of the past; in light of that experience, we would be remiss if we didn't at least consider the degree to which new technologies and forms of knowledge-building are supplying us with new ways to manage the world. That diffuse Twitter model creates a formless multitude which refuses to be standardised in a representation and builds a new world simply by proclaiming its existence over and over again on the networks and in the streets. And although it is true that, at the material level, things have not changed all that much, the mere act of thinking that they might change has broken a certain trend of standardization and homogenization of thought and been able to generate true politics, as defined by Rancière in *Dissensus*: the kind of politics that emerge when those relegated to the realm of passivity, impotence and obedience break into mainstream society and make themselves heard. The true moment of politics occurs when we unexpectedly congregate and peacefully defy the rules that have been imposed on us (which is also surprising) and alter, if only for an instant, the established order; that is what really frightens those who claim to represent us. Then the process of fear is reversed, because the power of politics transforms bodies. No one expected us to show up at this party. And that is when we realize that equals are not those who recognize each other as such, but those who are equally capable of reshaping the world, of transforming it using those open-source software strategies that slowly, almost imperceptibly, modify the code.

There is one thing about this square that I find particularly fascinating, and that is the way in which its images, its representations, have been captured and distributed. The traffic of images of revolutions, from Iran to Spain and from Tunisia to Greece, has established new and unexpected routes that have evolved into political itineraries. These uprisings have been televised from the outset by their protagonists, who have created their own representations of events. People in Syria have produced images that travel clandestinely over the internet. The anonymous film *Images d'une révolution*, which we were able to see at the Cinéma du Réel festival, and more recently at the CA2M in the context of the programme *Images Struggling: Stories of Resistance*, shows how thousands of Iranians, outraged at the obviously manipulated results of the presidential elections, poured into the streets on election night to protest the fraud. Despite the heavy-handed repression tactics of police and military forces, protestors still managed to capture hundreds of images using mobile devices, phones and cameras. Those urgent, furtive images were immediately emailed around the world and uploaded to online channels like YouTube. The film, created by Iranians living in exile, is a compilation of those videos and a tribute to everyone who ran out into the street to record what was happening, thus creating a counter-narrative of the resistance which contradicted the official media version. That struggle, like all those that emerged in its wake over the past year, has travelled accompanied by the bodies of those who fought in the squares and risked their lives to capture an image. We can no longer sever the images from the bodies, nor from the struggles of those bodies, for, as Hito Steyerl (2010) has said, "instead we should try to think beyond that conflict (between politics and images). Our reality is already made up of images. So the question is: How can we get images politically involved? Can we think of embattled images rather than images of people fighting? Otherwise, we remain in that kind of dichotomy where we have real politics and real bodies on the one hand, and on the other we have images, appearances and spectacle. And I don't believe that's very productive. Images, bodies and struggles are all part of the same dynamic".

And just as we cannot differentiate between images of bodies, so we cannot differentiate between media of bodies. The mobile phones, the photographic cameras, their images and the bodies are all one and the same. These images turn out to be radically political because they show us the scene of the conflict as it occurs, and they in themselves are conflict

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because on their journey they must also flee from concealment and ostracism. The media not only become a space for making struggles visible, but they themselves are also spaces of struggle, confrontation and resistance. They are spaces for creating and disseminating new meanings for democracy that restore its original plurality of meaning, places where we can poke holes in reality and find new ways of constructing knowledge which, more than helping us to survive in the world of capital, can teach us to imagine possible alternatives to that world.

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Footnotes

[1] In this respect, Hito Steyerl makes some very interesting observations in her work entitled *In Free Fall: A Thought Experiment on Vertical Perspective*, where she notes that the present moment is distinguished by a prevailing condition of groundlessness. Her premise is inspired by the work of numerous philosophers who reject the notion of a given and stable metaphysical ground and whose ideas revolve around Heideggerian metaphors of the abyss and the absence of ground.

[2] In this respect, it is interesting to think, like Maurizio Lazzarato (2005), that the paradigm of representation based on the subject-work relationship no longer functions in politics or in art, and that therefore we must now think of the world in terms of event and multiplicity. Consequently, art no longer represents the object but creates possible worlds. It therefore seems that this rejection of representation which calls for new scenarios of visibility, participation and collaboration might

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be a political reality that has moved beyond representation, particularly now that the age of the technocrats has dawned.

[3] The video is available in parts on YouTube at

http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=iyEH58BhxAA [retrieved on 20 May, 2011].

[4] A video recording of the entire action and the call to participate can be viewed at http://fastgallery.net/index.php?/fg5/

memoria/ [retrieved on 25 June, 2011].