

Interventionism and the historical uncanny:

Or; can there be revolutionary art without the revolution?

Gregory G. Sholette, **April 2, 2004** (DRAFT)

"Art into Life!" ... "Art into Production!" ... "Liquidate Art!...", proclaimed the slogans of the Soviet avant-garde. They likened themselves to engineers standing "before the gates of the vacant future,"¹ as centuries of Russian monarchy collapsed in a matter of days. Men and women of diverse artistic temperament including, El Lissitzky, Klucis, Stepanova, Popova Tatlin, Rodchenko, Gabo, Pevsner and the Stenberg brothers described themselves variously as Constructivists, Objectivists, Engineerists, and Productivists. Their goal was nothing less than a "universal human culture" founded on reason, collective production, and technological utility². Some expressed loathing for conventional artists describing them as the "corrupters of the human race."³ Others abandoned their studios and sought to enter factories, extolling standardized production processes modeled on Henry Ford's assembly line. They developed designs for workers clubs, portable propaganda apparatuses, and art laboratories where experimentation with new Constructivist principles ideally preceded real world implantation. The artist Tatlin, who is credited with coining the slogan *Art Into Life*, even designed a flying bicycle that would grant every Soviet citizen aeronautical mobility.

¹ From the "Realistic Manifesto," N. Pevsner and N. Gabo, *Second State Printing House*, August 1920, in *Art Into Life: Russian Constructivism 1914-1932* (Seattle/New York: Henry Art Gallery & Rizolli: 1990), p 61.

² K. Medunetskii, V. Stenberg & G. Stenberg, "The Constructivists Address the World," January 1922, in *Art Into Life*, p 81.

³ Ibid.

More than eighty years after Mayakovsky proclaimed "the streets shall be our brushes - the squares our palettes," a discordant collection of interests once again seeks the liquidation of artistic detachment by staging a fresh assault upon the tenuous boundary between art and life.⁴ These forces include not only artists and intellectuals, but also philanthropic foundations, government agencies and above all global corporations; the contemporary locus of hegemonic power, a point I return to below. For the moment it is enough to note that within this constellation of interests a particular subset of individuals understand this conflict as a site for critical, artistic engagement within the public sphere. Those gathered here under the rubric of *Interventionists* represent compelling examples of this tendency. And because the subsidiary theme of the exhibition is artist as tool provider, comparison to Constructivist and Productivist, post-revolutionary Russian art is unavoidable. Needless to say, this essay steers directly into this potentially turbulent correlation. It asserts that despite far more modest ambitions and radically different circumstances, the contemporary, so-called interventionist reveals a definite congruence with the historic avant-garde program, enough to make qualified comparisons worth pursuing.⁵ At the same time there is significant variance raised by the comparison thus complicating the thesis in ways hopefully productive of future research and debate.

The Soviet avant-garde artists of the 1920s and early 1930s sought to intervene directly into life by developing an art that would be useful for the advancement of an unprecedented revolutionary society. If the magnitude of this task did not lessen artistic arguments and mutual denunciations, it nevertheless inspired a surprising degree of harmony regarding one objective: art would never again be treated as mere décor or serve as a luxury item for the wealthy. It would instead be integrated directly into the lives and labor of the masses as a useful activity, an organizational tool, and a universal "mathematical consciousness of things."⁶

⁴ Mayakovsky from his poem "Order to the Army of Art," in Camilla Gray, *The Russian Experiment in Art: 1863-1922* (London: Thames & Hudson, 1962), p 224.

⁵ Note that both my caution and enthusiasm regarding this historical comparison is indebted to the important research and writings of Benjamin Buchloh, Hal Foster and Christine Lodder on the revolutionary avant-garde.

⁶ V. Stenberg from *Art Into Life*, p 68.

Predictably, the definition of utility varied from artist to artist, and from manifesto to manifesto. Yet, around one point this complex movement converged. A new conception of pragmatic art would cast aside conventional notions of industrial design and applied art. It would aim instead at something far more sweeping in scope. As Lyubov' Popova, asserted, under the fast changing circumstances of the 1920s, "organization was the principle of all creative activity, including artistic composition, " and the "artistic organization of the object" would inevitably become "the principle guiding the creation of even the most practical, everyday things." ⁷ Rodchenko carries this logic to extraordinary lengths claiming that, "Contemporary art is a conscious and organized life that is able to see and build. Any person who has organized his life, his work, and himself is a genuine artist." ⁸ Or as El Lissitzky states, "The private property aspect of creativity must be destroyed all are creators and there is no reason of any sort for this division into artists and nonartists." ⁹

Such sentiments argue for a diffusion of creative work throughout a singularly transfigured society rather than the lock-step discipline of an avant-garde elite leading the cowed masses. They also echo the remarks of the young Karl Marx and Frederick Engels who argued that:

"The exclusive concentration of artistic talent in particular individuals, and its suppression in the broad mass which is bound up with this, is a consequence of division of labour. ... In a communist society there are no painters but only people who engage in painting among other activities." ¹⁰

⁷ Popova, "Commentary on Drawings," December 1921, in *Art Into Life*, p 69.

⁸ Rodchenko, "Slogans," February 22, 1921, in *Art Into Life*, p 71.

⁹: El Lissitzky, "Suprematism in World Reconstruction," 1920, in El Lissitzky: *Life, Letters, Texts*, (London, Thames & Hudson, 1967), p 333.

¹⁰ Karl Marx and Frederick Engels, *The German Ideology*, 1845-46, (New York, International Publishers edition, 1970), p 109.

Therefore, if socially useful art is ultimately determined by the society it serves, the artist as tool maker must, by necessity, look to the public sphere, and not to the realm of art, for the logic of her work. It also means that the success of any fully, radically expanded idea of art is ultimately measured by its very disappearance into the daily life of the masses. Obviously, in a revolutionary moment, such an objective introduces extraordinary possibilities. It also presents risks, not only for artists, but citizens and even for the state as vanguard aesthetics appears to appropriate the very dynamic of the revolution itself. No doubt this same, extraordinary ambition made these artists, along with other, semi-autonomous movements in post-revolutionary Russia, troublesome to the increasingly centralized and aesthetically traditional Communist Party.¹¹ As is well known, by the mid 1930s, most of the radical artistic practices I refer to had either been absorbed into orthodox forms of industrial design or sidelined by the official Stalinist aesthetic of socialist realism. Yet while Constructivist ideals of disseminating amongst the masses gave way to the outright displacement of the avant-garde itself, the desire to drag art into life remained central to most 20th Century avant-garde movements including the Surrealists, the Situationists and Fluxus. Never again, however, did it foment the astonishing range of prototypes, theories and artistic programs aimed at not merely subverting existing norms, but at reinventing human existence in toto. Nor was art spared retrogression back into its familiar, rarified, commodity form as art historian Benjamin H. D. Buchloh has asserted.¹²

¹¹ Historian Boris Groys has suggested more recently that the Soviet Avant-garde was a threat to Stalin not because they rejected his aesthetic of Socialist Realism, but because their totalizing artistic project literally competed with Stalin's on the same ideological terrain. Groys revisionism however neither accounts for the ironic tendency found especially in the later work of Tatlin nor, more significantly, does it explain the call to make the division between artists and non-artists disappear in a liberated communist society. See, "Stalinism as an Aesthetic Phenomenon," in *Tekstura: Russian Essays on Visual Culture*, edited and translated by Alla Efimova and Lev Manovich, (Chicago, University of Chicago Press, 1993), pp 115 - 151.

¹² See especially B. Buchloh, "Figures of Authority, Ciphers of Regression," reprinted in *Art After Modernism: Rethinking Representation*, edited by Brian Wallis, (New York, The New Museum of Contemporary Art, 1984), pp 107- 136.

Nevertheless, the radical legacy of early 20th Century art remains broadly detectable today, much in the same way background traces of radiation evince a distant, primeval universe. Take the test yourself. Visit any survey of recent art and try to locate a single participant who is not compelled to make some reference to the world beyond art, be it political, personal or through appropriation of popular media or youth culture. At the same time however, if all one can argue is that a trace of social engagement lingers on today, as an artistic theme or curious academic problem, then certainly the grouping of past revolutionary art alongside its tepid, contemporary progeny offers a questionable family portrait. Fortunately, there is a wrinkle in this picture. Within its folds is a different interpretation of, as well as an alternative genealogy for, contemporary art itself.

Low cost shelters for homeless people, birthing tents, graffiti spraying robots, machines that process racial attitudes, food testing units, mobile message boards and apparel designed for civil disobedience: on the face of it these projects might just as easily belong in a science hall rather than an art museum. (And I suspect some of the participants would actually be pleased with that alternative.) An apparent disregard for the category of art is the first conspicuous similarity between the artists in this exhibition and the Soviet Constructivists and Productivists. Approaching this more recent work as art however, with all the historical and formal logic this implies is the premise of this text, but with this important proviso: no claim is made that contemporary interventionist artists consciously set out to emulate the work of Tatlin, Rodchenko, Stepanova and their colleagues. Nor am I promoting this tendency as an incipient neo-avant-garde, especially given assertions still to come, that the very concept of an artistic vanguard has today lost all credibility as a critical, cultural endeavor. Instead, what resemblance exists arrives by indirect routes. This includes professional training in art school and exposure to the activist art of the 1970s and 1980s, but also via a renewed interest in the Situationist theory of the *detourne'* as curator Nato Thompson puts forward in his introductory essay. Then again, this semblance of far-flung artistic forms might be described as relating by way of an historical uncanniness in so far as there is something strangely familiar about two distant historical moments in which all existing social and productive forces are brought under the domination of a

single ideology, even if this jurisdiction was specific to the Soviet Union in the 1920s and is today a global phenomenon.

In any case, the most striking similarity between the artists in this exhibition and the historic avant-garde is a mutual interest in temporal systems of organization and public circulation rather than the traditional practice of creating discrete, fixed art objects. Significantly, this indifference towards the valuable artwork is different from that of Conceptual Art in the 1960s and 1970s since it is neither calculated to be an end in itself nor intended to function as a critique of art's institutional circumstances. Instead, this recent work turns outward and away from the institutional art world. Its immaterial bias is not fixated on rejecting commodity fetishism, a near impossible objective, so much as it is focused on scattering art into the public sphere in the form of publications, software, performances, machines, temporary architecture, social services and even conversation. In this sense, the work ideally becomes the property or experience of an unknown recipient. She or he is likely to be a non-art layperson carrying out the logic of the intervention without necessarily recognizing its artistic origins. Again in theory, such dissemination within a public space forms a temporary gift economy that is quite unlike the managed parsimony of the mainstream art market. In this exhibition, Indimedia, Yomango, The Critical Art Ensemble, Michael Rakowitz, Ha Ha, and Krzysztof Wodiczko most clearly represent aspects of this practice, although it applies in part to most if not all interventionist artists. Needless to say, in the absence of *any* economic market for their work the early avant-garde manifest a comparable desire to disseminate art into the social body.

There are several additional similarities between recent, interventionist tendencies and the artistic program of historic Constructivism and Productivism. In so far as tool making is premised on a degree of research and development, we find a mutual interest in experimentalism or laboratory art as well as the incorporation of new technology into artistic practice. Still, what distinguishes the interventionist approach under discussion here from the broader art and technology scene as well as from such forerunners as ZERO and E.A.T., or Experiments in Art and Technology in the 1960s, is the instrumental or "tactical" approach they take to technology. In practice this amounts to the incorporation of new, as well as old, methods for advancing social analysis, communal pedagogy, or the enhancement of civic life based on particular needs, rather than technology as a

spectacle or as an end in itself. Consider the tent-like pouches that Dre Wapenaar explains permit "people to feel secure, calm and friendly," or the Center for Tactical Magic's combination of magic and microcircuits aimed at encouraging "responsible citizenship through social action." How can one avoid being reminded of Tatlin's slogan, "not the old, not the new, but the necessary"?¹³

Because this experiment in utilitarian art goes hand-in-hand with an inattention to traditional notions of individual, artistic expression, it also reveals a distrust of overt aesthetic display in favor of an economy of form and an investment in transparency of expression. The Constructivists, of course, went so far as to describe their artistic program as engineering. And one finds a similar expediency at work in the projects of Ha Ha, N55, Krzysztof Wodiczko, Lucy Orta, Dre Wapenaar, Valerie Tevere (who is also a part of the group Neurotransmitter) and Michael Rakowitz et al. But there is also a pragmatic lucidity found in the pedagogical interventions of Atlas Group, Yes Men, SubRosa, and Critical Art Ensemble, and in the vernacular and amateur idioms adopted by Rub_n Ortiz-Torres, Alex Villar, Craig Baldwin, Yomango, and the Center for Tactical Magic.

What is above all most striking in this regard, as well as markedly different from the type of art favored by mainstream discourse for the past several decades, is the absence of any weighty preoccupation with making the form of the work problematic in itself. It suggests that the recently dominant paradigm of post-modernism, with its emphasis on allegorical representation, irony and pastiche, is no longer operative raising yet another curious parallel with the Soviet avant-garde in so far as the latter sought to supplant all representational forms of art making with material structures, primary forms, and de-mystified systems of objective, artistic production. However, this is also the place where dissimilarities most clearly come into play between now and then. This is so in large part because under present historical conditions the objective, material world appears as radically different from that which inspired the post-revolutionary Russian artists. Yet by examining one final area of correspondence, a shared proclivity towards collective art making, the strangely inverted relationship between certain current art practices

¹³ *Art Into Life*, p 38.

and the historic Soviet avant-garde will become most apparent, and my thesis productively detoured.

For much of the early avant-garde, collectivism was axiomatic. It was bound up with modernist concepts of historical progress, and unprecedented societal reform. This was frequently expressed in utopian terms and involved technological and political change but at times took the form of rejecting modernism, yet did so in a manner that nevertheless remained linked to it through negation. Regardless of which aspect of modernism or anti-modernism dominated a particular artistic inclination, the individual members of a given movement were expected to identify categorically with its convictions. According to historian Nina Gourianova, even the pre-Constructivist, anarchist-inflected art of Malevich's Suprematism, called on artists to create,

“...not an individual reflection of the soul, but a universal idea presumably free from the individual psychology and emotions of the artist, the liberation of the spirit through creativity.”¹⁴

For the Constructivists and Productivists this greater calling meant equating art with the massive, material reorganization of society then underway within post-revolutionary Russia as everything from factories to farms was modernized, collectivized, and made pragmatic. Fast forwarding to the present we find a remarkable degree of collaborative and collective organization amongst the interventionist artists. Each is different however. They range from spuriously labeled bureaus, institutes and centers to a legitimate, yet sardonic corporation in Bitter Nigger Inc. There is even a "factory" that simulates industrial processes and public service workers who monitor potentially hazardous forms of production such as genetically modified food. Meanwhile, the Critical Art Ensemble describes itself as a “cellular collective construction” exercising

¹⁴ Nina Gurianova, "The Supremus Laboratory-House: Reconstructing the Journal," in Drutt, Mathew, ed. *Kazimir Malevich:Suprematism*, Guggenheim Museum Publications: New York, 2003, p.44-59

“solidarity through difference.”¹⁵ Yet, contrary to early 20th Century art movements, contemporary art groups, as if reflecting the plasticity of identity formations in the post-industrial world, might be said to perform or enact collectivist modes and organizational forms rather than embody them. Incongruity, pluralism and informality have come to supplant notions of unanimity and revolutionary discipline. Tactical conditions not grand, unifying principles compel their formation, which explains perhaps why so many engage in self-mockery and irreverent play.

Logically, discrepancies also emerge in terms of the audience for this art. While the Constructivists, following Lenin, believed rapid industrialization held the key to radical, social transformation, and therefore understandably looked towards factory workers as the ideal audience/participant for their program, by contrast, no contemporary artist volunteers to enter the work place any more than they anticipate mass-producing utilitarian artworks.¹⁶ Gone is the positive expectation that modernization once inspired and with it the privileged role of the laboring class. Michael Rakowitz and his cohorts Bill Stone, George Livingston and Freddie Flynn for example focus on the urban indigent rather the industrial proletariat by creating polyethylene shelters for homeless people that are inflated by heat exhaust from city buildings and subways. Similarly, the Danish group N55 offers individuated sanctuary with their Snail Shell System. It rolls as well as floats and can tap into the city's electrical grid through the base of street lamps like some municipal parasite, but the occupant it is aimed at is not the worker but an alienated nomad. Yomango's line of shoplifting positive apparel and accessories allows the plebeian consumer to perform everyday acts of sabotage against the homogenizing effects of trans-national corporations. In each case, the intended audience for this work is less working

¹⁵ Observations on Collective Cultural Action

The Critical Art Ensemble

(From <http://www.critical-art.net/lectures/collective.html>)

¹⁶ At least this is true in the US today. However, some notable exceptions from an earlier generation of artists include: Mierle Laderman Ukeles who has worked with the New York City Department of Sanitation as their artist-in-residence for more than twenty years as well as such artists as Fred Lonidier, Mike Alewitz, Alan Sekula, Marty Pottenger and Toronto, Canada: Carol Conde and Karl Beveridge.

class than simply the masses or what Antonio Negri and Michael Hardt term the *multitude*.¹⁷ But equally significant is the way this new wave of useful artistry functions as an ideal model for acts of civil disobedience rather than a practical strategy for defeating global capitalism.

If, for the Constructivists, experimenting with the mundane routines of labor promised something far grander than well-designed teapots, then redemption of utilitarian art was unconditionally linked with the imminent rebirth of humankind: living and working collectively, creatively and rationally thanks in large part to avant-garde art itself. By contrast, the ostensibly practical solutions for civic negligence offered by contemporary interventionist art are a symbolic and at times farcical comment about specific social problems. In other words: to the degree this work is pragmatic, it is also ironic, and to the degree it is aimed at public intervention, it cedes no transformative powers to any one group or class. Not that this represents a deficiency so much as the logical response to current political and economic conditions. Still, it is a departure from the earnest teleology of classical avant-gardism as well as from much of the art activism of the 1970s, 1980s and early 1990s.

The Art Workers Coalition, Red Herring, Artists Meeting for Social Change, The Los Angeles Women's Building, Heresies Magazine Collective, Guerrilla Art Action Group, Paper Tiger, S.P.A.R.C. (Social and Public Art Resource Center), General Idea, PAD/D (Political Art Documentation and Distribution), Border Arts Workshop, Group Material, Gran Fury, Godzilla, the Guerrilla Girls and later REPOhistory to name only some of the artists' groups founded between 1969 and 1989 certainly had no unified program or aesthetic.¹⁸ They did generally share however, an analytical approach to cultural criticism and a desire to use art as an instrument for revealing to a broad, non-art public concealed institutional, political, and

¹⁷ Antonio Negri and Michael Hardt, *Empire*: (Cambridge: Harvard 2000),

¹⁸ For more about these groups see: *But Is It Art: The Spirit of Art as Activism*, ed. Nina Felshin, (Seattle: Bay Press, Inc. 1994); *Alternative Art New York: 1965-1985*, ed. Julie Ault, (Minneapolis, University of Minnesota Press, 2002); Grant Kester's *Conversation Pieces: Community and Communication in Modern Art*, forthcoming from University of California and *Collectivism After Modernism*, eds Stimson & Sholette, forthcoming from University of Minnesota Press.

historical power. By staging sustained public demonstrations against the Museum of Modern Art in the late 1960s, The Art Workers Coalition for example is credited with forcing this and other New York museums to offer a free admission day. Group Material's 1983 subway car, intervention *Subculture* encouraged riders used to advertisements for hemorrhoid cream to reflect on working conditions and increasing U.S military involvement in Central America. Gran Fury and Act Up re-wrote the rulebook regarding activist iconography in the mid-1980s by appropriating sophisticated media strategies for enlightening the public about the politics behind the AIDS crisis. In the early 1990s REPOhistory installed temporary street signage on city streets with images and texts that offered passersby a site-specific window into historical events and people misrepresented or ignored by dominant culture including workers, women, children and minorities. And the Guerrilla Girls, who along with Paper Tiger is the only organization listed above that remain active today, have since 1985 used public poster campaigns to reveal the numerical absence of women and minorities within the mainstream cultural establishment.

Along with this strong pedagogical and analytical inclination, these groups also shared a spotty kinship with Conceptual Art, especially in terms of the latter's emphasis on text, versus image, and its de-emphasis on the sanctity of the art object. But perhaps most significantly these diverse organizations also converged around the cultural politics of the New Left: a polyglot amalgam of feminists, progressive labor, minority and community activists that, despite increasing fragmentation, appeared, until recently, to be capable of coalescing into something resembling a single movement. PAD/D went so far as to propose an entire alternative arts network linking a variety of venues, including university art galleries, community centers, union halls, even churches into a sort of shadow art world that in turn would connect with non-art oriented activists. Very much *not* avant-garde in approach, PAD/D sought to transform preaching to the converted into a bona-fide, counter-cultural community that anticipated some of the rhetoric surrounding the World Wide Web.¹⁹

¹⁹ I take up the notion of a shadow or dark matter art world in several recent essays including "Some Call It Art From Imaginary Autonomy to Autonomous Collectivity," available on-line at: *European Institute for*

While these lessons are not lost on the new wave of activist art, according to curator Nato Thompson the *interventionists*,

"do not preach. They do not advocate. As opposed to providing a literal political message, these artists provide tools for the viewer/participant to develop their own politics. In this sense, the political content is found in a project's use. They supply possibilities as opposed to solutions." ²⁰

Perhaps the softer political tone of most of this work reflects a healthy disillusionment with expert culture as well as an acknowledgement that even when preaching social awareness artists remain a privileged class. And if some interventionists openly align themselves with the mass activism witnessed in Seattle, Genoa, Quebec, and so forth, their politics are, generally speaking, as informal and fragmentary as the wildly heterogeneous counter-globalization movement itself. They signal a rejection of traditional Left wing institutions. At the same time it is equally preposterous to imagine any of these artists openly embracing their own, national government in the way Constructivists and Productivists intended their art to help build communism in the USSR. This holds true despite the receipt of modest to strong federal funding amongst the artists. Instead of grander political goals, analyses, and strategies therefore we find a call for self-determined cultural, and social autonomy. However, there is a legislative model that contemporary interventionists somewhat resemble. It is the Non-Governmental Organization or NGO. Independent, unaffiliated, and ecumenical, groups such as *GreenPeace*, *Medicine San Frontier*, and *Amnesty International* stress pragmatic and tactical action over ideology. Nevertheless the question must be raised; can there be radical art without a revolution?

Ironically, or inevitably, it is not interventionist artists who lead the charge to collapse the allegedly transcendent into the merely secular, that is to say art into life. Instead this pressure

Progressive Cultural Policies:

http://www.eipcp.net/diskurs/d07/text/sholette_en.html

²⁰ REFERENCE NATO INTRODUCTORY TEXT HERE

comes primarily from the legitimating demands of the modern, managerial class who make up what historian Chin-tau Wu calls *enterprise culture*: the unfettered privatization of all public life and services. *Enterprise culture* is a force that has come to dominate both the US and UK and is linked with the conservative governments of Ronald Reagan and Margaret Thatcher. According to Wu, it has also produced significant effects within the cultural realm. She writes,

"Contemporary art, especially in its avant-garde manifestations, is generally assumed to be in rebellion against the system, [but] it actually acquires a seductive commercial appeal within it." ²¹

The codependency between the captains of enterprise culture and contemporary art is plainly articulated by John Murphy, former Executive Vice-President of Philip Morris Corporation when he states:

"There is a key element in this 'new art' which has its counterpart in the business world. That element is innovation — without which it would be impossible for progress to be made in any segment of society." ²²

Perhaps Tatlin's revolutionary slogan should now be rephrased as "art into business," assuming that the latter has already incorporated most aspects of autonomous, daily life into itself. And clearly everything today can be market-branded from the war in Iraq to coolness itself as social critic Thomas Frank argues. ²³ At the same time the language and logic of commerce has deeply permeated the art world. In art schools, students express concerns about how to market themselves. Once graduated, the emerging artist is keen to focus on product placement within prominent museums, journals and biennials. But why should this surprise us when the leading

²¹ Chin-tau Wu, *Privatising Culture: Corporate Art Intervention since the 1980s*, (London/New York, Verso, 2002), p 161.

²² Ibid, p 125.

²³ Thomas Frank, *The Conquest of Cool: Business Culture, Counterculture, and the Rise of Hip Consumerism*, (Chicago, University of Chicago Press, 1997).

lights of the art world, from Matthew Barney to the managers of the Tate Modern, present high art as a spectacle of abundance, even of excess, in which success is measured by how many fabricators one commands and who throws the swankiest openings? And all of this shock and awe appears to be thanks to the marriage of high culture and corporate largess. In terms of artist as tool provider, therefore, the boasting of Thomas Hoving, former director of New York's Metropolitan Museum of Art sums it up decisively: "Art is sexy! Art is money-sexy! Art is money-sexy -social-climbing-fantastic!" (Wu, 127).

The call for art to merge into life returns today under the most improbable of circumstances. Not only has the decrepit Soviet Union completely vanished, but, as if history were a glove pulled inside out, so has the once widespread aspiration that society be grounded in equanimity, fraternity and reason rather than profitability, competition, and market speculation. Socialism, the driving force of the Russian avant-garde, has become, in the words of Jacques Derrida, a specter. It haunts the totality that is, at the start of the 21st Century, global capitalism. What is so very odd, therefore, is the degree to which current historical circumstances are exactly opposite those surrounding the Soviet Avant-Garde, and yet simultaneously analogous in so far as the private interests of capital permeate the entire fabric of society now to the same degree collective ideals once saturated Soviet culture. The strongest opponents of globalization comprehend this fact. They also grasp the importance of expanding the notion of working class resistance to include the type of immaterial, symbolic production created by service and intellectual laborers. Interventionist art exists at the crossroads of these realizations.

The current wave of artistic utilitarianism does indeed produce useful, tool-like art. And, these acts of resistance practiced within everyday life are witty and at times inspiring. Nevertheless, they remain disconnected from comprehensive visions of radical, social transformation. Their politics are vague or at best subdued.ⁱ²⁴ It is worth noting by way of an admittedly oblique

²⁴ Regarding Iraq see Noel C. Paul, "Selling War: Marketers Weigh in on How Well Bush Is Branding the Battle with Iraq," *The Science Monitor*, March 26,

answer to the question raised about radical art and revolutionary politics that some of the most ambitious projects in the USSR in the 1920s, including Tatlin's Monument to the Third International and Rodchenko's Workers Club, never left the prototype stage. Perhaps foremost among these unrealized social interventions was the "people's air bicycle," or Letatlin, a peculiar combination of the pragmatic and the fantastic that Tatlin fabricated in the seclusion of the Novodevichi Monastery outside Moscow in the early 1930s. The personal flying machine at once signaled the possibility that every Soviet citizen could be mobile, travel freely; even temporarily withdraw from the collective. But more than that, one can read into Letatlin a sly, critical stance towards the increasingly bureaucratic and centralized Soviet state.²⁵ In other words, is it possibly Tatlin's merging of autonomy and critique, rather than his call of art into life that most clearly prefigures today's interventionists? And perhaps the problem of representation is not obsolete after all. At the same time, how can one not afford to attempt the radical transformation of present art and society, with or without a revolution imminent?

FOOTNOTES:

1. From the "Realistic Manifesto," N. Pevsner and N. Gabo, Second State Printing House, August 1920, in *Art Into Life: Russian Constructivism 1914-1932* (Seattle/New York: Henry Art Gallery & Rizolli: 1990), p 61.
2. K. Medunetskii, V. Stenberg & G. Stenberg, "The Constructivists Address the World," January 1922, in *Art Into Life*, p 81.
3. Ibid.

2003, and online at:

http://abcnews.go.com/sections/business/World/iraq_sellingwar_csm_030326.html).

And in terms of political explicitness I am focusing on a general tendency but acknowledge there are significant differences between SubRosa or the Critical Art Ensemble on one hand and e-xplo or N55 on the other.

²⁵ Perhaps it is not coincidental that the shrewd, humorous reflexivity of contemporary interventionist art also resembles art made during the cold war in what was termed the "eastern bloc"? For example Krzysztof Wodiczko's ironic, conceptual art projects made before emigrating from Poland. Despite all efforts to move art into life political resistance, art and representation remain intricately connected.

4. Mayakovsky from his poem "Order to the Army of Art," in Camilla Gray, *The Russian Experiment in Art: 1863-1922* (London: Thames & Hudson, 1962), p 224.
5. Note that both my caution and enthusiasm regarding this historical comparison is indebted to the important research and writings of Benjamin Buchloh, Hal Foster and Christine Lodder on the revolutionary avant-garde.
6. V. Stenberg from *Art Into Life*, p 68.
7. Popova, "Commentary on Drawings," December 1921, in *Art Into Life*, p 69.
8. Rodchenko, "Slogans," February 22, 1921, in *Art Into Life*, p 71.
9. El Lissitzky, "Suprematism in World Reconstruction," 1920, in El Lissitzky: *Life, Letters, Texts*, (London, Thames & Hudson, 1967), p 333.
10. Karl Marx and Frederick Engels, *The German Ideology*, 1845-46, (New York, International Publishers edition, 1970), p 109.
11. Historian Boris Groys has suggested more recently that the Soviet Avant-garde was a threat to Stalin not because they rejected his aesthetic of Socialist Realism, but because their totalizing artistic project literally competed with Stalin's on the same ideological terrain. Groys revisionism however neither accounts for the ironic tendency found especially in the later work of Tatlin nor, more significantly, does it explain the call to make the division between artists and non-artists disappear in a liberated communist society. See, "Stalinism as an Aesthetic Phenomenon," in *Tekstura: Russian Essays on Visual Culture*, edited and translated by Alla Efimova and Lev Manovich, (Chicago, University of Chicago Press, 1993), pp 115 - 151.
12. See especially B. Buchloh, "Figures of Authority, Ciphers of Regression," reprinted in *Art After Modernism: Rethinking Representation*, edited by Brian Wallis, (New York, The New Museum of Contemporary Art, 1984), pp 107- 136.
13. *Art Into Life*, p 38.
14. Nina Gurianova, "The Supremus Laboratory-House: Reconstructing the Journal," in Drutt, Mathew, ed. *Kazimir Malevich: Suprematism*, Guggenheim Museum Publications: New York, 2003, p.44-59
15. *Observations on Collective Cultural Action*, The Critical Art Ensemble, <http://www.critical-art.net/lectures/collective.html>
16. At least this is true in the US today. However, some notable exceptions from an earlier generation of artists include: Mierle Laderman Ukeles who has worked with the New York City Department of Sanitation as their artist-in-residence for more than twenty years as well as such artists as Fred Lonidier, Mike Alewitz, Alan Sekula, Marty Pottenger and Toronto, Canada: Carol Conde and Karl Beveridge.
17. Antonio Negri and Michael Hardt, *Empire*: (Cambridge: Harvard 2000).
18. For more about these groups see: *But Is It Art: The Spirit of Art as Activism*, ed. Nina Felshin, (Seattle: Bay Press, Inc. 1994); *Alternative Art New York: 1965-1985*, ed. Julie Ault, (Minneapolis, University of Minnesota Press, 2002); Grant Kester's *Conversation Pieces: Community and Communication in Modern Art*, forthcoming from University of California and *Collectivism After Modernism*, eds Stimson & Sholette, forthcoming from University of Minnesota Press.
19. I take up the notion of a shadow or dark matter art world in several recent essays including "Some Call It Art From Imaginary Autonomy to Autonomous Collectivity," available on-line at: *European Institute for Progressive Cultural Policies*: http://www.eipcp.net/diskurs/d07/text/sholette_en.html

20. REFERENCE NATO INTRODUCTORY TEXT HERE
21. Chin-tao Wu, *Privatising Culture: Corporate Art Intervention since the 1980s*, (London/New York, Verso, 2002), p 161.
22. Ibid, p 125.
23. Thomas Frank, *The Conquest of Cool: Business Culture, Counterculture, and the Rise of Hip Consumerism*, (Chicago, University of Chicago Press, 1997).
24. Regarding Iraq see Noel C. Paul, "Selling War: Marketers Weigh in on How Well Bush Is Branding the Battle with Iraq," *The Science Monitor*, March 26, 2003, and online at: http://abcnews.go.com/sections/business/World/iraq_sellingwar_csm_030326.html. And in terms of political explicitness I am focusing on a general tendency but acknowledge there are significant differences between SubRosa or the Critical Art Ensemble on one hand and e-xplo or N55 on the other.
25. Perhaps it is not coincidental that the shrewd, humorous reflexivity of contemporary interventionist art also resembles art made during the cold war in what was termed the "eastern bloc"? For example Krzysztof Wodiczko's ironic, conceptual art projects made before emigrating from Poland. Despite all efforts to move art into life political resistance, art and representation remain intricately connected.