

NY ARTS

Sandbox Democracies

<http://www.nyartsmagazine.com/?p=12277>



Image courtesy of swissinfo.ch

The 20th annual Jornadas de Estudio de la Imagen is the kind of luxurious discussion event that happens regularly here in Madrid. This June, the CA2M (Centro de Arte Dos de Mayo) in the town of Móstoles near Madrid, hosted “Speculating on Change”—an enormously wide brief during these very interesting times. Present behind nearly all the talks that week were the inaudible sounds of riotous repression of popular protest: the tear gas we could not smell, and the smack of rubber bullets we could not feel.

What lured me in to Móstoles for nearly a week was the presence of Ayreen Anastas and Rene Gabri who were doing a workshop on “After Work.” I miss the great discussions and genial interactions at 16 Beaver Studio, a place that they founded and currently run in NYC.

Their work has been a lodestone for me.

The conference was very rich and interesting. It helped me to draw a bead on many recent works in the realm of political art. However, that's fatuous to say now, about the ideas behind the artistic practices that are engaging the overbearing problems of our day. I did not draw a bead so much as get absolutely soaking wet from the dense theoretical fog the presenters pumped out.

Unlike the formal fumings of decades past, the presenters here were dealing with subjects of immediate importance: the nature and constitution of value and property, remuneration for artists, concepts of political action separate from labor, and curatorial and artistic frames which could contain those economic and political speculations.

As the conference began, on June 17th, Hyperallergic reported that "Over the weekend, a group of 100 or so activists protesting Tadashi Kawamata and Christophe Scheidegger's 'Favela Café' were teargassed at Art Basel."

Attending the conference in Madrid was Andrea Phillips, the English co-curator of the Istanbul Biennial. Events she arranged had been disrupted by protests there only weeks before. She spoke about this during her presentation. During conversations about the Basel incident during social time, some voiced skepticism. "It looked like an Aernout Mik production." Could the whole thing have been staged? The coincidence between representation and an intervening reality had been too neat.

I was uncertain as to what they were talking about. After the talks were done, I learned more. This was a harsh event, but totally fascinating, interesting and ambiguous, both politically and, in the emergent terms of what must be called, a new aesthetic discourse.

If the attack on the faux-favela party was a set-up, the police were in on it, because they commented to the press afterwards. And cops don't do art. A video posted to one blog was shot from behind the Kawamata installation, almost as if this YouTuber was waiting for the event to happen. It's a slow pan, shot from behind the favela, just before and as the police arrived. When the event does happen it does it isn't directly visible. The classic frame is at 2:45 or so, as a chair hurled at police appears in the air above the favela roofline. It begs for the Beuys/Nauman/Johns question: "What is under the chair?" (This video is linked on Greg Allen's blog, "greg.org: the making of: movies, art, &c"; clearly this is "&c.")

http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=FJkhVEyfhQY&feature=player_embedded#t=0

<https://vimeo.com/68430602>

http://www.tageswoche.ch/de/2013_24/basel/551573/video-gewaltsame-polizeiraeumung-am-messeplatz.htm

The ambiguities of representation are in full play in an event that unfolds in an artwork. It purports to open up global urban poverty in a fair catering to the world's rich and their artist servitors. In Basel, in very rich, very secure Switzerland, this event has a very different

meaning than the disruption of the biennial-sponsored performance in Istanbul.

That same lecture-performance was restaged in Móstoles by the Brussels-based duo Katleen Vermeir and Ronny Heiremans. They had the tables in the meeting space arranged like a boardroom, and proceeded to hold a kind of corporate presentation of a fictional art index fund, complete with simulated tele-chat by a financial expert. This character was a fictional composite, performed by an actor, and inspired by Herman Melville's mid-19th century novel "The Confidence Man."

Their work, "Art House Index", concerned the proposition—with distributed prospectus—of a kind of investment vehicle based on art. By now I understand a great deal of this terminology, although the whole notion of an index on which one may "place bets" remains obscure. I suppose Willi Bongard kicked this off with his "Top 100 Artists" list in the mid-1970s. By now this seemingly innocent guide to comparative value among "investment grade" artists, based on their museum and one-man gallery shows in key art cities and auction sales, is a relic of a distant past. I met the short-lived German Bongard, and thought him an odd guy, in some way also an artist with a conceptual project. I was an art fool. He was a business visionary. This shit is now real, or as real as fictional financial instruments can make it. The Art House couple revealed in a Q&A that some experts have offered to help them make their index project a real investment vehicle. Yow.

The activist artists of Turkey broke into the Art House performance with banners and chants. One artist trailed co-curator Fulya Erdemci with his video camera for a long while, which led to an ongoing legal dispute over privacy rights. It is unsurprising that these artists should be inattentive to a parodic project to turn creative production into a speculative financial instrument. Already in 2009, the Istanbul Biennial purported to deal with the concerns of precarious labor. That outing was themed "What Keeps Mankind Alive?" and curated by collective What, How & for Whom. It was protested by anarchists, which the art world ignored. To move in four years later with a theme of presentations around public space on the eve of a revolt around the same issue was too much to bear.

The part of the biennial that was disrupted in Istanbul was the educational section. It is funded by Koç Holding, an enormous Turkish conglomerate deeply involved in the rampant hyper-development tearing Istanbul apart. Gezi Park, one of the last green lungs of the city and the site of recent riots, is slated for a shopping mall and a historical reconstruction of military barracks in fond recollection of the Ottoman imperium.

When I heard "Koç" in the Móstoles table talk, I thought they said "Koch," the right-wing billionaires who have also thrown money into the NYC culture pot, and whose sponsorship there has been protested by Occupy Museums.

In her talk, Andrea Phillips discoursed learnedly on notions of property around art today. In her view, art fairs like the Istanbul Biennial and Art Basel "protect art from indiscreet speculation" of the kind burlesqued by Art House by asserting other meanings for art. Auratic, profound, transcendental significations are advanced over the mere significations of art as property.

I'll buy that. Still it's a rear guard action at best and waged on the plane of ideas where neoliberal capitalism has not bothered to deploy its forces. What was more germane in Phillips' analysis was her understanding of the role of neoliberal culture in the "post-welfare state" as responsible for a certain constant "fictionalization of concepts of publicness."

Art is promoted as a social necessity, a “socially ameliorative tool, a healing tool,” which is more important than its commodity status. Still, it “holds up a spectacle of freedom to unfree spectators.” Art fairs, then, are vistas onto what Grant Kester calls the “ontic spaciousness of the bourgeois subject.” That is, they are social, political and philosophical comfort food for an increasingly precarious bourgeois class.

The activists of Occupy are precisely those “unfree spectators.” They are moving to free themselves from the “nightmare of participation” in cultural and discursive arenas by disrupting these toy public spheres which cannot stand in for the absent forums and mechanisms of democratic participation.

At this moment, when artists have taken leading roles in the Taksim Square occupation (said Andrea Phillips, who should know), another spectre of Melville’s fiction has emerged – Bartleby. The clerk of the short story who “prefers not to” – move on, protest, fight the police, resignedly watch TV, take up armed struggle, etc. – has reappeared in Turkey in the form of the “duranadam,” or standing man protest, begun by an artist, which has gone viral.

It’s a great public action, and clearly a work of art: a public sculpture.

By Alan W. Moore