

ABSOLUTE DEMOCRACY

A conference organized by Carlos Motta (CO/USA) and Oliver Ressler (A) for Steirischer Herbst, 2012 — September 26, 2012 — 7pm

Participants: Manuela Bojadzijeve, Janna Graham & Dont Rhine/Ultra-red (D/UK/US), Mariam Ghani (US), Nicoline van Harskamp (NL), Jennifer Gonzalez (US), Isabelle Fremeaux & John Jordan (F/UK), Miguel López (PE), Sofía Olascoaga (MX), Nikolay Oleinikov (RU), and Marco Scotini (I).

The idea of an “absolute democracy“ suggests the need for the redistribution of wealth and power and the radical transformation of systems of rule. It denounces the effects of capitalism and in that way challenges normative understandings of class, race, gender and sexuality. “Absolute Democracy“ convenes an international group of cultural producers to discuss the construction of a plural, heterogeneous, inclusive and “absolute“ democracy. The conference is composed of two sessions: “Forms of Democracy: Activism, Art and Cultural Production“, which features presentations by artists and theoreticians that question past and existing forms of democratic participation, revise historical accounts and interpret forms of artistic production and documentation; and “Thinking Politics Freed From the State“, a session devoted to presentations that imagine new democratic models independent from the State and that envision new understandings of governability and of self-determination.

*

Session 1: Forms of Democracy: Activism, Art and Cultural Production

Introduction/Moderation: Carlos Motta (CO/US)

Manuela Bojadzijeve, Janna Graham & Dont Rhine from Ultra-red (D/UK/US)

Mariam Ghani (US)

Jennifer Gonzalez (US)

Miguel López (PE)

Nikolay Oleinikov (RU)

“**Forms of Democracy: Activism, Art and Cultural Production**” asks what is at stake in the process of representing, critiquing, and archiving democracy. Presenters discuss artistic and cultural projects that interrogate the “forms of democracy”— its aesthetic and political articulations—and engage with specific representational strategies that comment on democracy as a form of government but also as a mode of cultural production.

*

Teaching/Learning Democracy: Delegate Reports from Three Schools of Echoes

Manuela Bojadzijeve, Janna Graham & Dont Rhine from Ultra-red (D/UK/US)

The problem of democracy echoes everywhere. The curators of "Absolute Democracy" have called for "concrete statements about how to possibly achieve, construct, arrive to an absolute democracy." This sounds like an invitation to interrogate what we do, why we do it, and with whom. Since every inquiry presumes a protocol, and every protocol commences around a question, Ultra-red ask, what is the sound of democracy? That sound can be heard in the traditions of radical democracy linking political organizing with education. For the "Forms of Democracy" conversation, delegates from three Ultra-red teams (Berlin, London, and Los Angeles) reflect on their efforts to establish local pedagogical experiments. What is radical democratic pedagogy within the very centers of global capital today? What concrete contributions

can cultural producers make to teaching/learning absolute democracy in a moment of crisis in/of capitalism?

Ultra-red is an international sound collective. The group's diverse membership draws on a broad range of political experiences, intellectual traditions and artistic practices. Founded in 1994 by two AIDS activists in Los Angeles, Ultra-red conduct sound-based investigations as part of our members' daily involvement in social justice struggles concerning HIV/AIDS prevention justice, anti-racism, migration, education, gentrification, and poverty. Ultra-red teams work in locations across Europe, North America, and South Africa. We learn from musique concrète, conceptualism, popular education, and militant inquiry. In the image-dominated field of political art, Ultra-red seek to develop, test, and teach practices of political listening.

*

Kabul: Constitutions

Mariam Ghani (US)

Mariam Ghani will present a guided tour of “Kabul: Constitutions,” her interactive documentary of Afghanistan's Constitutional Loya Jirga of 2003-4, with a discussion of the strategies of representation employed in the production (by UNAMA and the transitional Afghan administration), experience (by delegates and observers both elected and appointed) and depiction (by the international media and by Ghani herself) of the constitutional assembly. “Kabul: Constitutions” resists the construction of any linear narrative of the events of the assembly, instead choosing to examine the political process through the space in which it unfolded, a multi-million-dollar tent complex constructed specifically for the two jirgas, or “grand councils,” held between 2002 and 2004 to reimagine the fundamental architecture of the Afghan state, in that “open moment” when previous structures and assumptions had been swept away by war, invasions and migrations.

Mariam Ghani is an artist, writer, and teacher. Her videos and installations have been exhibited internationally, most recently at dOCUMENTA (13) in Kassel and Kabul, MoMA in New York, and the Sharjah Biennial 10. Her public and participatory projects have been staged in Berlin, Amsterdam, Buffalo, Detroit, New York and online. Her texts have been published in, among others, *Mousse*, *Pavilion*, *Filmmaker*, *the New York Review of Books*, and the *Radical History Review*. Her ongoing collaborations include work with media archive pad.ma, choreographer Erin Kelly, anthropologist Ashraf Ghani, and artist Chitra Ganesh, as the roving archive Index of the Disappeared. She is currently a visiting scholar at NYU's Asian Pacific Institute.

*

Does Democracy Have a Visual Culture?

Jennifer Gonzalez (US)

Political theories of democracy generally define the term abstractly according to a set of relations among people that are cultural, legal, participatory and voluntary. Over the past decade we have seen repeated claims that democracy also has a visual component that, in fact, democracy *looks* like something. Activists and government officials make this claim; artists and historians substantiate this claim. It seems possible to argue, therefore, that a visual culture of democracy exists. If democracy looks like something, what does it look like? Who gets to decide? How and where do bodies appear, or disappear? What can we learn from looking at early visualizations of the democratic process? What is at stake, politically, in the current battle over articulating new

visual forms of democracy? How is the *look* of democracy tied to the *feel* of democracy, and why might this connection be important?

Jennifer A. González is Associate Professor in the History of Art and Visual Culture Department at the University of California, Santa Cruz. Her critical writings have appeared in numerous periodicals and journals including *Frieze*, *Bomb*, and *Art Journal*. Her book *Subject to Display: Reframing Race in Contemporary Installation Art* (MIT Press, 2008) was a finalist for the Charles Rufus Morey book award. She teaches in the Whitney Museum Independent Study Program, NY, and has received numerous fellowships including from the American Council of Learned Societies and the Ford Foundation. In 2012-2013 she is affiliated with the Centre de l'histoire et theorie des arts, EHESS, Paris.

*

Absolute Transfutures

Miguel López (PE)

An “absolute democracy” requires us to shape our own histories. Any radical transformation of the system demands to establish new territories and narratives for subjectivities and bodies that have been, for a long time, outside history. I would like to consider here one of the most remarkable examples of this rewriting of the past: the “Museo Travesti del Perú” (“Transvestite Museum of Peru”), founded by the artist and drag queen Giuseppe Campuzano (b. 1969). This museum is a portable collection of objects (masks, wax Virgins, high heels), appropriated images, press clippings and artworks. The project, halfway between performance and historical research, proposes a critical rereading of the so-called “History of Peru” from the perspective of mixed-race transvestite natives. Here transgender, transvestite, transsexual, intersex and androgynous figures are posited as central actors and the main political subjects for any construction of genuine and democratic futures.

Miguel A. López (Lima, 1983) is writer, artist and researcher. He is an active member, since its foundation in 2007, of the Southern Conceptualisms Network / Red Conceptualismos del Sur (RCS). He has published his writing in newspapers and periodicals such as *Afterall*, *ramona*, *Manifesta Journal*, *Tercer Texto*, *The Exhibitionist*, *Artecontexto*, and *Papers d'Art*. He is co-curator (with RCS) of “Perder la Forma Humana. Una imagen sísmica de los años 80 en América Latina” at Museo Nacional Centro de Arte Reina Sofía, Madrid (2012–2013), among others. During 2012-2013 he is guest-curator at Lugar a Dudas, an independent art space in Cali, Colombia.

*

Communal Living

Nikolay Oleinikov (RU)

Several years ago Nikolay Oleinikov initiated a series of *obschezhitie*-projects grounded in collective creative living [**obschezhitie – rus. for <communal living>*]. Since then, bringing together practitioners from different fields and organizing temporary communities in constant dialog, has become an essential element of his artistic practice. This initiative was elaborated and developed in activities of the Chto Dealt? Group and supported by other collectives, and have now taken shape of experimental non-stop seminars, congresses-communes or learning plays. At this stage it makes sense to summarize the experiences we have had and to attempt to examine the different perspectives for this experiment, which has offered “creative workers” and “workers in

the field of cultural production” a direction for making sense of their position in society, given them the impulse to engage in critical self-education at a local level, and to reframe the question of a rapprochement between political and creative practices.

Oleynikov likes to think about collective practices as a sort of dance. The aesthetic power of the body language common to public gatherings, protests and assemblies is a kind of “dance” logic, very similar to “contact improvisation.” As Oleynikov was thinking about his “performative” presentation for “Absolute Democracy,” the memory of his Soviet past came to mind and specially the practice of “Industrial Gymnastics.” Everyone was obliged to make some easy warming up physical exercises during the work day, despite what industry the worker was involved in, or their physical or intellectual labor, service, or creativity. During his presentation in this conference the audience will make a collective industrial ballet together. A volunteer will lead a simple and slow exercise sequence as Oleynikov talks about collective practices, durational seminars, learning plays, learning murals and the Soviet tradition of communal life practices.

Nikolay Oleynikov (1976) is a Moscow-based artist and activist and member of ChtoDelat?, editor for ChtoDelat?’s newspaper, co-founder of the Learning Film Group, and May Congress of Creative Workers. Known for his didactic murals and graphic works within the tradition of the Soviet monumental school, comics, surrealist-like imaginary and punk culture. Represented worldwide by his solo projects as well as with number of collective activities, Oleynikov has had numerous international shows including Fargfabriken, Stockholm; Musée d’Art Moderne de la Ville de Paris – MAM/ARC; Cittadellarte – Fondazione Pistoletto, Biella; Museo dell Arte Contemporaneo Luigi Pecci, Prato; X BALTIC TRIENNALE in Vilnius; Welling School, London; State Tretyakov Gallery and Paperworks Gallery, Moscow.

*

Carlos Motta (Introduction/Moderator) is a multi-disciplinary artist whose work has been presented internationally in venues such as New Museum, Guggenheim Museum and MoMA/PS1 Contemporary Art Center, New York; Institute of Contemporary Art, Philadelphia; Museo de Arte del Banco de la República, Bogotá; Serralves Museum, Porto; National Museum of Contemporary Art, Athens; San Francisco Art Institute; and Hebbel am Ufer, Berlin. Motta is currently working on a performative event, which will premiere on February 2013 at Tate Modern, London. Motta is a graduate of the Whitney Independent Study Program; he was named a Guggenheim Foundation Fellow in 2008 and received a Creative Capital Foundation Grant in 2012. He teaches at Parsons The New School of Design and The Milton Avery Graduate School of the Arts at Bard College.

Session 2: Thinking Politics Freed From the State

Introduction/Moderation: Oliver Ressler (A)

Nicoline van Harskamp (NL)

Isabelle Fremeaux & John Jordan (F/UK)

Sofia Olascoaga (MX)

Marco Scotini (I)

“**Thinking Politics Freed From the State**” is a session devoted to presentations that imagine new democratic models independent from the State and that envision new understandings of governability and of self-determination.

Yours in Solidarity

Nicoline van Harskamp (NL)

Nicoline van Harskamp will talk about the theoretical tradition of anarchism, as it applies to artists with an ambition to be somehow instrumental in the world, or more specifically as it applies to herself and her work *Yours in Solidarity*, on show in < rotor > in Graz from September 29th, 2012.

The work of **Nicoline van Harskamp** (Netherlands, 1975) addresses the function and power of the spoken word, and its ability to influence perception and shape thought, both of which are instrumental to politics. Her most recent and ongoing project *Yours in Solidarity*, addressing the contemporary history of anarchism through a correspondence archive, was presented in different stages of completion at the Museo de Arte Contemporanea Universitario in Mexico, the Frankfurter Kunstverein, Hillary Crisp Gallery in London, Manifesta 9 in Genk, Belgium and the Shanghai Biennale. Nicoline van Harskamp was trained at the KABK in Den Haag (BA) and the Chelsea College of Art and Design in London (MA). In 2009 she won the Dutch Prix de Rome. She is a faculty member at the Sandberg Institute Amsterdam and a board member at Witte de With in Rotterdam.

*

Paths Through Utopias: Everyday Life Despite Capitalism

Isabelle Fremeaux & John Jordan (F/UK)

As the storms of the financial crisis began in 2007, we set out on a journey across Europe to experience examples of post-capitalist living. For 7 months we traveled through 11 communities and projects, all of which used horizontal forms of organizing and direct forms of democracy. This ranged from a direct action climate camp to squatted villages, a free love commune to self-managed factories, an anarchist school to land reappropriated by precarious agricultural workers. From this experience came a film-book, *Pfade durch Utopia* fusing reflective travel writings with an attached DVD. Whilst the book is travelogue, analyzing the communities, their practices and their histories, the film is a magicorealist road movie set in an imagined post-capitalist future. Our presentation will briefly outline the experience and how it changed our own lives and practices. *Pfade durch Utopia* has just been published in German with Nautilus.

<http://www.edition-nautilus.de/programm/politik/buch-978-3-89401-763-7.html>

Isabelle Fremeaux was a Senior Lecturer in Media and Cultural Studies at Birkbeck College-University of London (2002-2011) until she deserted the academy. Her action research explores popular education, storytelling and creative forms of resistance.

John Jordan is an art activist. He co-founded the direct action groups Reclaim the Streets and the Clown Army, worked as a cinematographer for Naomi Klein's *The Take*, co-edited the book *We Are Everywhere: the irresistible rise of global anti-capitalism* (Verso 2004) Together they co-founded the The Laboratory of Insurrectionary Imagination, and co-authored the film-book *Pfade durch Utopia* (Nautilus, 2012). They are in the process of setting up a school of art activism and Permaculture within the new collective La r.O.n.c.e (Resist, Organise, Nourish, Create, Exist) on a farm in Brittany, France.

*

Between Utopia and Failure

Sofia Olascoaga (MX)

Between Utopia and Failure, is an active research project-in-progress, assessing the productive tension of intentional community models developed in Mexico in past decades. The project traces the work and influence of radical thinker Ivan Illich, through CIDOC -the intellectual community he started in Cuernavaca- and the role that model has played in the practice of many Mexican and international thinkers and artists. It also looks at figures Gregorio Lemercier and Sergio Méndez Arceo, who pioneered initiating communal models on education, psychoanalysis and social movements. This critical reassessment focuses on the current relevance of the ideas and forms of organization generated between the fifties and eighties, and on their influence of several generations. The research includes the activation of dialogic platforms with direct participants, scholars, and with younger cultural producers influenced by these experiences, to discuss the pertinence of looking back at them, as a way to respond to Mexico's disrupted social tissue.

Sofia Olascoaga (b. Mexico City, 1980) works in the intersections of art and education by activating spaces for critical thinking and collective action. Through museum education, artistic practice, and curatorial initiatives seeks to engage in productive ways of questioning and experimenting on art's social role. Olascoaga, is a Curatorial Research Fellow at Independent Curators International, and attended the Whitney Independent Study Program as a Curatorial Fellow in 2010. She received her BFA from La Esmeralda National School of Fine Arts (MX). From 2007 to 2010, was Head of Education at Museo de Arte Carrillo Gil, and was Clinics Director for SITAC X Symposium in Mexico City in 2012.

*

Autonomia, for example

Marco Scotini (I)

Contemporary forms of social mobilization breaking out everywhere across the planet these days assert that "there are no alternatives" possible within representative democracy. From the WTO protests in Seattle to those currently enacted by international Occupy movement, from Zapatista to the Arab insurrections, there is an identical tension (global, chaotic, plural) transforming the world that has never ceased to act. The insurgent movements respond to the irreversible decline of the political model based on representation, to the neoliberal economy's new hegemony and the reigning police forces, with a devastating political experimentation that dislocates the classic methods of exercising power and resists the logics of representation (political parties, ruling classes, the State). The refusal to delegate the representation of what divides us (property, wealth, power) to political parties and labor unions, and the representation of what we share (citizenship, community) to the State, has its origin in a new concept of political action brought forward by the revolution of the Seventies.

Marco Scotini, Art critic and independent curator, based in Milan. Director of NABA Visual, Multimedia and Performing Arts Department and M.A. of Visual Arts and Curatorial Studies. He is a Director of Gianni Colombo Archive in Milan and Editor-in-chief of the magazine *No Order. Art in a post-fordist Society*, published by Archive Books, Berlin. Co-founder of Isola Art Center. His writings have been published in magazines like Springerin, Flash Art, Domus, Moscow Art Magazine, Brumaria, Fucking Good Art, Kaleidoscope, Manifesta Journal etc. Recent exhibitions he has curated among others are: Gianni Colombo, Castello di Rivoli Museo d'Arte

Contemporanea, Rivoli, 2009; *A History of Irritated Material*, Raven Row, London, 2010. Since 2005 he is a curator of the traveling exhibition *Disobedience. An ongoing video Archive*, exhibited in Berlin, Mexico DF, Eindhoven, Nottingham, Riga, Atlanta, Boston, Umea, Copenhagen etc.

*

Oliver Ressler (A) (Introduction/Moderator) produces exhibitions, projects in the public space, and films on issues such as economics, democracy, forms of resistance and social alternatives. His projects have been in solo exhibitions at the Berkeley Art Museum, USA; Platform Garanti Contemporary Art Center, Istanbul; Museum of Contemporary Art, Belgrade; Centro Cultural Conde Duque, Madrid; Alexandria Contemporary Arts Forum, Egypt; Bunkier Sztuki Contemporary Art Gallery, Krakow and The Cube Project Space, Taipei. Ressler has participated in group exhibitions at MASSMoCA, USA; Itaú Cultural Institute, Sao Paulo; National Museum of Contemporary Art, Athens; Van Abbe Museum, Eindhoven and at the biennials in Prague, Seville, Moscow, Taipei, Lyon and Gyumri. For the Taipei Biennale 2008, Ressler curated an exhibition on the anti-globalization movement, *A World Where Many Worlds Fit*. A show on the financial crisis, *It's the Political Economy, Stupid*, co-curated with Gregory Sholette, is currently presented at Centre of Contemporary Art, Thessaloniki.