

THEORISING ART INTERVENTIONS: MANIFESTA 6 AND OCCUPY 38

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The attack must be unexpected, frontal, and must come with the night when the building, undisturbed by its daily functions, is asleep and when its body dreams of itself, when the architecture has its nightmares. This will be a symbol-attack, a public psychoanalytical seance, unmasking and revealing the unconscious of the building, its body, the 'medium' of power.

Krzysztof Wodiczko, *Public Address*

What is an art intervention? It implies a reversal of norms, an attempt to shock, destroy pretence, break apart traditions of representation to foreground the experiential, to open different kinds of engagement with meaning, to activate an audience. For instance, in performance art, it typically subjects an audience to alternative, confusing, obscure, alien or otherwise abnormal mindsets, attempting to 'intervene' with their normal thought processes. It is a concentrated essence of an oppositional concept – without the familiar constellation of givens set up to ingratiate the viewer in a context – organised to instigate a disequilibrium in an established system of thought, behaviours, conventions. The Institute of Applied Autonomy describes this as follows, "Interventions change the behavior of a system in a way that the system is not prepared to deal with". Art interventions have both an oppositional element, a sense of conspicuous negation, of tearing something down (through demystification, deconstruction); and also a productive element, a sense of producing or activating a new set of conditions, revitalising an ossified set of relationships and reconfiguring it as a fluid set of relationships. Perhaps the most dynamic interventions transcend this binarism, synthesising an amalgam of both tendencies, its creative force imbued in a radically penetrative criticality.

An art intervention is usually dematerialised, often ephemeral, interactive, post-autonomous, post-studio art, as opposed to pictorialist or 'retinal' art. Intervention is predicated upon action, interjection into a situation, and immediate reconfiguration of relationships, as opposed to 'representation'. Thus far, 'art intervention' always seems to be the vehicle to cause change in some pre-existing, formalised art historical canon, convention or genre, as opposed to being the basis of a genre or type of art itself. More in relation to what it is against than what it is for, what constitutes an intervention is defined largely according to the viewer expectations, ideologies and exhibition conventions of its time.

How can we systematise the theorisation of art intervention? Is it oriented towards a product, an event, a reaction, a result? Is it social mores, bureaucratic structures, popular opinion, epistemes of knowledge, art-world behaviour, accepted conventions of exhibition or display that is the sphere into which we are intervening? Does it make sense to talk about art interventions in terms of success or failure? Where does the 'outside world' and the intervening of daily life into art, or art's intervening into daily life, figure into art interventions?

The term 'art intervention' immediately fast-forwards us into a conceptual (as opposed to an aesthetic) realm, as it situates art in a context of the socially constructed norms in which it is received. It implies an existing community of shared values and assumptions, in relation to which the 'interventionist' has some superior knowledge or moral code, which he/she then forcefully interjects through his/her intervention. The assumption is that had the status quo been left to its own devices, it would not have naturally come to the 'revelation' that the intervention brought about. There is a rhetoric of a vanguard around the art interventionist, with the subtext of a guerrilla, non-institutionally sanctioned, rogue element. Therefore, an art intervention is a shortcut, or a short circuit of established patterns, to expedite the reception of or exposure to a superior knowledge, perceptual clarity or paradigm shift.

What is it that is problematic about some of these assumptions, particularly that any given audience has a homogeneous set of expectations, thought processes or moral codes, all identically in need of being intervened with and in the same way? Before the oppositionality embedded in the notion of intervention is legible, one takes for granted a codified set of assumptions to be uniformly disrupted. What are the pitfalls of operating upon such totalising, generalist assumptions? In what cases would such an assumption be effective and apt, and in what cases would it be a patently contestable premise, failing to reflect the heterogeneity or unknowns of a situation? When the Situationiste Internationale disrupts mass culture with 'interventions' into daily life, is it not assuming, as does Guy Debord's *Society of the Spectacle*, that we are all affected in an identical way by mass culture, consumerism, in the same way and that we can all be uniformly corrected of its ills with such and such an 'intervention'?

'The Interventionists' at MASS MoCA in 2006

In 2006, the exhibition 'The Interventionists: Art in the Social Sphere' curated by Nato Thompson was launched in the gargantuan Massachusetts Museum of Contemporary Art (MoCA), a blockbuster survey of interventionary art. Though perhaps laudable for its commitment to multifarious counter-hegemonic practices, from Institute for Applied Autonomy, Yomango, The Yes Men, Critical Art Ensemble, Spurse, etc. that might otherwise elude (for better or for worse) conventional display environs, the exhibition was ridden with an adolescent boy-like fascination with buzzing, whirring, gadgetry and gimmicks. The exhibition press release read: "these 'interventionists' continue to create an impressive body of work that trespasses into the everyday world – art that critiques, lampoons, interrupts, and co-opts, art that acts subtly or with riotous fanfare, and art that agitates for social change using magic tricks, faux fashion and jacked-up lawn mowers". Sounding more like a circus description (faux fashion, magic tricks, riotous fanfare), with a distinctly recreational tone to mollify any potential political critique, one almost expects to find Dancing Bears and a trapeze artist. It then continues with a troublingly pejorative tone, "In contrast to the sometimes heavy-handed political art of the 1980s, interventionist practitioners have begun to carve out compelling new paths for artistic practice, coupling hard-headed politics with a light-handed approach, embracing the anarchist Emma Goldman's dictum that revolutions and dancing belong together. The projects in 'The Interventionists' – whether they were discussions of urban geography, tents for homeless people or explorations of current labour practices – were often seasoned with honey rather than vinegar".

Reading more like a Barbecue Sauce TV commercial (“seasoned with honey not vinegar”) or a Dance-a-Thon jingle (“revolutions and dancing belong together”) than a description of politicised art practices, the figure of Emma Goldman is invoked as ‘authentic radical brand’ figurehead, without remotely engaging with any of her ideas, but to sanctify the recreationalisation of art activism (Emma said revolutions and dancing belong together!). I also find strange this tacit compulsion to cater to some unidentified ‘popular opinion’ that to be overtly political is undesirable, not ‘cool’ or ‘in’ – hence this justificatory tone that this MoCA exhibition was *not* to be confused with heavy-handed political art of the past (the ones lamentably seasoned with not honey, but vinegar). More befuddling is the characterisation of one of the most conservative and retrograde eras of US art – the 1980s’ ‘greed is good’ era of speculative art markets and vacuous Ab Ex paintings – as ridden with “heavy-handed political art”. I found myself asking the question, which “heavy-handed political art of the 80’s” was this press release so blithely relegating to ineffectuality, and on what basis? Artists Call Against US Intervention in Central America that took a stand against the US government’s economic, political and military interventions in Central America and mushroomed into a nationwide mobilisation? Gran Fury’s valiant agit-prop campaigns to galvanise awareness of malignant inaction to address AIDS? Guerilla Girls’ blunt protests against the lack of recognition for female artists? This blanket dismissal of “heavy-handed political art” – simultaneously myopic, reprehensibly disrespectful to the legacy to which current art is indebted, and implicitly self-congratulatory (*‘this new brand is better!’*) – smacks of quintessential Generation X complacency and entitled insulation from the struggles upon which the current status quo we take for granted was built, as well as a regressive slide into complicity with a neoliberal agenda, complete with a glib dismissal of the viability of militant politicisation. This must give us pause in terms of the seriousness with which we take the political consciousness fuelling the exhibition (not to mention the irony that one of the artists featured prominently in ‘The Interventionists’, Polish artist Krzysztof Wodiczko, is in fact an icon of “heavy-handed 80’s political art”, with his 1985 swastika projection on the South African Embassy building in London).

Now let us turn to how this exhibition was divided into four subcategories like a mail order J. Crew catalogue of polo shirt colours: 1. Nomads, 2. Reclaim the Streets, 3. Ready to Wear, 4. Experimental University. Once again, one is struck with a frustration that these are almost nothing more than formalist designations, skating on the surface of the superficial form of these artworks without apprehending the specific cadence and accents of their underlying concept: ‘these people create clothes’, ‘these people created mobile homes’, ‘these people did their work in the streets’. It may be true that X artist created clothes or mobile homes, or worked in the streets – is that the most crucial feature of the overarching idea of their work?

Suffice it to say, in my investigation of the epistemological basis of art interventions, I was unsatisfied with the answers given by the MASS MoCA Interventionist exhibition, which seemed infatuated with gadgetry and micro-technologies, decontextualised from any political analysis other than that they were ‘trespassing and modifying the rules of engagement’, without elaborating upon what was one trespassing, and to what end.

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I will provisionally propose my criteria for an intervention as premised upon two principles, namely: 1) an act in the Kantian sense as that which defines a limit by surpassing it; 2) the only acts of institutional critique that succeed are ones that fail – their ostensible ‘failure’ is evidence that they have actually threatened the institutional power structure and could not be absorbed by it. (I use the term ‘institutional critique’ not as the reified canon of what we have come to know as ‘institutional critique’, but in a more expanded sense of any act of cultural production that bears a contestatory relationship to institutions of art.) Based on

these two principles, I will address two relatively recent cases that did not declare themselves as 'interventions', which is why I am attracted to them and their lack of 'art world packaging' as examples around which to make an argument that they were interventions: Manifesta 6 and its cancellation in 2006 and Occupy 38 in 2011.

The Cancellation of Manifesta 6

The globalisation of the art world makes for an increasingly homogenised art system, for which many fault the art biennial. As Mark Van Proyen of *Art in America* notes:

The real story of the art world in the 1990's lies in how it subtly embraced and then reversed this trend towards hyper-commodification by using the machinations of marketing to shift the focus of art patronage away from the artist and back toward the institution... The 1990's did not show its unique aesthetic hand in the emergence of any identifiable period style in the visual arts; rather it did so with a building boom in stylish museum buildings and a concomitant proliferation of the international biennial.

Whether the biennial is located in Guangzhou, Dakar, New York or Liverpool, we see a 'lingua franca' of 'multi-channel sound and video installation', 'collaborative duos', noisy hi-tech, spectacle-oriented, large-scale installation, just enough transgression to be sexy, just enough estrangement to distinguish it from mass culture, just enough ambiguity to be apolitical, all marked by a high degree of aesthetic entropy, inter-changeability and infinite reproducibility. As Julian Stallabrass notes in *Art Incorporated*:

Seen from the point of view of the art-world as a system, artworks appear as the component parts of a uniform machine, which produces a large range of novel combinations that are tested against various publics for marketable meanings...¹ The filtering of local material through the art system ultimately leads to homogeneity. This system, not just the curation but the interests of all the bodies, private and public, that make up all the alliances around the world [from] which biennials are formed, [tends] to produce an art that speaks to international concerns.²

Against this distribution of sameness, we can then perhaps contextualise Manifesta as a counter-hegemonic move away from the homogenisation of the globalised art market (while still, wittingly or unwittingly, a component of it), an impulse to locate the biennial in a geopolitically specific local context. A 'roving European biennial' that chooses a new city every two years, its original impetus was to shift the centres of art away from predictable Western European mega-cities to more peripheral zones, in some sense to revitalise culturally marginal cities and those ridden by intercultural conflict. An offshoot of European Union utopianism, this notion that art could be used as an intervention into a geopolitical situation, something perhaps mundane to Europeans, is wholly foreign and exotic to Americans, and would never happen in the United States, where art is first and foremost a commercial, careerist enterprise with only the most tenuous and strained ties to anything political.

Perhaps the only exception I can think of is Paul Chan's *Waiting for Godot* in New Orleans' 9th Ward in 2006. Chan restaged the Beckett play in the wake of Hurricane Katrina, using the six months in the lead-up to the play for intensive activist work within hurricane-ravaged New Orleans, attempting to galvanise pressure to address the Katrina aftermath. That said, the important differences between Chan's use of an art project to address Katrina refugees and Manifesta are: 1) *Waiting for Godot* was a 'one-off', a one-time project conceived by

a single artist, whereas Manifesta is an ongoing institution devoted to the use of the art biennial in dialogue with a geopolitical context; 2) Paul Chan is an activist – that is to say, someone outside culturally legitimised channels of power and action, an ‘activist’ being a marginalised, at times demonised moniker in American society – whereas Manifesta is a culturally legitimised institution. American art institutions (Creative Time, MoMA) latched on to Chan’s project largely because of his celebrity. Would they have considered it viable to do so were Chan’s celebrity not attached? The resounding answer is no.

Previous iterations of Manifesta took place in Rotterdam (1996), Luxembourg (1998), Ljubljana (2000), Frankfurt (2002), Donostia-San Sebastian (2004), with the 2006 Manifesta slated for Nicosia, the capital of Cyprus. Three people were commissioned as curators: Florian Waldhovel (a German curator), Mai Abu Eidahab (an Egyptian independent curator) and Anton Vidokle (a Russian-born, New York-based artist). Cyprus is one of the last Cold War holdovers, split into antagonistic Greek-occupied and Turkish-occupied territories. Rather than hold a traditional art object display, their concept was to hold a four-month, alternative, temporary school in the vein of Black Mountain College, particularly seeking students from North Africa and the Middle East, hoping to coalesce an art intelligentsia in a locale lacking in contemporary art infrastructure. Eschewing the usual biennial model of the globetrotting-tourist-filled playground to revive the economy with Western consumption and a neo-colonialist capitalist leisure industry, they instead wanted to invest in the building of infrastructure in the local scene of Nicosia. That is to say, they subordinated the global to the local, and anomaly for biennials.

The crux of the issue, however, was that this school was to be ‘bi-communal’, that is, held in both the Turkish-Cypriot and Greek-Cypriot territories of Nicosia, with the Greek side overseen by Waldhovel and Eidahab, and the Turkish side by Vidokle. When a press conference for the school in the Turkish-occupied territory garnered positive attention before the actual start of Manifesta, the Greek-Cypriot cultural authorities at Nicosia for Art felt the weight of cognitive dissonance, as recognising the legitimacy of this school would mean recognising that of the Turkish-occupied territory. As such, they cancelled the biennial and fired the three curators, replete with recriminations and a half-million-dollar lawsuit against Manifesta.

Curiously, subsequent press accounts attribute the dissension to a case of administrative snafu, a miscommunication within the context of contracts and legalese – whereas Vidokle has said in no uncertain terms that the cancellation of Manifesta 6 was censorship.³ Press accounts seem to only be able to interpret the events with a ‘hindsight is 20/20’ condescension towards X party for not knowing better, the assumption being that the status quo was the inevitable outcome. The more interesting question for me is to imagine what would have happened if the biennial had gone through, if it had galvanised popular sentiment or planted seeds in 10 years for an eventual movement to reunify war-torn Cyprus. What would that have taken, and can we understand Vidokle’s administration of the Turkish-occupied school as a type of large-scale activism; that is to say, the harnessing of an institution of cultural production to intervene in (even destabilise) a geopolitical situation? If the answer is yes, then on whose behalf was he an activist – the Turkish-Cypriots? In a sense, two temporalities clashed – the rising tide of a pan-continental European Union utopianism temporality fuelling Manifesta, and the antagonistic, territorial, Cold War temporality of the Greek cultural authorities. By not backing down on the Manifesta school, Vidokle showed what the limit of the discourse of ‘bi-cultural tolerance’ was by exceeding it, pushing the dispositif underlying the biennial, rendering his curation of this exhibition a confrontational missile with political ramifications.

An art world based on neoliberal capitalist expansionism and ‘growth’ could only understand (if not deride) the cancelled biennial as a ‘failure’, fatuously oblivious to the wholly unusual and ambitious notion of using an art biennial to affect a 40-year-old geopolitical

situation. In an insipid display of art-world narcissism, Vidokle was chastised for 'believing he could accomplish what even the UN couldn't', or for going beyond what people usually mean by 'political art'. Ironically, every avante garde visual art movement in the West has for 90 years wrung its hands in aspiration to 'merge art and life', and when an actual instance of it happened, when a vessel of cultural production was brought into confrontation with a concrete geopolitical situation, they balked and scarcely had the vocabulary or tools to even process what happened, falling silent, inert, and cynically disengaging from the entire scenario.

Occupy 38

I shift gears now into a different landscape, that of Occupy Wall Street (OWS) and the visionary 28-hour occupation of an art gallery in October 2011 that can be understood to have been an intervention into the more mainstream OWS arts groups. Before OWS began, roughly 50 people gathered at Tompkins Square Park twice a week in July and August 2011 to create the New York City General Assembly, eventually giving birth to the Occupy movement itself in September. Several of these originators, initially 10 people, eventually 200, took over Artists Space gallery in Soho, New York, an occupation named Occupy 38 (for 38 Greene Street, the gallery's address) or Take Artists Space. This fluid body of people held this space for 28 hours without the gallery's permission, leading to a tense standoff and their eventual eviction by a hired security force. Occupy 38 subsequently became a huge source of controversy, eliciting both denunciation and support within the OWS ranks and being thus a 'dividing line'.

We can look at Occupy 38 as an intervention into an orthodoxy that had started to reify around Occupy Wall Street. One of these orthodoxies was consensus process, to which many in OWS adhered with seemingly blind, evangelist fervour. Consensus is a mode of group decision-making that emphasises shared power and process over product. Rather than voting or having a black-and-white 'winner' and 'loser', it is a slow, painstaking process, aiming for many steps of incremental negotiation to achieve unanimous consent. But some involved with Occupy 38 felt that consensus had ossified into a new type of 'establishment', with facilitation training almost taking on the patina of a 'professional' caste. Some felt that the 'harmony' that OWS privileges had started to be a conservative anaesthesia that reins in surprise anti-authoritarianism or true creative action. For Gramsci, consensus was an insidious result of the ruling class' hegemony over the working class, using 'common sense' to induce seamless and almost unwitting 'consent'. For Hans Haacke, consensus was the *prima facie* product of capitalist neoliberalism, 'consensus' being the inevitable resignation to the complete corporatisation of cultural expression (*Creating Consent*, 1981). For Baudrillard, consensus was the depoliticised vacuum that the New World Order of American hegemony produced (*The Gulf War Did Not Take Place*, 1991). Occupy 38 rejected the formalist tendencies of turning OWS into a governing body, or the General Assembly into a parliament.

Another persistent condemnation of Occupy 38 from certain quarters was 'How could they occupy a non-profit art space?' By its actions, Occupy 38 broached open a discursive space in which to ask, 'Is there a difference between a profit and non-profit art space today?' In Julie Ault's *Alternative Art, New York, 1965-85*, 'alternative art spaces' were an anachronism by the late 90s, mere feeders for the commercial gallery system.⁴ As Pablo Helguera notes in *Playing by the Rules: Alternative Thinking/Alternative Spaces*:

[An] alternative space rarely offers a real 'alternative' to the kind of art that is shown elsewhere. Instead, they are inextricably connected to a critical and economic fabric of the art world. By retaining their original name, alternative spaces today create a semblance of mini-subcultures that actually function closer to clearinghouses of emerging artist talent, rather than representing countercultural or underground

movements... But while this is a valid function, we should ask if that is enough to claim a role as a true conceptual and practical counterpart in the art system. I believe it is not.

Some hold that non-profits were proliferated in the post-60s US to quell social unrest into a governmentally supervised outlet, just as the New Deal staved off Communism by absorbing communisation tendencies into the Establishment. Many in OWS, naive and inexperienced in thinking about social justice issues, sanguinely attributed a halo of moral indemnity to something simply because it is a non-profit or 'alternative' space. As such, a torrent of denunciation descended upon Occupy 38 with a strange uniformity in *Art Info*, *Animal NY* and *Village Voice*. Occupy 38 was called "puerile", "freakish", "bizarre", "most hateable", an "aggressive artist group [that] botches occupation", a "failed occupation" – a testament to the intellectual conformity and subservience of the commercial art press. This witch hunt dynamic was sadly a retaliatory move instigated by the Artistic Director of the gallery himself, most explicitly targeting one of the Occupy 38 participants, performance artist Georgia Sagri. The gallery then pressured the OWS Arts and Culture Committee to disaffiliate itself from Occupy 38; as such, the committee sent 76 emails in 20 hours about 'what to do' about Occupy 38. Sounding more like a corporate Board of Directors than a group of activists, underlying this discussion was the assumption of ownership of the OWS 'brand', which they did not want tarnished. This resulted in an official statement denouncing Occupy 38 and antithetical to every principle of inclusion and horizontality for which OWS purports to stand.

Mainstream OWS art groups saw it first and foremost as a 'form' (i.e., bureaucracy) that must be systematised, normalised and rendered respectable. That Occupy 38 did not first seek 'permission' from the Arts and Culture Committee was an affront. Occupy 38 was executed under the belief that an action must catalyse a situation you cannot predict beforehand – because you do not know what will happen when a new threshold of power is threatened – not simply rehearse pre-choreographed symbolic rituals of antagonism. Many 'leaders' in mainstream OWS art groups favoured its becoming a conduit for accreditation within existing power structures: biennials and contemporary art centres worldwide, office space with art magazines, artist residencies, conference invites – essentially using OWS as a para-professional networking system. Occupy 38, on the other hand, eschewed the career-oriented approach of turning OWS into a governing body with powered interests that must be advanced through an existing system of art-world credentials.

Beginning as an act of negation against the status quo, OWS then subsequently generated a culture of vociferously celebratory affirmation, as if to over-compensate for its precarity. Leftism is deeply marginalised in the US, and it was as if OWS felt it had to make up for its 'weirdness' by being as palatable and upbeat as possible. Rejecting its pre-approved modes of speech and feel-good symbolic antagonism (mic check, consensus process, General Assembly), Occupy 38 became an 'affect alien', engaged no longer in the mere performance of antagonism, but in an assault on an institution's power structure itself. Occupy 38 was 'inappropriate speech' – a radical intervention into Occupy Wall Street that could not be assimilated, recuperated, sublimated or de-fanged. Occupy 38 did not succeed, but to even dance with this possibility enlarged the parameters and questioned the foundations of how OWS defines 'dissidence'. Indeed, it showed the hollowness of certain sanctioned forms of OWS dissidence, as well as the hollow dissidence of the 'alternative art space'.

Conclusion:

Though the cancellation of Manifesta 6 and Occupy 38 are vastly different non-equivalent entities, I see them having four traits in common. The first is that their putative 'failure' was their

success, in that they actually threatened power (unlike so much of today's subversion-for-hire, made-for-institution institutional critique). Their 'failure' was not the common understanding of failure (lack of competence), but the fact that they were operating on a vastly more ambitious plane of goals, of whose realisation they had no guarantee. Vidokle/Sagri-Occupy38 failed *because of an excess of their dynamism*, which their environment was not able to assimilate. Their thinking was ahead of that of the institution; it was strategically situated on a faultline that caused the institution to come to terms with its contradictions, and consequently the institution crushed them. Both cases were a litmus test that made everyone show their true colours and allowed us to learn things about the institutions involved that ordinarily would have taken years to glean. In this vein, they were 'heroic failures' in the sense of the uncommon risk they were willing to take. The second trait they have in common is that they both left the realm of the symbolic and entered the real. Manifesta 6 was not another gauzy kum bah yah symbolic 'dialogue' about 'bi-communal tolerance'; it turned the usually innocuous vessel of the 'art biennial' – an agent of globalisation and homogenisation – into a Trojan Horse, abruptly bringing it into direct confrontation with a geopolitical conflict. Occupy 38 was not another self-indulgent, upper-middle class, Bard/Yale/Columbia performance of antagonism fetishised by mainstream OWS art groups; it actually militantly challenged power structure (which the Gap-shopping, Starbucks-drinking, mainstream OWS political imagination was ill-equipped to deal with). The third trait they both share is they showed what a limit was by surpassing it. Manifesta 6 showed what the limit is of a cultural institution's acquiescence to the platitudes of 'cultural understanding' perpetuated by the juggernaut of the art biennial, if these platitudes actually have teeth and contradict the institutions' political self-interests. The debate over Occupy 38 showed the limit to which antagonisms will be tolerated in OWS – some are considered 'good', sanctioned and productive (i.e., permitted march); others are 'beyond the pale' (taking over a gallery). Traditionally, art is considered the 'safe space' for antagonism – where antagonism will be expressed only to be de-fanged, sublimated and recuperated for a social good. Occupy 38 superseded the symbolic 'performance' of antagonism, and gestured towards a real change in the power structure of an institution.

The fourth trait they had in common was their re-anchoring of site-specificity into the highly specific particularities of context. Site-specific art began in the 60s in opposition to the idealist space of sculpture and the logic of the monument, an "epistemological challenge to relocate meaning from the art object to, instead, the contingencies of its context".⁵ Site-specificity was rooted in the particular, the local, the unrepeatable preconditions of a site, with "the artists' deferral of authorship to the conditions of the site (including collaborators and viewers) a continued manifestation of Barthes' death of the author".⁶ With the flourishing of institutional critique, 'site-specificity' became untethered from a physical locale altogether, with the 'site' now referring to a confluence of discursive, ideological or institutional forces. As Miwon Kwon states in *One Place after Another* in reference to Serra's *Tilted Arc*:

In other words, the site is imagined as a social and political construct as well as a physical one. More importantly, Serra envisions not a relationship of smooth continuity between the art work and its site but an antagonistic one in which the art work performs a proactive interrogation – 'manifest[s] a judgment' (presumably negative) – about the site's sociopolitical conditions. Indeed, rather than fulfilling an ameliorative function in relation to the site, *Tilted Arc* aggressively cut across and divided it.⁷

However, with the rampant spawning of biennials in the late 90s and 2000s, and the gradual shift in the art world from a production-of-objects economy to a production-of-affective-

experience economy, so-called 'site specific' installation began its effulgent and syrupy slide into the proliferation of the now highly marketable 'site-specific' installation we see peppering every biennial, evidence of capitalist mobility. It dissipated into yet another benign marketing feature of the globalised art economy, eager to manufacture consumable 'difference' to break with the ever-encroaching homogenisation of place.

Vidokle's attempt to hold a bi-communal school in both the Turkish and Greek-occupied territories of Cyprus was a re-invigoration of the specificity and the critical bite of 'site' in the concept of 'site-specificity', which until now had attenuated into little more than flaccid platitude. His attempt to hold a bi-communal school in both the Turkish and the Greek-occupied parts of Cyprus could not have happened anywhere else. Similarly, Occupy 38's choice of a non-profit space to occupy made the mainstream OWS groups question their glib, naïve hagiography of the 'non-profit'; like a camera pulling back to span a whole panorama instead of only one spot, Occupy 38 made us question the role (and indeed the complicity) of non-profits in the neoliberal, globalised art economy. In this sense, both Manifesta 6 and Occupy 38 were stellar paragons of the three principles embedded in Serra's notion of site-specificity through:

1.) **Antagonism:** Antagonism towards a site is a crucial component of site-specificity. As Serra states in "*Tilted Arc Destroyed*":

Every context has its frame and its ideological overtones. It is a matter of degree. But there are sites where it is obvious that an art work is being subordinated to / accommodated to / adapted to / subservient to / useful to. . . In such cases it is necessary to work in opposition to the constraints of the context so that the work cannot be read as an affirmation of questionable ideologies and political power. I am not interested in art as affirmation or complicity.⁸

As Serra rejected the assimilative, accommodationist or affirmative relation to site in favour of one based on rupture and antagonism, Manifesta 6 and Occupy 38 made similar rejections, the site, in their case, being an art institution.

2.) **Inseparability:** Against the notion of ontologically hermetic, 'portable' sculpture that could be circulated and plopped anywhere at any time, oblivious to its context, Serra insisted that site-specific work had to be inseparable from its site. As Kwon describes:

The specificity of site-oriented works means that they are conceived for, dependent upon, and inseparable from their locations. The scale, the size, and the placement of sculptural elements result from an analysis of the particular environmental components of a given context.

But he goes on to say that "the preliminary analysis of a given site takes into consideration not only formal but also social and political characteristics of the site. Site-specific works invariably manifest a judgment about the larger social and political context of which they are a part".⁹

In this sense, Manifesta 6 and Occupy 38 too could not have happened anywhere other than where they did; they were the result of a coagulation of utterly unique factors inseparable from their site (in the case of Manifesta 6, the Turkish-Greek conflict in Cyprus; in the case of Occupy 38, an interrogation of the non-profit industrial complex in the context of Occupy Wall Street).

3.) **Unrepeatability:** Not only against the notion of portability, Serra insisted that site-specific work had to be unrepeatably. In this sense, both the cancellation of Manifesta 6 and Occupy 38 were unrepeatably events in time that captured a highly specific set of circumstances that cannot be replicated, exported or rendered 're-performable'.

Finally, the most salient point is that their putative 'failure' is what rendered them site-specific in the most acute, inimitable way possible. They could not have embodied the three principles embedded in Serra's notion of site-specificity unless they had failed. Had they 'succeeded', they would have been generic. In this sense, the only reason they succeeded – in being site-specific, in having a very pointed, confrontational agenda vis-à-vis their site – was because they also 'failed'. ■

Notes

- 1 Julian Stallabrass. **Art Incorporated** (Oxford University Press, 2004, Oxford), p. 179.
- 2 Ibid., p. 53.
- 3 Augustine Zenakos. "Manifesta No More". In **Artnet**. Available at: <http://www.artnet.com/magazineus/news/zenakos/zenakos6-5-06.asp> (last accessed 20 February 2013).
- 4 Julie Ault. **Alternative Art 1965-1985** (University of Minnesota Press, 2004, Minneapolis).
- 5 Miwon Kwon. **One Place After Another** (MIT Press, 2002, Cambridge, Mass.), p. 12.
- 6 Ibid., p.31.
- 7 Ibid., p. 74.
- 8 Richard Serra (1989). "Tilted Arc Destroyed". Reprinted in Richard Serra, **Writings Interviews** (University of Chicago Press, 1994, Chicago), pp. 193-213.
- 9 Kwon, op. cit., p. 37.