Nato Thompson *Seeing Power: Art and Activism in the 21st Century* (Brooklyn and London: Melville House, 2015)

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CULTURAL PRODUCTION MAKES A WORLD

Every day, the culture industry—movie studios, advertising firms, social media conglomerates, galleries, and so on—plucks the fruit of art and activism's labors, ingests it, and regurgitates a new substance for a voracious and growing nest of consumers around the world. What we like, what we do, what we listen to, what we dream about, the world we hope for—even the terms by which we define ourselves and the world around us—is increasingly controlled by huge and complex economic forces. Capitalism is thus not only out there—in belching factories, in gleaming shopping malls, and in politicians' offices—but also emerges from us and targets us. It is not enough to say that the ideas of artists and activists are being commodified into products, because what is happening—and has been happening for more than one hundred years—is too enormous to be understood in such simple terms. Even those of us who believe we have escaped the more blatant acts of co-option have found, nonetheless, the culture industry's numerous tentacles reaching into our economic lives and determining our participation in the world. As it stands, we cannot escape.

Given the complete transformation that the culture industry has had on everyday life, it is shocking to find that artists and activists continue to talk about their work as though the world

has not changed. Here and now, in the second decade of the twenty-first century, any consideration of aesthetics and politics must account for the explosive growth of the culture industry over the past sixty years. The intensification of advertising and the rise of television, radio, film, video games, affective labor, music, software, and other content-delivery mediums have slowly—yet radically—altered the entire spectrum through which we understand and perform our daily lives. Think of this new landscape as a cultural corollary to global warming: like CO_2, residue from the capitalist cultural economy has aggregated over time. But instead of drifting into the stratosphere, the particles of this vast economy have drifted into our work, behaviors, expectations, and emotions.

Yet this economy and its products elude easy analysis: we often do not feel the effects of the culture industry because we are also its sacred product. While we are free to critique the conditions of cultural capitalism, we must nonetheless sleep, work, play, and dream in the mystifying world it has built.

How did we get here?

FROM THE FURNACE

In the mid-nineteenth century, as the second industrial revolution was screeching into existence, a theory emerged that tried to make sense of the radical changes that were happening in everyday life. The study of historical materialism sought to connect the changes in material existence (the rise of steel, the use of steam power, the introduction of the railway, changes in the way material goods were produced) to changes in thought, ideas, and desires. It tried, in other words, to posit connections between economic questions and the ways people actually lived their lives. It was not just that new products were being produced using new methods—to hear the wailing of coal

smelting at the factories and to conclude that industrialization was changing the world did not require making a huge leap. There were other kinds of changes—the workday, the salary, and the basic relationship of worker and employer—that were also rapidly reshaping daily life across the globe. These were as much psychological and existential as they were material—and considerably harder to quantify. Yet they were incredibly pervasive: at the height of industrialism, Karl Marx offered a detailed analysis of how, behind the gears of the machine, a nascent system of logical economic exploitation would survive even if the new industrial system did not.

At the end of the nineteenth century, industry began to approach production from both ends of the dynamic—it would create a subject who would want what it sold. The industrial output machine would come to depend completely on advertising, which, in turn would help create the metropolis. When Charles Baudelaire swaggered through the streets of Paris caught up in the spirit of an emerging phenomenon—the modern city—he looked in awe at this new, mysterious, ravishing playground. Here, at once, was the nascent sense of anonymity that would come to typify urban life, and the glittery storefront window displays that transformed the city into a sparkling capitalist *wunderkammer*.

The growth of the city became a defining feature of modernism, and its relationship to the cultural allure of capital was its driving aesthetic engine. The city was a place of looking: looking at strangers, looking at buildings, and looking at objects to consume. And those impulses to look produced an incentive to decorate the city accordingly. Arranged like a musicological tableau, storefront window displays were the first volley in what would turn out to be an historic battle of seduction for the expendable income of desire. Shopping, as we understand it today, was a historically new phenomenon, and window displays were early forms of advertising. But they were also an integral

element in shaping how a person might navigate and understand the city around them.

As the twentieth century came into being, so too did the rise of modern forms of advertising. It wasn't enough for a firm to produce a product—it also had to produce the desire for that product. In essence, one had to shape and mold the consumer. And no consumer was more eligible for molding than the one who had the most intimate relationship with the product—the person who produced it. It is one thing to say, as Marx did, that the structure of labor (commutes, wages, work hours, relationships to hierarchy, health care) makes us who we are; it is another to say that the very thing we produce at a job *is* in fact who we are. This was precisely the notion Henry Ford embraced with the opening of his first assembly line in 1913. At Ford's Highland Park plant, workers were expected to both want and be able to afford the products that they built.

But by the 1950s, Ford's assembly line told another kind of story: each car was now composed of parts that arrived from various corners of the world. This was post-Fordism—the industrial revolution had finally gone global. Workers' material conditions were radically altered, and so was the geopolitical landscape: as capitalist techniques and ideas pushed their way around the world, the map was divided into First, Second, and Third World zones, based on a region's absorption into the new economy. No longer produced along assembly lines, nearly all products were now dependent on a globally interconnected system of finance, manufacturing, labor, and advertising. As manufacturing moved toward regions in the global south, the United States shifted toward a consumer society. That shift in economic relationships produced a new form of being in the world: for those in the United States, an increasingly large part of daily life came to involve the consumption of not only cars, homes, and food, but also a vast array of cultural products.

Our own information age—and its economy—has left the

old capitalist order behind almost entirely. The manufacture of material goods has receded in the United States and Western Europe, while informal, nonmaterial production—eating out at restaurants and food trucks, getting a massage, retaining a lawyer, listening to music on an iPhone—has rapidly become central to the economic system. And as the global economy focuses as much on the consumer as that which is consumed, the urge to gain the attention—and cater to the desires—of a consumer society is more consequential than ever.

And yet as our economic system grows in scope and complexity, contemporary culture's understanding of itself is stuck in the past: for the most part, our grasp of our place in the world owes more to the early twentieth century than to our current historic moment. A fish sees water no better than we see the culture industry. It is all around us, and it envelops us, but in order to see it, we must, as philosopher Giorgio Agamben advises, think contemporarily. One way to do this is to listen carefully to the anxieties of those who witnessed the flood—before it consumed them.

A WAVE RISING FROM THE WEST

The concept of the "culture industry" derives from Theodor Adorno and Max Horkheimer's influential critique of popular and consumer culture, "The Culture Industry: Enlightenment as Mass Deception." Writing in 1944, these two dialectical Marxists observed the phenomenon that would transform the postwar world: a tidal wave of cultural production was taking shape in the United States, and it was crashing on the European side of the Atlantic. German newspapers of the prewar era had lamented the onslaught of mechanically reproduced American music, film, and advertising, but Adorno and Horkheimer saw something different: capitalism did not, they argued, want

to destroy culture—it *adored* it, and given the opportunity, it would embrace it and shape it. In so doing, it would build a world—and a subject—that was homogenous and bland and consumer-friendly. As they wrote, capitalism "has made the technology of the culture industry no more than the achievement of standardization and mass production, sacrificing whatever involved a distinction between the logic of the work and that of the social system."

As politicians sought to revive national economies that had been uprooted by World War II, the networks of capitalism went full steam ahead into the production of homes, domestic consumer items, and social amenities. Which meant, in turn, that radio and film could sweep the global imagination on an even grander scale than they had before the war: the dreams of the world had found not only technologies to convey them, but also the economies to innovate them at an accelerating rate. This was a society in transformation—an upheaval equal in magnitude to that of the first industrial revolution.

Capitalist cultural production made itself felt across a range of spaces and in all aspects of life, from billboards and films to records, radio, and television. Technologies like film, television and radio were not just a feature of the daily lives of a young generation—they had become an integral part of how one understood the world. Everyday life was changing, and so were the desires and dreams of a new generation, which was eager to articulate its own identity. Pulp and historic narratives leapt from the page onto the big screen, and children's imaginations followed. Jazz was America's greatest new cultural export, and magazines multiplied, producing a world of potential desires from dish soap to makeup to air travel.

For Adorno and Horkheimer, this barrage spoke to the strangely democratizing nature of capital. Far from elite and sophisticated, this new wave of cultural products embraced any market willing to shell out the money to keep it going. While

they warned of the degree to which it would gain acceptance amongst a mass public, they also lamented what they considered to be a flattening of taste.

> Culture as a common denominator already contains in embryo that schematization and process of cataloguing and classification which bring culture within the sphere of administration. And it is precisely the industrialized, the consequent, subsumption which entirely accords with this notion of culture. By subordinating in the same way and to the same end all areas of intellectual creation, by occupying men's senses from the time they leave the factory in the evening to the time they clock in again the next morning with matter that bears the impress of the labor process they themselves have to sustain throughout the day, this subsumption mockingly satisfies the concept of a unified culture which the philosophers of personality contrasted with mass culture.

Today, these words read as both prophetic and reactionary. Adorno and Horkheimer were generally hostile toward mass culture, so their antagonism toward homogenized, populist aesthetic tastes is understandable—if, ultimately, somewhat misguided. (Adorno was especially critical of jazz, which, for him, typified the rising tide of mass culture. In this particular case, though, it's hard to see how capitalism was an agent of standardization—it was, instead, making the world more complex: an African American art form—and its practitioners—was finding an international audience.)

What proved most striking about capitalism's ecstatic devotion to cultural production wasn't its flattening ability—it was its potential to produce thousands of new identities. What Adorno and Horkheimer realized was that this new form of cultural capitalism was becoming entangled with the bourgeois

ideals of individualism and taste. They understood, with great clarity, that the industries of modern culture were on their way to producing an aesthetic framework for the denizens of capital that worked in cahoots with capital's logic. This struck them as a profound setback for the traditional idea of Marxist revolution. Culture had always played a role, of course, but never before on this scale. Once people accepted a cultural world produced by capital, they feared, it would be very difficult to get them to react against it.

A GENERATION RIDES THE WAVE

But there *was* a reaction. The generation of the sixties responded—often radically—to the expansion and intensification of the culture industry. In many ways, the shifts that Adorno and Horkheimer could only faintly identify in the 1940s became the defining issues of the sixties. The post-World War II generation—baby boomers—grew up gorging on culture. A March 1948 issue of *Newsweek* described the craze for television as "catching on like a case of high-toned scarlet fever," and between 1949 and 1969, the number of households with at least one television exploded from under one million to 44 million.

From 1946 to 1960, advertising was transformed from a $3 billion industry to an $11 billion one. The Mad Men of Madison Avenue and the big Midwestern advertising firms, like Leo Burnett, had a colossal impact on American culture. Leo Burnett—the founder of the namesake company and one of *Time*'s most influential people of the twentieth century—was one of the pioneers of contemporary advertising. The creator of iconic sales images like the Marlboro Man, the Pillsbury Doughboy, and the Jolly Green Giant, Burnett wrote that "we absorb [advertising] through our pores, without knowing we do so. By osmosis."

The revolt that emerged in the 1960s pushed back against

this new mass dominance, but it wasn't up to the task. Music, fashion, bohemian lifestyles, books, and cultural ephemera became symbols of authentic participation in community—and rebellion against conformity—but these symbols sometimes proved to be empty signifiers. The post-World War II countercultural movements lent activism a new, aesthetically diverse identity, but they failed, for the most part, to prioritize politics. As clothes and music and culture as a whole became wilder, political movements became more diffuse—less readily identifiable. Perpetuated as much by the media as by the generation itself, the new wave of movements would eventually suffer from their very indebtedness to the culture industry against which they were rebelling.

There were bright spots, of course. A fruitful critique of the culture industry emerged in Paris in the late 1960s in the form of the Situationists and their irascible figurehead Guy Debord. The *spectacle* was his term for the confluence of capital and culture—especially mass culture—that had come to dominate the postwar era. "The spectacle," he wrote, "is not a collection of images, but a social relation among people, mediated by images."

But even the Situationists could not escape a cultural economy that would ultimately contain the revolutionary spirit of the late 1960s. In 1968, revolutionaries of all stripes—hippies, free-love communists, Beat Generation agitators, Diggers, Yippies, and on and on—took to college campuses, and then the streets, and the result was a beautiful fusion of activism and culture. But it didn't last. The first generation to be brought up on an economy of alternative records, radio, literature, and fashion organized around new identities was also the first generation of consumers. All of that generation's political concerns, which have received the bulk of critical commentary and reflection on the era, were ultimately no match for the concurrent flowering of cultural products that were tailor-made to channel and absorb all this new, identitarian energy.

Increasingly, the language of subcultures, the language of activism, and the language of society itself became radically intermingled with the cultural industries that were shadowing them. As the second half of the twentieth century unfolded, an industry of musical and political subcultures—from glam rock and punk to hip-hop, hardcore, grunge, rave, riot grrrl, and hipster—brought with it a barrage of potential identities. Each possessed its own rules, fashions, and idiosyncrasies, and each developed alongside specific micro-economies that were eventually bought and sold into the mainstream.

After nearly sixty years of cultural production on a mass scale, a certain logic is finally making itself visible. Today, any culture that sticks around for more than a few months becomes a cultural product—there is nothing that is outside the culture industry's grasp, no matter how authentic it may seem. But paradoxically, this fact has allowed us to see things—to see power—with greater clarity. As punk music becomes the go-to language of Playstation and banal pop bands, veteran punks find themselves creeped out at themselves. And as organic food becomes the go-to language of agricultural giants, green farmers and activists become more reflective than they were before—but perhaps also more cynical. The steady packaging and reselling of each successive cultural signifier of resistance (everything from punk rock to the Black Panthers to hippies to anarchists—pick your poison) means something, as does the fact that every promise of revolution seems to become fodder for app developers and advertisers who have content to promote on social networks.

It is in this fairly dismal moment—the moment of total and utter co-optation—that this story begins. The radical movements and subcultural projects of our time have fought commodification while simultaneously embracing it. And the tangled web of political action over the last sixty years has used an increasingly faulty cultural logic to express itself. The good news, though, is that at the beginning of the twenty-first century, co-optation has become more familiar. In 2015, we can understand power—in all of its endless iterations—more clearly than those who came before us.

THE BABIES OF CREATIVE INDUSTRIES

If you step into a shopping mall in any American suburb, you'll likely come upon Hot Topic—an outfitter for the malcontents of exurban American life, a church devoted to the commodification of culture. The store boldly unites all subcultures under one roof and regurgitates them in the form of T-shirts, tote bags, bracelets, chokers, earrings, headbands, and shoelaces, all at bargain prices. At Hot Topic, Slipknot and Toby Keith live happily alongside Creed, Marilyn Manson, and pro-marijuana shirts. Anarchist bracelets go for a mere five dollars, and if you're lucky, you can snag a Red Hot Chili Peppers water pipe at 20 percent off. Hot Topic is, in other words, ground zero of the consumption of counterculture, but perhaps it can—perversely—serve as a trigger for a new era of resistance. If the forties saw the birth of culture as consumption, and the sixties gave birth to the rise of the counterculture, by the early twenty-first century, the move from counterculture to cash register was so brief as to make the transition feel almost imperceptible. Culture and commerce appeared to be so intermingled that one could not readily say which was which.

As the economies of culture have grown, their presence has become increasingly ubiquitous. What terms like "creative industries" and "creative economies" describe is nothing new—this is the same range of activities that was described in the recent past as "culture industries." But that term had a critical, skeptical edge, whereas the new terminology is emphatic and positive. "Creative industries" refers to a vast network of

noncommercial activities as well as any number of fields that fall under for-profit entertainment: film, television, radio, software, sports, journalism, writing, music, and, to some degree, the business of simply being cool. With each iteration of the growth of culture industries from the 1940s until today, the culture and commerce become ever more intertwined, and the scale of their entanglement continues to grow. Hand-in-hand with the rise of Internet content production, the creative industries see cultural producers—now often referred to as creatives—as emblematic of the new spirit of the age.

The creative industry's effect on culture has little in common with the spread of more conventional commercial products like cars, dishwashers, and power tools. Innovations in cross-marketing, demographic niches, and focus groups allow for a more strategic form of brand identification, and products and advertisements collude as one engine of the economy. Advertising is now everywhere: no Google search is too esoteric to be left unexploited by advertisers. The manipulation of meaning is big business, and those that make it far enough along in the cultural production economy now find themselves in the hands of massive corporate information producers whose job is to translate new identities into entirely new economies.

In the 1980s, Jean Baudrillard warned of the disappearance of the "real," which would give way to a world of falsely lived hyper-realities and simulacra. The engine of the information economy has only heated up this possibility. As the presence of advertising has grown alongside the information economy, the distance between the product and the advertisement has collapsed. T-shirts advertise clothing companies, and fast-food cups advertise films—this has become so common, so quickly, that it seems like old news. Even more subtle is advertising's conquest of personal interactions, which have become opportunities for pushing the ultimate product: one's self.

An economy dependent on culture industries is bound to move quickly—to become increasingly hungry for the next big thing. The hunt for ever newer iterations of the cool has evolved into a speculative bet made by corporations, as meaning becomes just another kind of resource, like coal, oil, and ore. In the era of creative industries, thinking, art, and political action can be a source of resource production.

The rise and acceleration of these speculative bets—in an array of expanding markets, ranging from housing to all forms of music to the design of retail outlets—has had a profound impact on every aspect of daily life. Today, any kind of culture can be commodified. Any list of subcultural identities is really just a list of market affiliations, various demographics to be plugged into and resold. Corporations like YouTube, Flickr, and Facebook provide a public platform for radical content production that can, at a moment's notice, be absorbed by a conglomerate. Every sub-identity is able not only to participate in the new cultural markets, but to produce them as well.

And what constitutes production can be defined more broadly than ever. Cultural production is increasingly focused on the formation of new spaces and new experiences, rendering the products themselves somewhat unnecessary. Red Bull is thus not merely a drink, but a lifestyle. And IKEA isn't just a place to shop, but a place to conceive of a new way of living—a space designed for the imagination of another new space. And the Apple Store isn't a place to get a computer, but a place to be educated.

OF RELATIONSHIPS AND TACTICS

With an economy increasingly based on the activity of "creatives," where exactly do the artists fit in? The massive shifts in the global information economy have had a profound impact

on what constitutes art. Artists have historically reacted to the times in which they live, and the tools that constituted art in the early twentieth century—such as image making, performance, design, and architecture—are now basic skills in the worlds of advertising and media. The work of artists is, in fact, dwarfed in comparison to the scale and scope of the creative industries. Which means that artists must be all the more resourceful when it comes to cutting through the haze of cultural production. This is no simple task.

The complex arrangements of self-identified artists, galleries, museums, magazines, and art schools around the globe are too vast and variegated to make any generalizations—or at least, I'm not prepared to make them. Instead, I focus in this book on the artists who self-consciously operate at the intersection of art and politics. Even with this qualifier, we need to make some generalizations. In the latter part of the twentieth century and the first two decades of the twenty-first, we have witnessed the rise of an international art world where the catchall term *contemporary art* replaced the term *postmodern* as a way to describe the myriad of aesthetic styles and histories that abutted, collided, and conjoined across the vast spectrum of international art making. Throughout the 1990s, biennials began to emerge in cities across the globe from Guangzhou to Istanbul to Johannesburg, and with the rise of this orientation of the arts toward a circuit of international fairs came the vast quantities of money that have become as instrumental to the contemporary art market as the art itself.

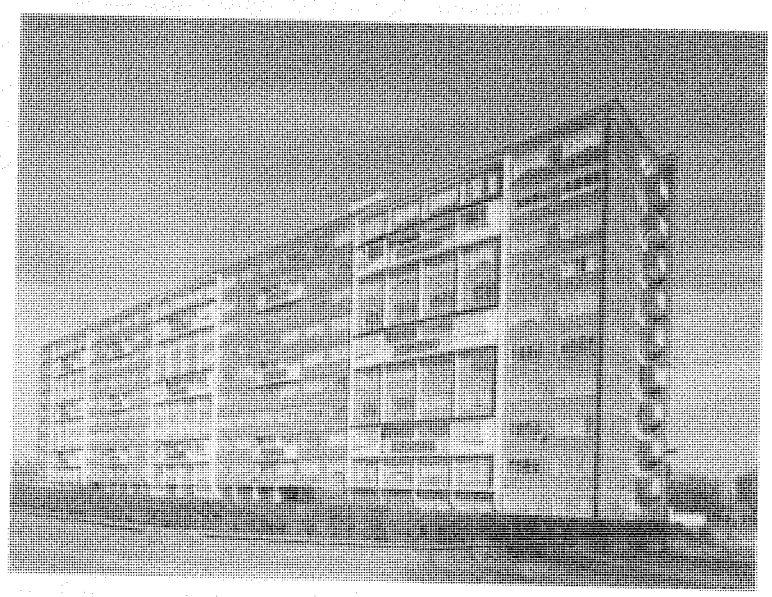
But like I said, this book, while aware of the biennial explosion and the emergence of new global markets for art, sets its sights specifically on the artists whose work touches on the intersection of art and politics. While some of these artists do interact with the infrastructures and the revenue streams of the market (and indeed, even the discourses and spaces of noncommercial art are not entirely removed from the effects of

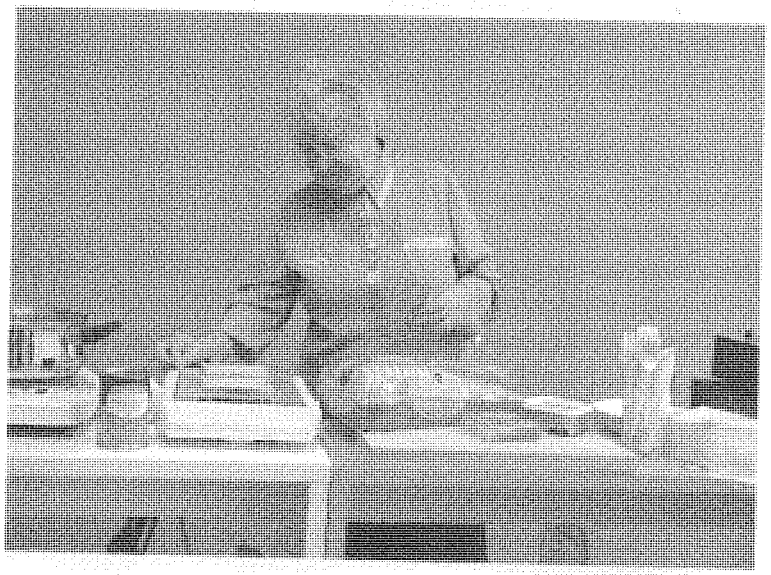
the high-finance art market), the milieu within which these artists operate has a markedly unique trajectory.

In particular, two strands of artistic production stand out as important precedents in informing much of the art and political work of the recent past: social aesthetics and tactical media. While social aesthetics focused on people (and thus, by way of people, politics), tactical media considered art merely a tool to disrupt power. More often than not, social aesthetics possessed a less obvious relationships to activism, while tactical media embraced its flagrantly activist underpinnings. These art movements are different, yet they share an interest in bringing art into the world at large and speaking a language that everyday people can understand. This shared approach makes these two trajectories critical in understanding the art and politics at work today.

Social aesthetics emerged in the mid-1990s. Here was art that was at once more social and interpersonal, and unafraid to be immaterial and immediate. It was an art of actions. It was an art that involved people, and which wasn't always located in a museum. Its creators drew inspiration from a heightened sense of skepticism regarding mass culture and instead put their emphasis on the immediate, the personal, and, at times, the political.

Social aesthetics emphasizes interpersonal relationships that often occur outside the museum or gallery context. This is art focused on the social. Take Tenantspin, a work created by the Danish art collective Superflex in a public housing tower block in Liverpool, England in 2001. Using web-based telecasting technology (Skype hadn't been invented yet), the artists of Superflex developed a media channel for tenants to discuss the goings-on in the housing complex. Whether the issue was concerns over rent, facilities needing repair, local bake sales, or even an upcoming karaoke gathering, Tenantspin operated as a catalyst for civic activity. The work could not exist without the





interaction of the residents. In essence, the activating of the social *was* the art.

One can locate antecedents to social aesthetics throughout the twentieth century: the uproarious poetry readings and performances of the post-World War I Cabaret Voltaire in Zurich; the social sculpture of German artist Joseph Beuys in the forties and fifties; the wild, ephemeral, activist performances of the fifties known as Happenings; the deep connection between the personal, the political, and the social in the work of second-wave feminists like Judy Chicago, Suzanne Lacy, and Meirle Laderman Ukeles; and the social psychoanalysis artworks of the Brazillian Tropicalia movement, by artists like Helio Oticica, and Lygia Clark. There are too many histories to name, but social aesthetics wasn't merely the latest link in a chain: in its emphasis on the participatory and the social, the movement can be considered a necessary reaction to the alienating effects of media and manipulative culture making.

Social aesthetics produced a number offshoots, the most famous of which the French curator Nicolas Bourriaud dubbed "relational aesthetics." But the move toward the social—and at times, political—had numerous other names and permutations, including dialogic aesthetics, social practice, new genre public art, and on and on. Another Danish art collective, N55, designed a mobile home that could be pushed down the street; the artist Rirkrit Tiravanija cooked Pad Thai for gallery patrons to eat; an Austrian collective named Wochenklausur designed a civic workshop focused on drug addiction.

Social aesthetics may have lacked the political efficacy of earlier art movements, but it did make clear that the stakes of aesthetics were shifting in culture. Guy Debord's desire to step outside the spectacle had found an answer—or at least an echo—in these new forms of interpersonal, immediate art. And social aesthetics would only grow in importance.

By embracing the realities of the lived world outside the

wall of the museum, social aesthetics inevitably confronted the overarching environment of the culture industry. At the same time, the artists of the tactical media movement—a related but different kind of art—were making their presence felt in an explicitly political sphere.

Borrowing from the language of theorist Michel de Certeau, the art collective Critical Art Ensemble defined "tactical media" as an interventionist form of guerrilla cultural production that would disturb specific political structures. "Get in and get out" was their mandate. They saw the world as a complicated field of power, in which artist-activists would intervene: one had to trespass to make meaning. The medium was not important or preordained—instead, it would be determined by the aesthetic language of a particular discourse. If the artists were going to address issues of biotechnology, their medium would be laboratories and research. Their adage—"by any medium necessary"—was a kind of call to arms for artists to enter into fields of society outside the arts and use the entire spectrum of forms available to them. As a radical form of politics, Critical Art Ensemble encouraged art making that, in many ways, left the art world behind.

Tactical media's practitioners understood that the world of meaning and its potential manipulation need not be confined to the gallery or museum. They saw that power and its cultural signifiers were at work in every aspect of life—from the workplace to the prison, from the theater to the laboratory—and in response, they offered a hybrid technique of artistic and activist work that sought to create a disruption using the very signs that had provoked their actions.

Like all art movements throughout history, tactical media and social aesthetics were inevitable recalibrations to an increasingly spectacular world. They were art forms desperate to react to and participate in realities that had become omnipresent. Yet even these unusually engaged art forms could not

be entirely resistant to capital. After all, the rise of the culture industries had paved the way for culture to enter the halls of power in profound ways. Art that focused on interpersonal relationships, like social aesthetics, was mirrored by corporate efforts that were formally similar but whose aims were spectacularly different. Event-based promotions and the emphasis on interpersonal advertising that arose in the 1990s were—if one wanted to be so vulgar—a privatized form of social aesthetics. And while tactical media understood that power and culture were in deep collusion, the worlds of corporate power and governmental control were not blind to this understanding, either.

As information and culture have become major forms of capitalist production, an increasingly ephemeral art has ultimately only mimicked broader economic transformations. In other words, even while art tries to escape capitalism, these efforts often merely reenact the forces at work in the larger economy. In an age dominated by creative industries, a productive union of art and politics ultimately requires more than simple transformation in aesthetic styles

FROM THE WTO TO OWS

The alternative globalization, or alt-globalization, movement sprang to life in the late 1990s, and, for a brief while, it brought art under its banner. In large demonstrations, politically engaged movements around the world recruited artists and activists to work side by side to combat the ills of global capitalism—the excesses of the IMF, the World Bank, and the WTO.

By the time the Battle of Seattle broke out in 1999, a vast network of communities of resistance across the globe had matured. Skeptical of the co-opting power of media, ready to unite across political and ideological differences in pursuit of common capitalist enemies, and aware of the problems of

hierarchical organizing, the new network had numerous analytic and social tools at the ready. In the two years between the Battle of Seattle and the attack on the World Trade Center, activism erupted into a global community of political resistance. From the Seattle WTO meeting in 1999, to the World Economic Forum in Davos and the International Monetary Fund protests in Prague in 2000, to the battle at the Summit of the Americas in Québec City, the EU summit in Gothenburg, Sweden, and the bloodied streets of Genoa during the G8 Protests in 2001, social and cultural activism movements grew ever more connected. Indeed, it is hard to comprehend how fast these movement shot across the globe.

This period was characterized by aesthetic interventions, culture jamming, and a host of neo-Situationist tactical media approaches. Interventions in space, which often began as tactical, temporary trespassing, became ubiquitous. These included Reverend Billy, who railed against gentrification at Disney Stores and Starbucks outposts; the Surveillance Camera Players, which led tours of surveillance cameras in New York and other cities; Carnival Against Capitalism, which produced spontaneous anarchist dance parties; and the Pink Bloque (a riot grrrl–inspired response to the aggressive aesthetics embodied by the Black Block), which distributed feminist literature and choreographed dance routines at protests. The band Le Tigre implored listeners to get off the Internet and into the streets. Anticorporate graffiti pockmarked the landscape in large collectivist campaigns. Interventions and tactical media had become the visual language of the global protest movement, and the synergy was captivating.

Before the Battle of Seattle, many artists and activists lamented that the age of traditional activism had ended. It was time to consider a radically new model, they argued, because traditional street protest was ineffective. Then, suddenly, tear gas spread across Seattle, and the world of street activism

exploded across the globe once more. Indymedia used the Internet to produce alternative on-the-ground reporting. Anarchists produced models of organizing that resonated with the diversity of the protesters and the ideas being raised. Michael Hardt and Antonio Negri's book *Empire* blossomed into the movement's core text, giving it new philosophical and aesthetic underpinnings and a deep sense of possibility. The moment was optimistic and filled with adrenaline.

Protest, anarchist, and art-activist practices converged in new and exciting ways. Tactical media practitioners like the Institute for Applied Autonomy, Natalie Jeremijenko, Yomango, and RTMark produced applications and web-based projects for use in protests. Robots spray-painted any slogan that was needed. Sardonic interventionists like Billionaires for Bush (a large group of activists portraying corporate CEOs protesting for Bush) played with the marketing of protest. The magazine *Adbusters* shot into the popular imagination as billboard manipulation became the symbol of a post-Situationist mass aesthetic. Interventions were gaining speed as the antiglobalization protests leapt across the globe.

Then, suddenly, it ended.

It might come as a surprise to historians that during some of the most politically oppressive years in American history, under George W. Bush's presidency, activism tapered off at a visible rate and protest movements lost participants. This decline wasn't simply the result of apathy on the part of American citizens—it was caused, in large part, by a new disenchantment with electoral politics and, later, by a frontal assault on civil liberties.

In 2000, many progressives had supported Green Party candidate Ralph Nader and then watched Bush, by the tiniest of margins, steal the election in Florida. After the attacks on September 11th, things got worse. Breaking windows was suddenly synonymous with terrorism: Earth First activists ended

up being prosecuted under terrorism laws in Oregon, and anarchists were beaten by police on the streets of Miami. While middle-of-the-road Democrats turned back to electoral politics, a significant portion of the radical left used the tools they had learned from Indymedia and other online activism to attempt to effect tangible transformations in the electoral leadership. MoveOn.org adopted a banner of reform and mastered online fundraising, a strategy that would be used by Howard Dean in his failed primary attempt before being successfully co-opted by the Obama campaign in 2008. The new coalition of online activists began speaking out for progressive issues, even as they accepted the compromises that came with electoral politics. (Change.org was another successful example of this kind of organization.)

The same could be said of most cultural producers—even those on the margins—who quickly joined the information economy: the scruffiest, most committedly DIY bands were now promoting their work on MySpace and other web-based platforms.

This, too, was the dawn of the age of the hipster. Distinct from hipster subcultures of the seventies and eighties, the new urban hipster was a mutable and largely apolitical being who gravitated toward the increasingly gentrified neighborhoods of Silver Lake in Los Angeles, Wicker Park in Chicago, Williamsburg in New York, and the Mission in San Francisco. The hipster was now a peculiar fashion-conscious scenester unwilling to tie him- or herself to any single cultural movement. Indeed, after conquering big urban areas, by the end of the first decade of the twenty-first century, the hipster could be found almost anywhere in America. With the assistance of the Internet, cultural micro-economies came and went so rapidly that the hipster's chief role was to navigate cultural products. Unlike nearly every cultural movement that had preceded it, hipsterism is a movement with no one claiming membership—if anything, it

is a catchall designation for a cultural condition, rather than a self-prescribed identity.

During this period, the art and activism communities in the United States could be characterized by two distinct tendencies: deference to mass media and the shift toward localized grassroots organizing The creative and productive unity of art and activism that had defined the antiglobalization movement was now being dismantled—in part because the forms their protest had taken were becoming wildly popular. As the global protest movement rapidly dissolved, the antics of interventionism began to become synonymous with the rapidly evolving anti-Bush media. Borrowing a page from *The Onion*, Stephen Colbert and Jon Stewart reinvigorated the comedic form, thanks in no small part to the template laid down by muckraker Michael Moore's brilliant, satirical documentaries. Aggressive satire no longer spoke to small and alienated communities on the left—it became, instead, the template for a sudden wave of anti-Bush populism. The politically provocative duo The Yes Men seemed to split the difference between the old art activism and the new mainstream comedy, taking their goofy political interventions as impostors of the WTO onto the big screen.

During George W. Bush's second term, something switched in the collective activist community. There was, to paraphrase a pamphlet from a G8 demonstration, a moving toward the light. Many art activists began to move their causes from the periphery to the center—whether that meant television, radio, film, or electoral politics and policy.

But while this movement toward greater visibility applied to many art activist groups, many others found themselves interested in practices that would undertake a more rigorous analysis of power at all levels and would work at the grassroots. These activists focused on political realities like gentrification, the prison-industrial complex, and immigration. In the face of the erosion of democratic institutions, as well as rising concerns

about gentrification and its link to art and activism, art activists were returning to the local.

At the same time, the DIY ethos that had informed riot grrrl and lifestyle anarchism became incorporated into what might be described as the progressive edge of the hipster milieu. The independent spirit took off as crafters, knitters, and bloggers took the means of production into their own hands. Everyone was a cultural producer with shared DIY know-how. Though not yet a national priority, sustainability movements sprang up: recycling and reuse became signifiers of a progressive lifestyle. Food politics became an even more elusive yet omnipresent organizing principle as new community gardens, CSAs, organic food markets, and alternative restaurants sprouted up in every gentrified neighborhood in the country.

As the hipster took on more progressive characteristics, there emerged a new political movement organized around the "right to the city" that was more pointed than its antecedents. This movement dug deep into the land battles that raged across an increasingly urbanized country. Frustrated with political abstractions and eager to ground resistance in specific neighborhoods, "right to the city" groups merged homeless activists with anti-gentrification activists.

Overall, in the face of an increasingly privatized public sphere and the retreat of a global protest movement, the energy around art and activism dissipated. But this erosion was concurrent with the broader recognition of precisely how power and capital operate at the level of culture. Fast-forward to the advent of the Occupy Wall Street movement on the heels of the Arab Spring, and one can glean an emerging form of politics fueled by these very conditions. New and evolving strategies such as spatial occupations, nonhierarchical organizing methods, and a savvy movement of anti-branders, have barreled onto the world stage in recent years.

But most economic and political conditions remain the

same. The increasing privatization of space, culture, and time speaks to a powerful new system that artists and activists must reckon with—and work within. While the increase in cultural production has tied cultural efforts inextricably to those of capital, efforts to untangle the consequences of cultural production from media activism and socially engaged artworks allow for more effective (and affective) activism. To study art and activist projects that have attempted to address the underlying conditions of social and cultural capital and the privatization of space is to home in on a productive lens through which to view models for contemporary action. Indeed, interpreting what truly counts as resistance or activism today is one of our most critical tasks.