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ACTIVISM

ON THE TIGHTROPE BETWEEN ART AND ACTIVISM: FIVE PROMISES JOHN JORDAN

356 ppm¹

I stare up into the smoggy sky. A spotlight picks out a kind of mutant offspring of Tatlin's Tower breaking through the roof of a terraced house. Made from thousands of pieces of scaffolding, the vertical barricade stretches a hundred feet above East London. It's a giant single finger to the road builders, who plan to destroy this community with the M11 Link road. We have squatted the houses in resistance.

The occupied street is named 'The State of the Art' – it's littered with wrecked cars with gardens sprouting out of them, twisted pieces of painted steel rise Kraken-like out of the tarmac. The boundless creativity here constructs practical objects of resistance. The eviction becomes the most expensive in UK history. A year later, due to this and other anti-road protests, the government abandons 500 new road plans.

My son was born that night. I realise art is not enough and that resistance is never futile.

363 ppm

The techno bounces off the tower blocks. 8000 illegal dancing bodies pour onto the motorway, the M41 street party begins. A giant puppet glides smoothly up to the sound system. Beneath its skirts hidden from the eyes of the police, people are drilling into the tarmac with jackhammers to plant saplings saved from the route of the M11. In a nod to the Situationists² the origami flyers we hand out declare: Under the tarmac the forest.

The story of audacity spreads through the early fibres of the worldwide web. The Liverpool Dockers are inspired; they want to work with Reclaim the Streets. A deep working-class culture collaborates with ecologists, ravers, anarchists and artists. The seeds of the alter-globalisation movement are sown.

I understand how imagination dissolves barriers and myths can change our world by building cultures of resistance.

372ppm

Quebec City bans any wearing of masks during the protests against the *Free Trade Area of the Americas* summit. Hidden in the outbuildings of an art gallery we screen print 4000 bandanas. It seems an appropriate response. When worn they give the wearer a carnivalesque smile. We hand them out for free.

The heads of state fail to agree behind their fencing. Thousands of riot police fire tear gas at the protesters for two days non-stop, the toxic state's poison seeps into our pores, but we aren't afraid and the city belongs to us.

I vow that I will never again make art 'about' change, but make politics artistic. From now on, my work will try to be as beautifully useful as possible.

The Laboratory of Insurrectionary Imagination, The People vs the Banksters Snowball fight, citizens challenge bankers to a snowball fight in London's financial centre following the crash, London, February 2009

Photo by Kristian Buus



378ppm

The Clandestine Insurgent Rebel Clown Army tour the country, funded by the Arts Council of England (ACE). We train and recruit 200 rebel clowns for the G8 summit protests which happens to be in Scotland, therefore not under the jurisdiction of ACE.

A 70-person-strong clown gaggle magically walks through a line of riot police. When the video footage is examined, it turns out that beneath their visors the police are laughing too much to be able to concentrate and hold their line.

It becomes clear when activism doesn't really look like activism, and art doesn't look like art, magic happens. 'Teach people the pleasure of transforming reality,' said Brecht³. 'It's not new forms of art that are needed,' replied Debord⁴ 'but new forms of revolutionary everyday life.'

389ppm

The Laboratory of Insurrectionary Imagination⁵ (Labofii) is invited to run a workshop at the Tate Modern. A week before the workshop we receive an email:

Ultimately, it is also important to be aware that we cannot host any activism directed against Tate and its sponsors, however we very much welcome and encourage a debate and reflection on the relationship between art and activism.

Tate's main sponsor is oil giant BP. It's the best teaching material we had ever been given, especially given the title of the workshop: *Disobedience Makes History*.

We project the email onto the wall and ask the participants whether they should obey or disobey the museum's orders. The curators try to sabotage the heated discussion. The participants take the path of disobedience. Three years on, a handful of them continue to work together, in the collective 'Liberate Tate' who make headlines with their creative actions to free culture from oil.

The Labofii will never be invited back, but to make art in the service of life means refusing to pretend to do politics in the art world, and sometimes this means letting go of your cultural capital and realising that the greatest creativity is enabling the creativity of others.

400ppm

I no longer want to separate what I believe in from how I live in the world. I want to heal the chasm between those that build alternatives and those who put their bodies in the way of the suicide machine that is capitalism.

After 25 years of the megapolis, I leave London, not to escape, but to start a new front. Working with a landless farmer, activists, artists, a baker, mechanic, cook and botanist we found Lar.O.n.c.e (Resist Organise Nourish Create Exist), a working farm and school for art and activism in Brittany.

In a way we are responding to the words of Allan Kaprow⁶: 'We may see the overall meaning of art change profoundly – from being an end to being a means, from holding out a promise of perfection in some other realm to demonstrating a way of living meaningfully in this one.'

My son was 19 today. I promise myself never to choose between resistance and creativity.

Notes:

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- 1 PPM is the measurement of parts per million of CO2 in the atmosphere. The stories in this text instead of being dated, are titled with that year's reading of CO2. Scientific consensus is that 350ppm is the upper safe limit if we are to avoid runaway climate chaos.
- 2 The Situationists International (SI) was a group of artists and intellectuals who set out to completely reinvent both modern art and radical politics during the 1950-60s.
- 3 Radical poet, playwright and theatre director, Bertold Brecht applied Marxism to the process of performing theatre.
- 4 Guy Debord was one of the key thinkers and members of the Situationists International.
- 5 The Laboratory of Insurrectionary Imagination brings artists and activists together to create new forms of civil disobedience. It was founded in 2004 by Isabelle Frémeaux, the vacuum cleaner and John Jordan.
- 6 Allan Kaprow was one of the inventors of the happening, where the division between artists and spectator is collapsed. His later work explored the fluidity between art and life.
- 7 Harrison, E. (ed.) (2009), 'Confessions of a Recovering Data Collector.' (Plymouth College of Art), p. 8.
- 8 Available at: www.ellieharrison.com/essays/trajectories/
- 9 Harrison, E. (2013), 'Counter-Hegemonic Propaganda Machine' in *The Art of Life, Mission Models Money & Common Cause*, pp.19-21.