You Want Art? I Give You Revolution

Dan S. Wang

Since upon opening Gerald Raunig's immodestly titled *Art and Revolution* (2007), recently published in an English translation by Semiotext(e), I skipped the question of whether I agree with his ideas and went straight to the problem of how best to apply them, I suppose you could call me a sympathetic reader. My expectations come from my having heard the Vienna-based philosopher deliver a lecture several summers ago, in which he awoke me to the idea of the transversal and the reality of all boundaries dividing cultural from political work forever existing as porous and in flux. Those ideas had been circulating in the political art scene for a while even then, but he connected the dots for me in a very clear way, and he did it by emphasizing the practical experience of contemporary political action. So did I set myself up for disappointment? Before I could answer that question, I first had some unpacking to do. Applying the ideas does require knowing what they are, and, as readable as Raunig's language is, this is not a casually absorbed book. There is a density to the text that goes beyond the prose and it is delivered in three interwoven layers.

The base layer of argument is a reliance on the idea of concatenation. The phrase "concatenation of art and revolution" is developed as a key concept early in the book and provides the frame within which Raunig conducts his inquiry into the relationship between art and politics. Raunig accepts that most of the time art and politics exist as separate spheres, but that under revolutionary conditions they may become linked in time and space, as if in a chain. The recurrent metaphor makes me think of that place where the links pull against one another, and, while suspended in tension, become one. Raunig mines the richness of the metaphor by examining different aspects and kinds of concatenation. He settles on the concept of "machines"—art machines, revolutionary machines—as the enlarged bodies of concatenation, offering various and infinitely divisible zones of temporary fusion, overlap, and commingling. "The way and extent to which revolutionary machines and art machines work as parts, cogs of one another is the most important subject of investigation in this book". (18)

It is in this layer of complexity that Raunig locates himself intellectually and politically. He starts with an explanation of his operational notion of revolution, against which he opposes the grand, nameable ruptures: "this study concentrates on the discursive and activist lines that have regarded revolution as an uncompleted and uncompletable, molecular process, which does not necessarily refer to the state as being essential and universal, but rather emerges before the state, outside the state". (25–26) In keeping with the anarchistic strains of the political cultures that interest him, Raunig rejects the seizure of state power as anything but a suspect aim. From there, he goes on to outline his theories of resistance, insurrection, and constituent power as the three essential elements of revolutionary machines.

And with those three terms in play, we can shorten the description of the theoretical orientation and say he takes a materialist analysis as a given—minus the Hegelian, mixes in the Foucauldian concepts of power, borrows confidently from Deleuze and Guattari, and ends up with something resembling *Empire* (2000) in language and tone. This is partisan resistance theory, anti-capitalist to the core, and informed by the practical challenge of political action. Like other texts of its kind, it is appropriately stirring. It is anchored to a particular tradition and vocabulary. Raunig hardly ever borrows from outside of a set of radical and/or neo-Marxist continental writers. This specificity is not necessarily a weakness. On the contrary, Raunig condenses key ideas from his source strains and synthesizes effectively, providing a valuable service for non-specialists. His explanation of how Deleuze's theories of resistance work off of and advance beyond those of Foucault is a good example, in which he reduces into only several pages a rather remarkable turn in the analysis of resistance, which the two philosophers molded over years of thought and exchange.

To guard against his text from reading like a series of excursions into various theoretical minutiae, Raunig turns to the second layer under which he presents his ideas: the "long twentieth century" framework. It is through this framework that he brings into conceptual proximity six specific events, episodes, and moments from over a span of one hundred thirty-one years. Each is a case study in how an instructive turn in the relationship between art and politics takes place under revolutionary conditions, a different instantiation of the concatenation of art and revolution. The focus is on the direct involvement of a particular artist, set of artists, or art group in a period of revolutionary activity. Two of Raunig's case studies, well-related as capsule histories, Gustave Courbet's contributions to the Paris Commune and the Situationists before and during the Paris uprising of May '68, are known, if less than well understood, to most art activists who have an interest in the ultra-left.

Considerably more obscure to today's socially engaged art workers is an episode from Germany in the 1910s, centered around Kurt Hiller's pseudo-leftist literary circle known in its day as "Activism". Raunig takes as his point of entry Walter Benjamin's essay "The Author as Producer", in which Benjamin attacks both *Neue Sachlichkeit* (New Objectivity) and "Activism" (Raunig always uses the quotation marks), and through which Benjamin establishes an argument for formal innovation as revolutionary work, as opposed to the conservative (or, at best, politically ineffectual) intellectual's role as supplier of thematic content. Raunig's account and analysis of this practically forgotten intellectual current reveals Hiller's "Activism" as a loose association of private, *geist*-philic artists dedicated to a largely de-politicized articulation of the metaphysical. Compared to the politicized experiments in dissemination, funding structure, and social organizing done by a parallel group centered around the publication *Die Aktion*, and its editor Franz Pfemfert, "Activism" is borderline reactionary. By contrast, over the same period Hiller's one-time associate Pfemfert transforms *Die Aktion* from a journal of literati arts into an organ of fully engaged council-communist and anti-militarist political action. That enterprise ends in rounds of dissociations and isolation comparable, according to Raunig, to that of the Situationists.

The fact that the circles around Hiller's "Activism" and Pfemfert's *Die Aktion* in their early stages had some overlap in actors verifies the reality of these seemingly divergent intellectual and political trajectories sharing a common inception in the want for creativity. This is where Raunig makes his point, because the two paths represent, on the one hand, the falseness of the universal intellectual and, on the other, the option of radical refusal. Hiller stands for the universal intellectual—a figure properly skewered by Benjamin as overdetermined by the production apparatuses to which it is subject—while Pfemfert ends his career in the obscurity reserved for those who, through their refusal to supply prevailing cultural forms with new content, maintain a principled distance from the recuperative processes of the culture industry. Drawing on Benjamin's critique, Raunig extends the example of Pfemfert and *Die Aktion*, seeing in it not only a betrayal of the bourgeois intellectual's function, but the beginning of a positive position, one which asks "what it means today not only to not supply the production apparatus, but also how it can be changed". (127) This is relevant to all politically-engaged artists and presented in mostly tidy fashion. My criticism here is that I had hoped for some figures throughout the book, but particularly in this chapter, knowing that *Die Aktion* had helped to bring German Expressionist graphic work to a wider audience. A reproduction of a cover would have gone a long way towards substantiating the descriptions of *Die Aktion* as an organ that struggled with the challenges of consistency in politics, design, and their aesthetic and economic base (*Die Aktion* aimed for zero advertisements)—all of which are familiar to those involved in contemporary radical publishing.

The most provocative of Raunig's "long twentieth century" episodes counts as the third layer of complexity to his dense argument. He delivers it in his last chapters describing and analyzing the participation of a Vienna-based radical activist performance troupe, the Volxtheatre (or PublixTheatreCaravan), in the

Die Aktion **Vol. VII, nos 39–40 (1917). Title Page: Woodcut by Conrad Felixmüller: *Rettet Euch Menschen***

oppositional activities targeting the G8 summit in Genoa in July 2001, and then the group's work with the activist gathering at the Strasbourg noborder camp of 2002. These are the most recent episodes addressed, but far from marking the closing of a period, they stand as keeping the long twentieth century open and present. It is not only that by any measure four years before the date of publication counts as recent history, well within the scope of personal memory and still-rough primary accounts. More significant is that Raunig tells of the PublixTheatreCaravan's activity following the events of Genoa, infamous for the brutality of the police actions, and of how the group evolved in a changed political climate. The post-Genoa climate is essentially continuous with the post-9/11 repressive media-saturated regime we in North America and Europe experience today, sometimes violently, especially depending on skin color and relative wealth. We cannot exist apart from, outside of, or beyond the long twentieth century of art and revolution, Raunig seems to be saying. We are in it, looking for ways to continue the task before us, laid out in imaginary terms by Chernyshevsky nearly a decade before Courbet served as Commune Councilor. In other words: What is to be done?

It is in Raunig's treatment of the recent, living, "uncompleted and uncompletable" history that his distinctive voice finally emerges in full, drawing equally on his training in classical philology, his leftist social theory idea-bank, and his practical experience in the activist milieu. The term "border" proves ripe for philological dissection. In a helpful rumination, Raunig explains that the three Latin terms corresponding to our single modern term "border": *(con-) finis*, *frons*, and *limes*, open up conceptions of borders not as lines, but as zones of adjacency and overlap. Speaking as the classicist, he reminds us that back in the days of Roman antiquity, whole provinces might exist as "border" (248). The element of activist experience, however, is what ultimately stamps the work with an authenticity not wholly provided by academic firepower alone. When Raunig speaks with familiarity of the tactical discussions, internal micro-political negotiations, and plain old interpersonal dramas that took place within the social space of the noboder camp, he speaks of the social dynamics that alternately energize and bedevil almost all grassroots movements (257–258). The service he provides is a necessary one, that is, to link in a coherent analysis the action on the ground, in the talking circles, and, in this case, in the plena of the noborder camps, to the theories which often too neatly accommodate in implicitly valorized terms such messy and frustrating activist realities. The point is, the concatenation of art and revolution in the long twentieth century is articulated not just in grand movements, but also and perhaps even primarily in the local actions, the rhizomatic discussions, the endless arguments, the short-lived interventions of the everyday.

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And here I can say I was not disappointed with the book. Attempting to make sense of the contradictions and blockages as experienced—or rather, *produced*—in the concrete activist efforts of, for example, the noborder camp is, I dare say, the only way to advance the theoretical understanding of our condition as leftist cultural producers. His attention to the inner workings of the activist milieu distinguishes his analysis from other movement-engaged works of theory that have reached a left-identified readership in the last few years (such as Retort's *Afflicted Powers*, 2005), which tend to float above the activist dysfunction. On that level, Raunig finishes on a courageous note. If there is one weakness worth mentioning, it is the lack of acknowledged specificity, especially in regards to the most recent activism. Other reviewers have questioned Raunig's selection of the PublixTheatreCaravan as the one example from contemporary times. I have no quarrel with his choice: from his descriptions, the group is indeed a fair representative of a prevailing current on the leftist world stage, in strategy, method, and aesthetic. However, it is also true that it is a current with a very European-American flavor, and that should not only be acknowledged, but analyzed. I have no interest in the morality of declaring social position as an attempt to circumscribe privilege, but I am concerned about how politically engaged art workers might anticipate, manage, and circumvent the inevitable limits of transferability of any given model in our age of colliding identities. Those limits are reached most quickly (but nearly always in a distressingly surprising way) when cultural and/or locational specificities are not straightforwardly declared. While this concern may fall outside the scope of the book, as long as Raunig's ever-lengthening century remains provisionally open, the specter of difference versus commonality lurks. Moreover, the operations of capital depend on the selective effacement of differences. In his closing thoughts targeting the art world's assimilation of "revolutionary" content, Raunig says as much:

> The figure of instrumentalizing the concatenation to derive all kinds of capital from it principally belongs to the current trend of fashionable border-crossings: When media intellectuals today... avail themselves of the symbolic capital and scandal of revolution, or when actors in the art field instrumentalize social transformations as spectacular conditions just to finance their art, this is part of what has become a familiar arsenal of aggressive publicity work and self-presentation. (264)

That, to me, is the issue. I have already said that, in regards to intellectual lineage, I see no weakness in specificity. The same could be said for the historical examples. How can we preserve the symbols of the past for a common revolutionary future when we have already seen the massive mining of images associated with the Chinese Revolution by profit-driven artists and style-makers, and when Che exists only as an ennui-inducing decoration, ubiquitous as a marker of staleness and virtual de-politicization? Far less heavily reproduced representations of revolution litter the art and design worlds. Any substantively revolutionary episode, including all those named and examined by Raunig, provide low-hanging fruit for the enterprising. Raunig posits the transversal—the dual belonging of any action to spheres not limited only to art or only to politics—as antidote to static representations of consumable revolution. Upon finishing a reader may be forgiven for believing that revolution, in some new-fangled form, is always possible, and at the micro level, always happening. But I must wonder, are these "singular events" actuated by the "concatenation of revolutionary machines and art machines" not equally due to the insistent particularities of a given social world in time and place? That is to say, is the incipient creation of revolutionary singularities due in part to the built-in limits of transferability of any given concatenation? Might that creativity be better served were the limits of transferability made a focus of theoretical understanding, rather than the afterthought it usually is? •

Gerald Raunig, *Art and Revolution: Transversal Activism in the Long Twentieth Century,* transl. Aileen Derieg (Los Angeles: Semiotext(e), 2007).

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