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Boom!

a project by Oliver Ressler & David Thorne

“if only . . .” This is the frustrated refrain which begins each of the overgrown, absurdly dysfunctional web-addresses advertised by *Boom!*, an agitational project by David Thorne and Oliver Ressler that has appeared in a range of distribution and display formats over the past two years. Instead of the instantaneous moment of brand recognition we have come to expect from this ubiquitous (and conventionally brief) linguistic structure, here we are addressed by a series of breathless verbal torrents that rehearse the fantasies, anxieties and defense mechanisms of a system—globalized free-market capitalism—confronting its own internal crises. These deranged apologetics deliberately fail to elicit from us a positive identification, for the conditional requirements following from the “if only” in each case go too far in foregrounding the specific contents of the universal “freedom” to which they aspire.

Somewhere between wistful day dreaming, beleaguered exhortation, and self-conscious strategizing, these crypto-capitalist voices seem to concede that the actual and potential crises of consent they allude to—among workers, the poor, the hungry, the third world, protesters—are immanent to the system rather than simple accidents to be written off or ignored. Were challenges to the legitimacy of capitalism a temporary problem rather than an ever-present threat, the *raison d'être* of these statements would eventually become obsolete: the universal benevolence of the market would reveal itself as a self-evident principle and the necessity of discursive mediation (along with the broader “apparatus of monitoring intervention regulation and policing”) would come to an end. Affirming that consent *cannot* be taken for granted (particularly at moments of acute dislocation), the texts hyperbolically perform a kind of “how to” manual, enacting the rhetorical displacements through which the interests of capital are made to stand in metonymically for those of Society as a whole.

The importance of this logic is indicated in the title given by Thorne and Ressler to the series in its entirety. “Boom” is a term frequently applied to periods of intensive capitalist expansion, endowing the process with an aura of generic emancipatory dynamism that obscures the constitutive unevenness on which all capitalist “growth” depends. This finds its canonical formulation in Joseph Schumpeter’s account of the “boom-bust” business cycle of modern capitalism, which he described as a ceaseless process of “creative destruction” driven by entrepreneurial initiative and technological innovation.¹ Schumpeter was acutely aware that booms (such as those connected with cotton, steel, railroads, electrification . . .) depended crucially on high levels of cultural-symbolic cathexis and speculative investment, making them finite, unstable and prone to overproduction. Instead of an occasion for collective political struggle on the part of those rendered most vulnerable by this dynamic, the recurrent crises generated by capitalism were for Schumpeter a quasi-biological process of “natural selection,” a call for individuals to flexibly adapt themselves to the risk, uncertainty and self-reliance proper to the course of economic “progress.”

“if only people would be as self-regulating as markets . . .” “if only people would believe that a rising tide lifts all boats . . .” “if only people would understand job security as the permanent state of insecurity . . .” These Schumpeterian calls uncannily echo throughout the texts of *Boom!*, whose contents bear a historically specific relationship to the linguistic and visual format which they inhabit.

Citing Marx, TJ Clark has recently suggested that a defining criteria for critical artistic practice is that it “teach the petrified forms how to dance by singing them their own song.” Clark distinguishes such “singing” from simple “mimicry” and “hectoring from the outside,” going on to assert that this art must exhibit “an intuition . . . of precisely the central knot in the dream life—the true *structure* of dream-visualization,” which he associates with “the imagery of ‘information,’ and the idea of the world being newly robbed of its space-time materiality by a truly global, truly totalizing apparatus of virtualization.”²

This overdetermining ideological “knot” described by Clark resonates closely with the millenarian euphoria of the late 1990’s, the period whose “petrified forms” *Boom!* sets into probing dialectical motion. “www_.com” is of course the format of a Universal Resource Locator (URL), the standard addressing system used by corporations to direct consumers to their sites on the World Wide Web, a technological development that figured prominently as both an investment and a symbol in the “New Economy” before its ruinous collapse in 2000–1 and the onset of the current recession.

Written in 1999, the following formulation by *New York Times* columnist Thomas Friedman is paradigmatic in this respect: “If the defining perspective of the cold war was ‘division,’ the defining perspective of globalization is ‘integration.’ The symbol of the Cold War system was a wall, which divided everyone. The symbol of the globalization system is a World Wide Web, which unites everyone.”³ This passage usefully indicates the utopian background against which the emergence of the Internet took place and the way in which the restructuring of the world economy according to the dictates of capital was made to stand for the liberation of humanity’s communicative reason. Chained together with generic values of dialogue, openness and cross-border community, the free-market economy is put beyond the sphere of democratic questioning, for it is taken to incarnate democracy itself.

An important part of this democratization narrative were the claims made that the virtual circuits of the New Economy had transcended the obstacles, conflicts and crises characterizing the industrial past, a notion nicely captured by Bill Gates’ phrase “frictionless capitalism.” Ceaseless technological innovation, increasingly perfect information and digitally empowered investor-citizens would facilitate the arrival of a golden age of permanent prosperity, an eternal boom without bust.

Thorne and Ressler’s texts rub this “dream-knot” against the grain, reinvesting it with traces of “friction” forcibly disavowed by the utopian promise that *this time it would be different*. In one sense, this might seem like a superfluous gesture: in the aftermath of the NASDAQ crash and the extinction of dot-com mania, the millennial discourse of the New Economy is already widely regarded as an embarrassing relic of youthful naiveté and speculative excess.⁴ However, rather than moralize against exceptionally irrational behavior or foolishly unrealistic expectations, *Boom!* draws attention to the crises generated as a matter of course by finance capital in search of ever-higher returns on its investment. The texts imply that crisis—job insecurity, income polarization, downward pressure on global working conditions, overproduction—not only coexists with, but is actively shaped by movements of money and information in the seemingly immaterial realm of electronic space. These crises unfolded *during* the boom *as part* of the boom, only intensifying with the latter’s collapse and the massive waves of downsizing and unemployment following in its wake.

In dwelling on the outmoded, divested symbol of the New Economy, Thorne and Ressler do not indulge in morbid post-boom gloating, but offer a historical insight apropos of Walter Benjamin’s observation that “the ‘state of emergency’ in which we live is not the exception but the rule.” Paraphrasing Barbara Kruger’s interrogatives, we could translate the meta-question posed by Thorne and Ressler’s texts as follows: “Whose boom? Whose bust?”

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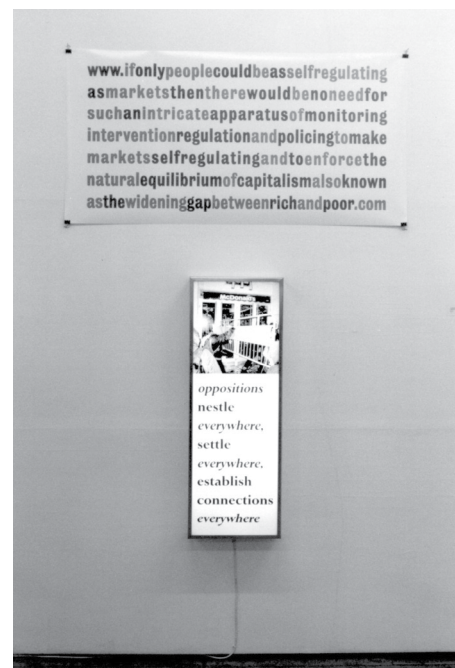
We have thus far considered the signifying operation of *Boom!* in terms of an imperative of spectatorial disidentification with the universalizing address made by neoliberalism. While evident in the disjunctive relationship between the familiar logo-structure of the URL and the exaggerated gestures of ideological crisis-management set forth in the texts, this imperative becomes even more complex when considered in relation to the variety of presentational formats in which *Boom!* has appeared, each implying different functions, conditions of reception and potential addressees: as storefront window-displays competing for the attention of urban pedestrians; as detachable centerfold-posters in *Afterimage*, a quarterly magazine devoted

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"Democracy When?," Los Angeles Contemporary Exhibitions, Los Angeles, 2002



"What, How & For Whom," Kunsthalle Exnergasse, Vienna, 2001

to critical media studies; as wall-installations in exhibitions of conceptual art, as email attachments circulating through activist and artistic networks, and finally as large, mobile banners for use in street demonstrations. While it would be unwise to hierarchize these formats according to a single criteria of publicity, here I will focus on the final one mentioned—the protest banner—precisely because this medium, by virtue of its physical proximity to the space of “the street” is frequently expected to achieve maximum levels of political relevance, accessibility, and effectivity.

Furthermore, the protest banner explicitly announces its instrumentality; it is designed for application in the service of an end outside of itself, which is why it is barely afforded the status of a “medium” in the discourse of art-criticism. Indeed, this relation of means and ends traditionally governs the distinction between “art” and “propaganda” in critical discourses of left and right alike. As Adorno put it in “Commitment,” artistic pretensions to “directly” engage in political struggle necessarily imply “accommodation with the world,” a stance that harbors sinister totalitarian impulses at odds with the open-ended “it could be otherwise” whispered by “autonomous art.”⁵ Were artists to attempt to accede to the register of *actual* social transformation rather than alluding to the empty potentiality of utopian alterity, the result could only be ethical impoverishment, or worse.

In overtly revisiting the medium of the protest banner, *Boom!* complicates these critical admonishments against artistic instrumentality, reactivating Benjamin’s productivist injunction that “[the artists’] mission is not to report but to struggle; not to play the spectator but to intervene directly.”⁶ But this complication should not be confused with a simple affirmation of the values in question; to reactivate productivism is not an attempt at resuscitating it: whereas resuscitation appeals to a lost ideal that can be unproblematically applied to the present, reactivation involves a critical, transformative engagement with a putatively anachronistic object in order to redeem its utopian spark in the present constellation. Indeed, a primary function of Thorne and Ressler’s designs is to disturb conventional assumptions about the unproblematic functionality of protest art itself—the immediacy of its claims, the identifications it elicits, the responses it activates. But instead of abandoning this

fraught terrain altogether in favor of a secure critical distance, Thorne and Ressler’s banners operate in its midst, signifying dia-critically vis-à-vis the heterogeneous mixture of cultural forms associated with the recent wave of mass mobilizations in the North against the institutions of global economic governance beginning in Seattle in 1999.

During much of the 1990’s, radical theory had been preoccupied with cyberspace as the privileged domain of counter-publicity and activism, with Critical Art Ensemble going so far as to declare that “street activism has become an anachronism now that there is no longer any geographic or physical center of economic or political power.”⁷ But the wave of demonstrations since Seattle has led many to echo the words of Allan Sekula: “. . . something very simple is missed by descriptions of this as a movement founded in cyberspace: the human body asserts itself in the city streets against the abstraction of global capital.”⁸ This observation resonates with the renewed interest on the part of artists in the space of the street, many of whom have linked their practice to the micro-politics of the demonstrations themselves.

Among these practices, a prominent aesthetic tendency from which *Boom!* marks its difference is the carnivalesque. Following Raoul Vaneigem’s dictum that “revolutionary moments are carnivals in which the individual life celebrates its unification with a regenerated society,”⁹ this tendency offers artistic creativity as an instance of direct democratic participation. The papier-mâché puppet workshops led by David Solnit, for example, are founded on the principle that “everyone can and everyone should make art.” The gigantic puppets produced in these workshops have been among some of the most memorable images associated with recent mobilizations, orchestrating a kind of moral pageantry in which grotesque anthropomorphism plays a prominent role. Such street art assumes the task of providing a colorful and affirmative counterpoint to official representations of demonstrators as bearers of social negativity, whether the “anti-social” property destruction of black-clad anarchists or the “anti-globalization” stance attributed epithetically to the movement more broadly.

For instance, according to Solnit’s open call, the goal of “Art and Theatre Against the World Economic Forum” in January 2002

was “To qualitatively contrast ourselves with WEF corporate executives . . . making it clear that they are a source of terror and misery and that we are the alternative. ANOTHER WORLD IS PAINTABLE. . . . We will create a festival of life worth living for and celebrating. We will reclaim the streets as a gallery to exhibit our visions of the world that will replace theirs.”¹⁰ In this passage, Solnit offers a variation on the quasi-utopian affirmation “Another World is Possible” that has become the unofficial motto of the counter-globalization movement.¹¹ But Solnit’s substitution of “paintable” for “possible” suggests that the “other world” of the future is known in advance and is already present as an ideal in need of simple visual presentation through the “use of positive, clear and inspiring images.” In fact, the demonstrators “reclaiming the street” provide their own referent: “we are the alternative.” In a similar auto-referential spirit, John Jordan of the Reclaim the Streets movement advocates an “art that is not about representation but presence, a politics not about deferring social change to the future but about change now, about immediacy, intuition and imagination.”¹²

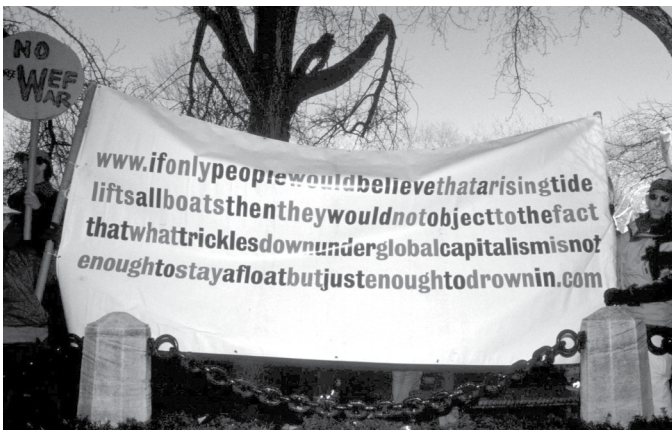
The deferred temporality and deranged argumentation we encounter in *Boom!* frustrate not only the hypothetical subject of neoliberalism, but also the identificatory plenitude expected by certain modes of left politics, such as those just mentioned. The latter stress “direct action” as the central values protest art should visually illustrate and literally enact. But this emphasis on the “now” of the demonstration risks overshadowing the possibility that artistic techniques might be capable of articulating analyses, demands, and positions that go beyond the reductive moral dramaturgy of demonized executives pitted against populist, life-affirming revelers. This is the proposition ventured by Thorne and Ressler, although the artists by no means claim for *Boom!* the status of a superior or exemplary “solution.”

In fact, on the several occasions that the artists have directly coordinated with activists to have *Boom!* used in protests, the results have been less than successful, at least according to conventional criteria: in one case, upon receiving them, members of a labor union were so unimpressed by the banner’s deferral of legibil-

ity and lack of iconographic figuration that they declined to bring them into the street at all. In another case, protest organizers did facilitate the distribution of three banners, but expressed bewildered skepticism as to their ‘point’ and ultimately neglected to keep track of them or to maintain them for reuse.¹³

What do these (admittedly unscientific) anecdotes suggest about the status of *Boom!* as a committed, productivist intervention? From one perspective, they confirm the entrenchedness of certain norms regarding “good” and “bad” protest art and the aesthetic conservatism of groups cautious not to distract from the specificity and urgency of their demands. And after all, who are independent conceptual artists such as Thorne and Ressler to challenge such strategic conservatism? Would it not be more “effective” for artists to put themselves directly at the service of the “community” in question, providing the technical skills necessary for the latter to make itself present in “positive, clear, inspiring images,” as Solnit would have it? Wouldn’t anything other amount to mere indulgence, directing attention away from the task at hand?

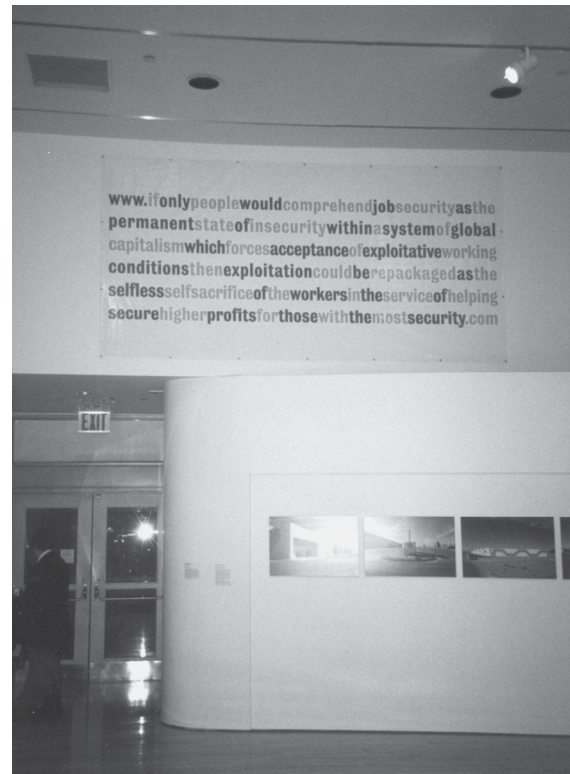
While intuitive, such questions risk neutralizing the radicality of the horizons opened by the recent mobilizations, whose “task” remains an open and contested question. While emerging out of decades of organizing around specific issues (agricultural policy, labor rights, debt relief, environmental justice) the novelty of recent mobilizations has been their politicization of the organizing principles and institutions of the global economic system as a whole. *Boom!* takes this novelty as its starting point, proposing the following question: how might the agitational culture of protests articulate a critique of an abstract, self-globalizing ideological premise (the inevitable, non-political, universally benevolent character of the “self-regulating market”) and the locally salient material effects this premise assists in reproducing (systemic impoverishment, insecurity, criminalization) that would render more politically complex the moral outrage expressed by a slogan such as “people before profit!” or the self-congratulatory incantation “this is what democracy looks like!?”¹⁴ Furthermore, what might such a complexity entail for the “other world” (or “worlds” as the



Demonstrations against the World Economic Forum, New York, 2002



Demonstrations against the World Economic Forum, Salzburg, 2002



"Anti-corporate globalization projects," Kunst Raum Goethestrasse, Linz, 2002

"Empire/State," Whitney Museum of American Art Independent Study Program Exhibition, New York, 2002

Zapatistas might have it) whose possibility is so enthusiastically announced?

In pondering these questions, we should not evade the fact that *Boom!* was not generally well received by protest-activists, and that simply charging the latter with aesthetic conservatism would be an inadequate response. *Boom!* is clearly intended as a Brechtian interruption of the normal "plot" of protest-art, creating a situation that "is not brought home to the spectator but distanced from him."¹⁵ Yet Thorne and Ressler do not pursue this as an end in and of itself, an obscurantist gesture that could only be the symptom of nihilism, sadism, or elitism. Their productivist desire to 'intervene actively' is sincere, if critical. As an *experimental* aesthetico-political undertaking that aspires to use-value in the project of a democratic globalization, *Boom!* may evolve in response to the needs and desires of others within the movement, which is not to say that it will be *dictated* by them or content to serve as their self-satisfying mirror-image.

Notes

1. Joseph Schumpeter, *Capitalism, Socialism and Democracy* (New York: Harper, 1975 [1942]), pp. 82.
2. "Modernism, Postmodernism, and Steam," *OCTOBER* 100, Spring 2002, p. 173.
3. *The Lexus and the Olive Tree* (New York: Farrar, Straus and Giroux, 1999), p. 8.
4. See Jon E. Hilsenrath, "Economy's Cooling Brings New Set of Watchwords," *The Wall Street Journal*, January 10, 2001.
5. "Commitment," in *The Essential Frankfurt School Reader*, Andrew Arato and Eike Gebhardt, eds. (New York: Continuum, 1982) p. 317.
6. "The Author as Producer," in *ibid.*, p. 257.
7. "Electronic Civil Disobedience" available at <http://amsterdam.nettime.org/Lists-Archives/nettime-l-9607/msg00004.html>
8. "Waiting for Teargas: [white globe to black]" in *Five Days That Shook the World: Seattle and Beyond*. Verso: 2000. While Sekula's point is crucial, it is difficult not to detect a certain anti-digital anxiety in his remarks that would resonate with a recent embrace by art-historians of the "obsolete" as a principle in and of itself at odds with what consider the artistically and politically unredeemable realm of cyberspace. But as Rosalyn Deutsche has written, "If our goal is to reveal and intervene in

the political struggles producing spaces, we should not focus on distinguishing hierarchically among heterogeneous spaces, on producing one space more political than the other, calling some spaces real and others metaphorical, or on defending traditional spaces—urban squares for example—against the supposed dangers to reality of new spatial arrangements—such as media, information systems, and computer networks." *Evictions* (Cambridge: MIT Press, 1997) p. 375.

9. Cited in John Jordan, "The Art of Necessity: The Subversive Imagination of Anti-Road Protest and Reclaim the Streets" in Stephen Duncombe ed. *The Cultural Resistance Reader* (New York: Verso 2002), p. 353.
10. "Art and Theater Against the World Economic Forum." Available at <http://lists.indymedia.org/mailman/public/imc-nyc-print/2002-January/005034.html>. Incidentally, this was one of the demonstrations in which *Boom!* was deployed.
11. Susan George "Another World is Possible," *The Nation*, February 18, 2002, pp. 11–13. See also Naomi Klein, *Fences and Windows: Dispatches From the Frontlines of the Globalization Debate*. (New York: Picador, 2002). This motto has been adopted by the World Social Forum in Porto Alegre, Brazil, the alternative global summit to the World Economic Forum usually held in Davos, Switzerland. (The WEF temporarily relocated to New York City in 2002 in a gesture of support to the city after the events of September 11th.)
12. John Jordan, "The Art of Necessity: The Subversive Imagination of Anti-Road Protest and Reclaim the Streets" in Stephen Duncombe ed. *The Cultural Resistance Reader* (New York: Verso 2002) p. 349.
13. Email exchange with artists.
14. The us/them antagonism implied in these phrases are no doubt crucial in orchestrating the psychic investments necessary to sustain a movement. According to Chantal Mouffe, "There is always an element of affect, a mobilization of affect or a mobilization of passions. It's a real identification in the sense that one's identity is truly at stake in the idea of being democratic citizens." See "Every Form of Art Has A Political Dimension." Mouffe interviewed by Rosalyn Deutsche, Branden W. Joseph and Thomas Keenan. *Grey Room* 02, p. 112.
15. Benjamin, "The Author as Producer," p. 266.

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