



I DON'T KNOW MUCH ABOUT REVOLUTION BUT I KNOW WHAT I LIKE

Zanny Begg on
political art and
the counter-
globalisation
movement



*Program for De-Turnstilisation of Life Itself,
Contra Filé, Sao Paulo, 2004*

*This is not a protest. Repeat. This is not
a protest. This is some kind of artistic
expression. Over.*

Toronto police radio broadcast.¹

The Global Street Party on 16 May 1998 was one of the first internationally coordinated manifestations of the counter-globalisation movement. With people dancing, marching and cavorting through streets around the world, it provided an early indication that something *new* was happening in politics. This feeling would be irrevocably confirmed a bit over a year later during the riots and demonstrations in Seattle, when the colourful street party turned serious and shut down the World Trade Organization meeting, effectively scuttling that round of trade negotiations.

The call-out on the Toronto police radios indicates the sense of shock and concern that accompanied the emergence of this new movement. What exactly was it: a demonstration? a party? art? Of course it was all of these things combined, and it was this very ambiguity that was to be such a source of strength for contemporary culture and politics at the turn of the millennium.

The Global Street Party helped create a new political movement that was born out of the process of globalisation and yet was its most serious critic: the riots in downtown Seattle were both a product of the high-speed, networked, informational capitalism known as globalisation and a plea against its devastating social consequences. The demonstration brought together several lineages of political protest and culture – rave, cyberpunk, Marxism, anarchism, grunge and avant-garde – into a movement that unforgettably coalesced into ‘five days that shook the world.’

The relationship between ‘protest’ and ‘artistic expression’ has long troubled cultural theory nearly as much as it troubled the Toronto police on that day in 1998. There is a heavy and foreboding history of debates over politics and art, where notions of political revolution are bound up with ideas of the vanguard and notions of artistic innovation bound up with ideas of the avant-garde. In both cases, change was conceived in terms of destruction – the destruction of the old order, be it political or artistic – at a moment when the new was felt to be *possible*. Adorno described this destructive and creative potential as the ‘world once over, as like it as it is unlike it.’²

But if this discussion reaches back to the world of the avant-garde of the beginning of the twentieth century, it also takes a new form at the end of that century with the emergence of the counter-globalisation movement. This made the new possible again while simultaneously questioning the importance of the new as conceived by earlier generations of artists and activists. In the late 1990s revolution was back,

but the more linear traditions of the avant-garde were reinvented in more embodied, horizontal and transversal ways.

Avant-garde mash-up

One example is the counter-globalisation movement’s reinvention of the ideas of the 1960s avant-garde art group the Situationists. The basic building block of the new movement was the ‘affinity group’, a small group of friends or fellow activists who planned their own way of participating in larger events. The movement of these groups through the city could be considered – to paraphrase a famous Situationist text – as modern day *dérives*: ‘the passage of a few persons [the affinity group] through a rather brief unity of time [the protest].’

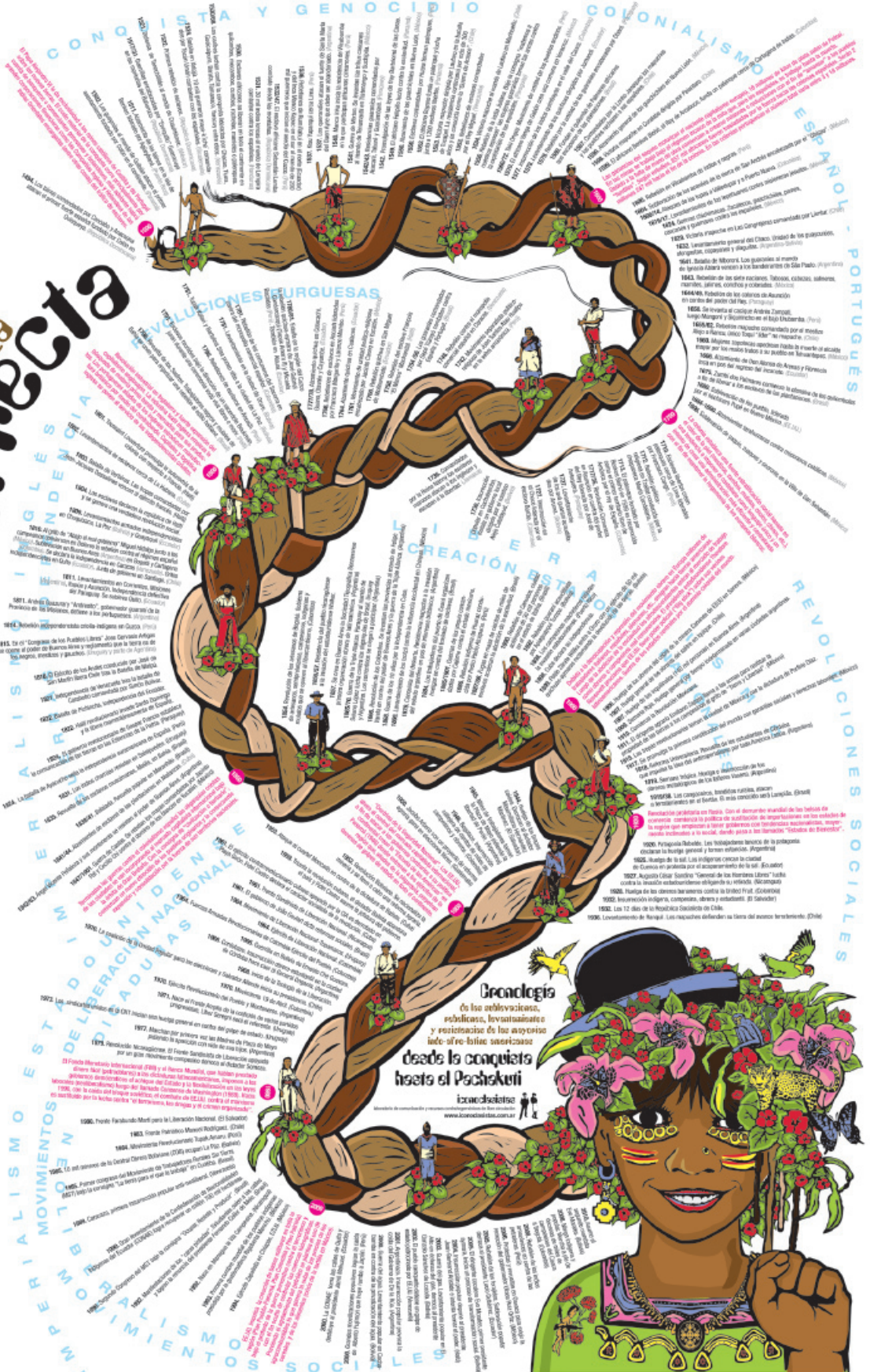
While some affinity groups focused on more traditional activities such as blockades or sit-ins, many used demonstrations as a platform for creative experimentation in forms of protest. The sum total of these experimentations could be regarded as ‘constructed situations’ that disrupted the spectacular operations of capital. The Situationists’ idea of constructed situations drew heavily on Henri Lefebvre’s notion of the Moment, which he saw as a gesture or action that breaks with the continuum of everyday life by providing a critique of the totality of moments that constitute this continuum.³ According to Lefebvre, these moments were destined to be lost but, in their moment of risk and anticipatory fantasy, they reconfigured the possible (‘Another World Is Possible’).

Seattle was the most serious anti-capitalist demonstration in a developed country since the collapse of the Berlin Wall and was thus the first chance for the Left to build a movement beyond the influence of Stalinism and the totalitarian ethos it had bequeathed. In many ways, the counter-globalisation movement was as much a demonstration against the organising tactics and strategies of Stalinism and the Old Left as it was against neoliberalism and the New Right.

Right: *The Braids of Insurgency*, map of resistance, Icono Clasistas, Argentina, 2010

1492: Los europeos llegan al continente americano por primera vez. Cristóbal Colón, al servicio de España, descubre América. Este evento marcará el inicio de la colonización europea en América. Los europeos traen consigo enfermedades que diezmarán a las poblaciones indígenas que no tenían defensas contra ellas. También traerán consigo tecnologías, herramientas y conocimientos que cambiarán la vida en América. El intercambio de plantas y animales entre Europa y América será intenso. El azúcar, el trigo y el ganado europeo se introducirán en América, mientras que el maíz, la papa y el tomate viajarán a Europa. Este intercambio tendrá profundas consecuencias en la alimentación y la agricultura de ambas partes.

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CONQUISTA Y GENOCIDIO

1492: Descubrimiento de América por Cristóbal Colón.

1492-1500: Conquista de América por los españoles.

1500-1550: Genocidio de los indígenas.

1550-1600: Colonización de América.

1600-1650: Rebeliones indígenas.

1650-1700: Conquista de América por los portugueses.

1700-1750: Rebeliones indígenas.

1750-1800: Conquista de América por los franceses.

1800-1850: Rebeliones indígenas.

1850-1900: Conquista de América por los británicos.

1900-1950: Rebeliones indígenas.

1950-2000: Conquista de América por los estadounidenses.

2000-2020: Rebeliones indígenas.

REVOLUCIONES BURGUESAS

1789: Revolución Francesa.

1804: Revolución Haitiana.

1810-1820: Revoluciones de independencia en América Latina.

1820-1830: Revoluciones de independencia en América Latina.

1830-1840: Revoluciones de independencia en América Latina.

1840-1850: Revoluciones de independencia en América Latina.

1850-1860: Revoluciones de independencia en América Latina.

1860-1870: Revoluciones de independencia en América Latina.

1870-1880: Revoluciones de independencia en América Latina.

1880-1890: Revoluciones de independencia en América Latina.

1890-1900: Revoluciones de independencia en América Latina.

1900-1910: Revoluciones de independencia en América Latina.

1910-1920: Revoluciones de independencia en América Latina.

1920-1930: Revoluciones de independencia en América Latina.

1930-1940: Revoluciones de independencia en América Latina.

1940-1950: Revoluciones de independencia en América Latina.

1950-1960: Revoluciones de independencia en América Latina.

1960-1970: Revoluciones de independencia en América Latina.

1970-1980: Revoluciones de independencia en América Latina.

1980-1990: Revoluciones de independencia en América Latina.

1990-2000: Revoluciones de independencia en América Latina.

2000-2020: Revoluciones de independencia en América Latina.

REVOLUCIONES SOCIALES

1910-1920: Revolución Mexicana.

1920-1930: Revolución Cubana.

1930-1940: Revolución Boliviana.

1940-1950: Revolución Paraguaya.

1950-1960: Revolución Dominicana.

1960-1970: Revolución Nicaragüense.

1970-1980: Revolución Salvadoreña.

1980-1990: Revolución Hondureña.

1990-2000: Revolución Guatemalteca.

2000-2020: Revolución Paraguaya.

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Grandes
de las aboliciones,
políticas, levantamientos
y resistencia de los pueblos
latinoamericanos
desde la conquista
hasta el presente

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By the end of the 1990s, the revolutionary impulse of the Russian revolution – the twentieth-century's great political 'event' – had become 'saturated', unable to generate or inspire anything new. In an interview in October 2006, Alain Badiou explained the concept of saturation not as 'a brutal rupture' but an over absorption of ideas:

It becomes progressively more difficult to find something new in the field of the fidelity. Since the mid-80s, more and more, there has been something like a saturation of revolutionary politics in its conventional framework: class struggle, party, dictatorship of the proletariat, and so on.⁴

The organisers of the counter-globalisation demonstrations wanted the experience of protest to be different from the previous culture of revolutionary struggle. Those who came were to be regarded as central to the decision-making

processes of the demonstration itself. No longer a passive audience to applaud the edicts handed down from the podium, participants were encouraged to make their own decisions about what they wanted to happen – or, indeed, to set up alternative, mutually supportive demonstrations in an activist ethos of 'tactical diversity'.

Carnival

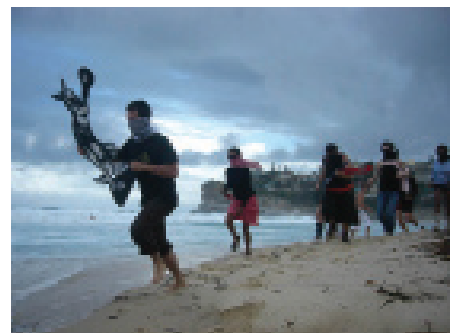
The Spanish artist Marcelo Expósito traces the origins of the counter-globalisation movement in his film *Radical Imagination (Carnivals of Resistance)*. Expósito's film explores a key aspect of the new movement: the carnival. As one of his interviewees put it, 'it was common sense, unless you create a space where people enjoy changing the world, a space of joy and conviviality, you are not going to change anything ... we wanted to get away from a traditional confrontational protest situation and pre-figure our imagined world in the moment of the protest itself.'⁵



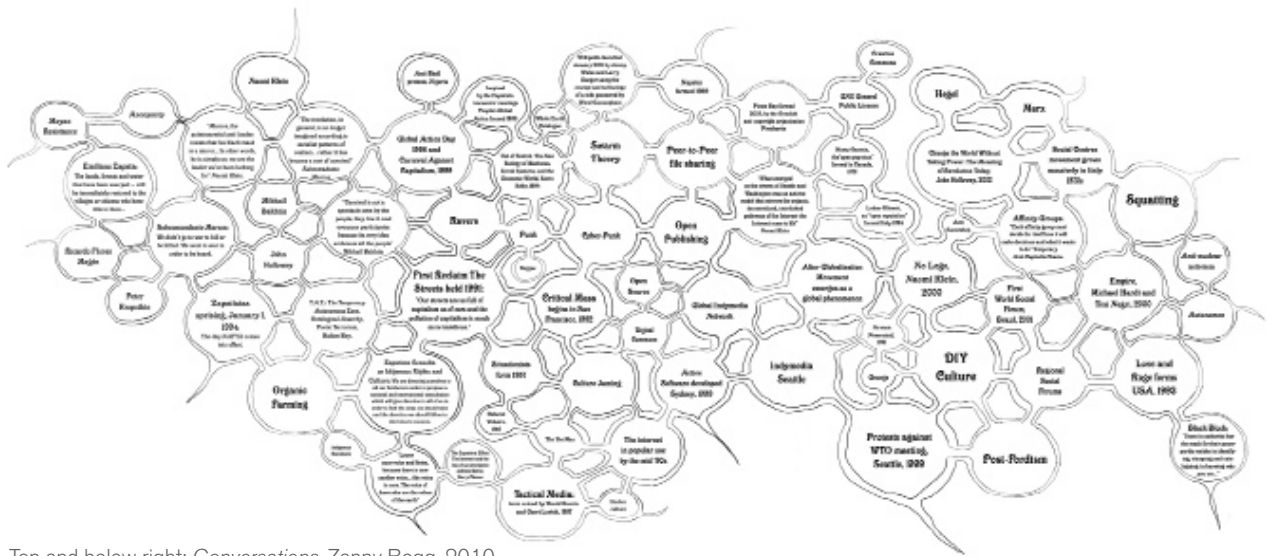
During the mid-1990s activists and revolutionaries increasingly began to question the joyless and stoic traditions handed down by the Left. The idea that the new world was born in the here and now out of people's joy and desire for a more human existence was counterposed to the transcendent notion that struggle would bring the promised land of happiness and equality tomorrow. Subcomandante Marcos, the influential spokesperson for the Zapatistas, explained this shift:

The revolution, in general, is no longer imagined according to socialist patterns of realism, that is as men and women stoically marching behind a red waving flag towards a luminous future. Rather it has become a sort of carnival.⁶

Concurrent with this shift was a growing interest in the ideas of the Russian philosopher and literary theorist Mikhail Bakhtin. Expósito's film is structured around a series of quotes from Bakhtin's *Rabelais and His World*. Bakhtin saw the carnival as a popular expression of subversion or a 'world turned inside out'⁷ in which people could make fun of the systems of power that structured their everyday existence. This freedom allowed them to parody 'normal life' – not just in an imaginary way but also in an embodied way that celebrated abundance and lived out feelings of pleasure in a temporary space without hierarchies.



Top of both pages: *What Would It Mean to Win?*
film by Oliver Ressler and Zanny Begg, 2008
Above: Erroristas Action, Bronte Beach, 2007



Top and below right: *Conversations*, Zanny Begg, 2010

Using an intimate, close-cropping technique that focused solely on the eyes and mouth of the speaker, Expósito's film presents activists discussing the link between previously disassociated experiences of party/carnival and political protest. Moving beyond the countercultural idea that alternative lifestyles could be a utopian escape from the drudgery of capitalism, the Global Street Party activists sought to transform alternative culture itself into a form of confrontation. The carnival would stop the levers of capitalism from working and simultaneously 'embody' the new and imagined reality.

Activist Art

Marcelo Expósito's direct exploration of the counter-globalisation movement was typical of a growing interest in political activism from artists and cultural institutions during the millennium's first decade. A raft of political exhibitions opened in the wake of Seattle: *Who If Not We ...?* (multi-venue project across Europe, 2004); *Collective Creativity* (Kunsthalle Fridericianum, Kassel, 2005); *There Must Be an Alternative* (Forum Stadtpark, Austria, 2004); *Space of Conflicts*; *The Invisible Insurrection of a Million Minds – 20 Proposals for Imagining the Future* (Sala Rekalde, Bilbao, 2005); *Disobedience* (Ivan Dougherty Gallery, Sydney, 2005); *Ex-Argentina*



(Cologne, 2004; Barcelona, 2004; Buenos Aires, 2006); *Now-Time Venezuela: Media Along the Path of the Bolivarian Process* (Berkeley Art Museum, 2006); *Cycle Tracks Will Abound in Utopia* (Australian Centre for Contemporary Art, Melbourne, 2005). The rise of these big political shows led Russian artist Dmitry Vilensky to joke of 'a spectre ... haunting Europe – the spectre of the political exhibition'.⁸

The exhibition projects were complemented by publications and discussions such as Gerald Raunig's *Art and Revolution* (2008); the Verso *Cultural Resistance Reader* (2002); the Documenta 12 *Magazine Project* (2007); *Empires, Ruins + Networks* (edited by Scott McQuire and Nikos Papastergiadis); MUP's *Art and Social Change: A Critical Reader* (2005); the Monday night critical discussion program



Jumps and Surprises, Zanny Begg and Oliver Ressler, Den Frie, Copenhagen, 2008

by 16beaver in New York; Russia's *Chto Delat?* newspaper; the Sarai Media Collective in India to again name just a few.

In addition, a range of art projects overlapped directly with community organising and activism outside of the gallery framework, such as SquatSpace's *Tour of Beauty* (Sydney); Chto Delat's project *Drift* (St Petersburg); Contra Filé's *Program for the Deturnstilisation of Life Itself* (Sao Paulo); Taring Padi's banner works (Indonesia); Oliver Ressler's documentaries of the movement in Genoa and Venezuela; Dmitry Vilensky's participation in the European Social Forums; Shilpa Gupta's exhibitions to coincide with the World Social Forum (India); Grupo Etcetera's *Errorist International* protests during George Bush's visit to La Plata (Argentina); and so on.

If, as the Toronto police pointed out, political demonstrations were now looking like 'artistic expressions', artistic expressions were also beginning to look like political demonstrations. Activist art came out of a moment of overlap between the spheres of revolutionary activism and art, generating new possibilities within both. Today the counter-globalisation

movement has entered its own period of saturation, with the joy and excitement of early counter-summit protests replaced by more ritualised confrontations with the heavily fortified apparatus of the state, or even indifference: to use Jacques Rancière's terms, the moment of 'dissensus' has passed into the 'politics as usual' of police lines and road-blocks.

Thus recent discussions on the counter-globalisation movement have focused on its limitations: the impact of September 11, the increasing spectacle of counter-summit protests, the ritualising of violence between police and protesters, the economic crash and the re-assertion of state-driven economics, the death of utopian visions of globalisation. But if the movement feels 'played out' in a political sense, its cultural impact retains much of its vitality.

While even just a few years ago, artists were making works specifically with activists from the counter-globalisation movement – projects such as Expósito's film – today the 'moment' has diffused within art more broadly. Artists are working within the subjective space opened up by that wave of activism but in ways that have



Above left: *Jumps and Surprises*, Zanny Begg and Oliver Ressler, Den Frie, Copenhagen, 2008

Above right: *Tour of Beauty*, SquatSpace, Performance Space, Sydney, 2009

transmuted from that 'event' into other areas and concerns. The counter-globalisation movement may have set out to culturise politics but along the way it has also politicised culture.

The process of globalisation has facilitated a rapid expansion and diversification of the impulse towards networking, collaboration and collectivism contained within earlier avant-garde art movements: thus mail art becomes the email list, *détournement* becomes sampling, the readymade becomes plagiarism, plagiarism becomes copyleft, the *dérive* becomes Google Earth, the collage becomes the mash-up, appropriation becomes the fanzine and so on. Rather than emaciating the avant-garde impulses of earlier art movements (as gloomy postmodernists prophesised), the globalised information age has expanded the capacity of artists and art movements to experiment with networked practices in which social relationships and political action become a form of art. 'Relational aesthetics', as propounded by Nicolas Bourriaud in the late 1990s, only touched the tip of this particular iceberg.

Of course, activist art cannot continue to thrive if activism doesn't, and so the malaise of the counter-globalisation movement presents certain challenges for the ongoing vitality of politicised cultural experiments. But the movements and struggles that emerge will do so in an environment where 'artistic' and 'political' expressions have become entangled in ways that will no longer surprise either the Toronto police

or cultural theorists. In the future, art's ability to continually amaze will manifest itself in as yet unimagined experiments in the gap between politics and art, activism and everyday life. To quote Badiou again, 'art must be as rigorous as a mathematical demonstration, as surprising as an ambush in the night, and as elevated as a star.'

- 1 Naomi Klein, *No Logo*, Flamingo, London, 2001, p. 312.
- 2 Theodore Adorno, *Aesthetic Theory*, Continuum, London, 1997, p. 427.
- 3 John Roberts, *Philosophizing the Everyday: Revolutionary Praxis and the Fate of Cultural Theory*, Pluto Press, London, 2006, p. 80.
- 4 Diana George and Nic Veroli, 'Interview with Alain Badiou', 30 October 2006, <http://scentedgardensfortheblind.blogspot.com/2006_10_15_scentedgardensfortheblind_archive.html>.
- 5 Marcelo Expósito, *Radical Imagination (Carnival of Resistance)*, 2004, DVD, 60 min., exhibited at 'Self Education – Self Organisation', National Centre for Contemporary Art, Moscow, September 2006.
- 6 Notes from Nowhere, *We Are Everywhere: The Irresistible Rise of Global Anticapitalism*, Verso, London, 2003, p. 176.
- 7 Mikhail Bakhtin, 'Rabelais and His World' (trans. Helene Iswolsky) in Stephen Duncombe (ed.), *Cultural Resistance Reader*, Verso, London, 2002, p. 88.
- 8 Dmitry Vilensky, 'On the Question of the Political Exhibition' in Keg de Souza and Zanny Begg (eds), *If You See Something, Say Something*, Break Out, Sydney, 2007.