

Brian Holmes

Marcelo Expósito's
Entre Sueños

Towards the New Body

In the past few years, Spanish artist Marcelo Expósito realized a series of videos entitled *Entre Sueños* – his testimony of a new social conflict. Art and culture critic Brian Holmes analyses these videos and shows that, besides carrying an activist message, they illustrate the history of its artistic expression.

Upon opening my laptop to write this article I found an email text with the latest news from Greece, where night after night demonstrators had been facing off with the police, expressing their rage at the murder of the young Alexandros Grigoropoulos. Immense social issues, as pervasive as they are everywhere invisible, were thrust into the burning actuality of the streets by the bullet that pierced the boy's heart. The text says this: 'The youth is revolting because they want to live. With every last one of the meanings of the word "life". They want to live freely, they want space to create, to emancipate themselves, to play. They don't want to spend their adolescence in 12-hour days of school and extra courses, their first adult years in the pointless chase of a university degree, the passport to a glorious 800-euro/48-hours-a-week job in a boring office. . . . We crave to construct our own, autonomous future . . . When you really want to live, a spark is enough to make you instinctively attack anything that you think stands in your way.'¹

1. Anonymous, 'The Revenge of Life', 14 December 2008, at <http://indy.gr/analysis/the-revenge-of-life>.

The corrupt politics and stagnant economy of Greece are unique, say the security officials. But in Europe and across the developed world, the neoliberal revolution has brought precarious working and living conditions to an entire generation. Meanwhile, city centres became glittering spectacles and skyrocketing levels of inequality were seen only from the viewpoint of the elites. The failure of the transnational financial system now guarantees that the 'unique' conditions of Greece will be duplicated in country after country. Like life itself, like art at its best, the spark from the south of Europe is something you can feel in your own body.

As the tension mounts and the demonstrations break out, how many museums and educational programmes will have the courage to explore the work of activist-artists who have dealt directly with the affects, the aspirations and the self-organization of this precarious generation? Those willing to erase the divide between politics and art will find great interest in the production of the Spanish video maker Marcelo Expósito, who over the last five years has been carrying out a multi-part evocation of the new social struggles under the name *Entre Sueños* (Between Waking and Dreams). Unlike conventional documentaries establishing the historical facts, this videography records the nascent movements of history in the gestures and the stories, or indeed the imaginations, of those who attempt to make their own history in the streets.

The series opens with *First of May (The City-Factory)*, 2004, a far-reaching video essay on the transformation of labouring and

organizing conditions in northern Italy, culminating with the appearance of the Chainworkers collective and the EuroMayday parade in Milano. Following this rather complex overture is *Radical Imagination (Carnivals of Resistance)*, also 2004, as well as a third piece, co-authored with Nuria Vila (the editor of all three works) and entitled *Tactical Frivolity + Rhythms of Resistance*, 2007.² In the videos, a shift in the philosophical conception of the capital/labour relation is articulated with the emergent forms of militant organization and with historical practices of audiovisual editing. But as these discursive and formal agendas are pursued, something unutterable is going on beneath the surface: the search for an unknown kind of life that can work a mind-numbing shift, dance in the face of the cops, click through computerized labyrinths and care for a child in one continuous rhythm. The search for a new body.

2. For screening and exhibition of the videos see <http://www.hamaonline.net/autor.php?id=69>; for free download see <http://www.archive.org/details/tacticalfrivolity>.

City-Factory

The ambition of these videos is to be activist in their message, while actualizing the intricate histories of artistic expression. Thus *First of May* is all about organizing chain-store employees and freelance workers; but it begins with lines from the literary writer W.G. Sebald, a sequence from the silent-film classic *Berlin: Symphony of a Great City* and a black-and-white clip of Glenn Gould at the piano, also strangely mute. Only a few moments later do we hear Gould's elegantly phrased performance, which seems to orchestrate the movements of a temp worker watching over kids in an Italian mall. The central question is posed in these first few seconds. If the cinematic montage of the 1920s sought to develop a harmonious musical score for the clashing social relations of the industrial city, then what kind of link could we hope for today between the virtuoso performances of artists and the highly scripted routines of workers caught in the production systems of the post-industrial metropolis?

The video shows documentary clips of the Fiat automobile plant of Lingotto, in Turin, with its spectacular racetrack on the roof where buyers could test drive a car rolling directly off the assembly line. Next come scenes of that same building transformed into a conference centre and leisure complex, a symbol of the transition to communicative labour. The collective discipline of the factory has been vaporized into the omnipresent warp and weft of hyper-individualized economic relations. It is here that the temp girl rushes to

keep up with the activities of the corporate playground, chasing toddlers on plastic cars imported from China. Consumerism appears as a debilitating game where even the guardians don't know the rules. Yet a dream is gathering amid the toys and balloons: the old leftist dream that artistic expression could become directly active in the struggle for emancipation.

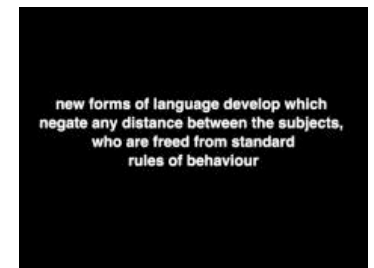
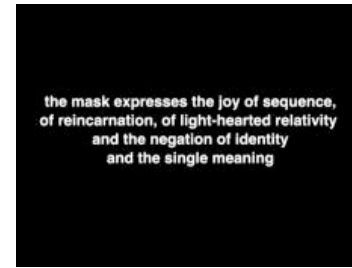
The philosopher Paolo Virno gives fresh voice to that dream in excerpts from a lecture where he describes the resemblance between virtuoso performance and communicational labour. Neither of them produces a finished object or work; both depend on improvisational sequences carried out before a public. Yet the same is true of politics. For Virno, the linguistic and performative turn of the economy tends to dissolve the boundaries between labour, inner contemplation and political action. The situation is confusing, but it brings new powers into everyone's reach. He speaks enigmatically of an invisible notation, a hidden score: the sharable potential of a 'general intellect' that informs or even orchestrates the multifarious activity of today's economy.

Is that sheer mysticism? Waking life in the metropolis appears to be guided not by political virtuosity but by fine-grained processes of control: combinations of motivational research, on-the-job surveillance, individualized seduction and credit assessment by the bankers. Managers and advertisers pull the strings. Activists have to occupy and undermine that terrain. Fascinating sequences of the film show the founders of the Chainworkers group in Milano mounting an unheard-of campaign: a mobilization of the shit-job workers who staff your supermarket, sort your mail, deliver your pizza – and play your music, host your party, cuddle your kids, probably write your advertising too.

Chiara Birattari clicks through a corporate image-bank, looking to pirate the perfect photo of a tattooed rocker from the squatted social centres. She finds one sorting boxes at a depot in the exurban sprawl. 'Autonomous, or precarious?' asks the flier she's designing. Alex Foti recounts the desire to organize people who never dreamed of a union: the kids in the uniforms, the chain-store workers, who grew up on comics and fast food and American culture. The interview breaks up into scenes from a surprise action he coordinated in a giant mall – an environment strictly without freedom of speech or association, the archetype of what Virno calls 'infinite publicity without a public sphere'.

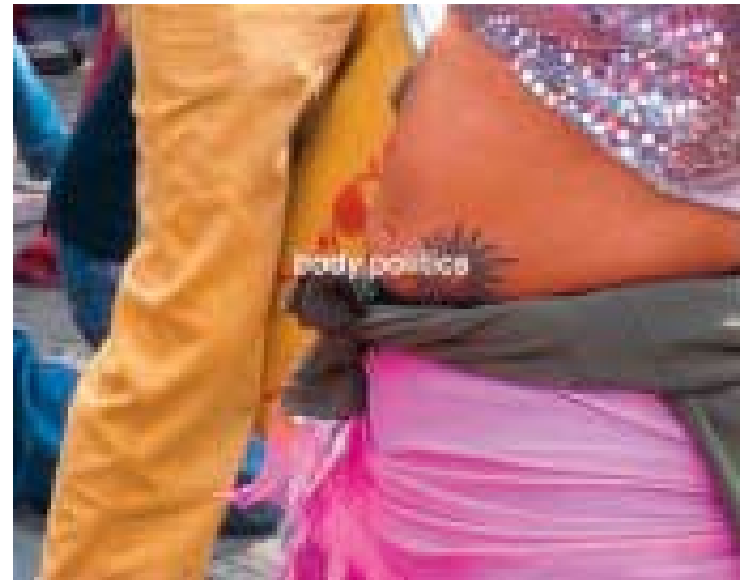
Banners suddenly unfold on an upper floor; leaflets sail through the kingdom of the commodity. A portable sound system cuts

Marcelo Expósito, stills from the video *Radical Imagination* (*Carnivals of Resistance*), 60 min., 2004.



Marcelo Expósito, stills from the video *First of May*
(*The City Factory*), 2 min., 2004.





through the muzak with strong rock and political talk, while activists hold off the burly security guards to open up a window of possibility. Amazingly, the action lasts an hour. The video ends on the city streets, with the wild antics of the precarious Mayday demonstration in Milano, gathering casual workers to protest for better conditions. 'Rights or riots' is the slogan on a demonstrator's bright pink shirt. He smiles self-consciously under the camera's eye, then looks frankly at us, tapping the words on his chest.

With the launching of the EuroMayday parades in 2003 and 2004, the new social movements began raising the issues of life and labour on the urban territory. In a bewildering neoliberal environment where workers are dispatched through the urban sprawl by computerized orders, activists use communication skills to change the score, to disrupt the orchestration of daily life and make a positive move in the perpetually losing game that the corporations have imposed on the populace. This is the challenge of emancipation in our time: popular autonomy and 'riots for rights' depend on the communicational capacities of precarious expression within the fractured tissue of the metropolis.

Swirling Rhythms

What the next two videos show is that emancipation really is a waking dream, relayed across the generations. 'Changes happen first in the imagination,' reads the opening caption of *Tactical Frivolity*. A faraway chant resounds in the air, then an extravagant creature appears on the screen, dressed in silver and pink with enormous wings, a feather duster in her upraised hand and a gas mask dangling at her side, twirling in front of the police. Cut to black-and-white scenes of suffragette marches, with early feminists speaking to the crowd; then another cut to the eyepiece of a turn-of-the-century kinoscope, through which we see the flickering image of a woman performing a modernist butterfly dance on stage. Her flowing white dress swirls in the air, tracing arabesques in three dimensions, while a samba drummer cuts into your rapt attention. One . . . two . . . three: the thunderous beat prepares the break into the present, into the streets.

Using simpler discursive structures than *First of May*, the next two works of *Entre Sueños* plunge into specific events: the 'Carnival against Capital' of 18 June 1999, and the invention of the 'pink bloc' protest aesthetic during the demonstration against the IMF/World Bank in Prague on 26 September 2000. *Tactical Frivolity* +

Rhythms of Resistance, on which I'll briefly focus, combines video footage of the Prague events and retrospective interviews with the participants. What they reveal is how much consciously articulated desire goes into the collective gestures that can succeed in transmitting a political message to today's polarized societies.

Evolving under particularly repressive conditions, British social movements invented the most effective forms of resistance against neoliberal control. Yet as activist Kate Evans explains, they did not depend on violence but on feminine provocation. At the Mayday demonstration held by London Reclaim the Streets in 2000, widely expected to mark the first application of the new Terrorism Act, 'Rosie was there, and she was wearing this ridiculous costume, with this tiny pink bikini and this headdress and these big pink tails, and she had a feather duster and she was tickling the police'. As Rosie herself continues: 'I thought, well, if I'm gonna be legislated into being a terrorist, then I might as well be the most ridiculous kind of terrorist there is.'

Kate recounts the journey to Prague in two travellers' vehicles, filled with 11 women, two men and vast quantities of silver and pink materials. Scenes at the convergence centre give a taste of the preparations with a larger group (mostly from the Peoples' Global Action) who formed the 'pink line', one of three distinct approaches used to shut down the World Bank/IMF meetings. Samba echoes in your ears, and at this point another series of interviews begins, recounting the origins of the subversive music from black Brazilian carnival bands in the 1970s. 'The rhythms that we play originate from *candomblé*, so they're actually used to call down deities of nature,' explains Nicky. 'The moment a break happens, the crowd goes mad. So I think there is really something powerful about those moments, and about those changes in rhythm.' The Prague demonstrations as a whole formed such a break; and members of the pink bloc used the disarming force of surprise to enter the conference centre, closing the meetings and launching a new cycle of popular protest in Europe.

Kate Evans, breast-feeding her baby during the interview, is quite lucid about the potential ambiguities of her tactics: 'I have a bit of a problem with the idea that girls wear very small costumes and dance and men don't,' she explains, 'because I don't know exactly how liberating that is for people who don't realize it's meant to be ironic.' This feminist look at the precarious protest aesthetic combines a grounded, direct-action approach with a rich exploration of the ways that popular mobilization sparks changes in lived experience.

Marcelo Expósito and Nuria Vila, stills from the video *Tactical Frivolity + Rhythms of Resistance*, 39 min., 2007.



The videos are directly inspiring for people who want to put their bodies on the line, producing a new orchestration of urban gesture without falling into the traps laid by the authorities and the media. At the same time, they trace perspectives across a century. Those who are curious about vanguard art might remember Peter Wollen's question in *Raiding the Icebox*: 'What form of bodily movement would correspond to a process of production that displayed a different, transformed rationality – and, of course, a transformed gender division and sexuality?'³ Marcelo Expósito and Nuria Vila have given one answer. It is as though marginal artistic and activist experiments of the past had reawakened in the present, but with a much broader and deeper embodiment, among people aware of the staggering opposition that any emancipatory movement faces. Now the relay will be passed to a younger generation. The film ends with samba rhythms and an eyepiece-view of costumed protesters, cutting to another antiquated butterfly-dance on stage. This time the swirling veils are tinted in electric pink.

3. Peter Wollen, *Raiding the Icebox: Reflections on Twentieth-Century Culture* (Bloomington, IN: Indiana University Press, 1953), 56.

Marcelo Expósito en Nuria Vila, opening still from the video *Tactical Frivolity + Rhythms of Resistance*, 39 min., 2007.

