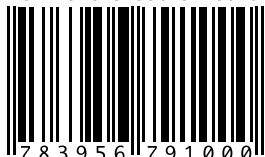



Assemblies, gathering places, and agora-like situations have become popular sites for contemporary art. At the heart of these arenas is the search for new ways to counter the crisis-ridden experience of *Homo economicus*—the pervasive and alienating marketization of all aspects of our lives. A great deal of hope is being placed on the potential of social formations enabled by new technologies of connectivity and exchange. Artists and cultural producers are at the forefront of testing the viability of transgressive actions such as coworking, crowdfunding, and open-source provisions. At the same time, it is apparent that global capitalism is expanding into multipolar constellations of top-down and bottom-up economic governance.

In *Visual Cultures as Opportunity*, Helge Mooshammer and Peter Mörttenböck analyze the networked spaces of global informal markets, the cultural frontiers of speculative investments, and recent urban protests, and discuss crucial shifts in the process of collective articulation within today's "crowd economy."

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SternbergPress VISUAL CULTURES AS **OPPORTUNITY**

HELGE MOOSHAMMER, PETER MÖRTENBÖCK



VISUAL CULTURES AS
OPPORTUNITY

HELGE MOOSHAMMER
PETER MÖRTENBÖCK

SternbergPress 

Visual culture emerged in the mid-1990s as a new—or, rather, a newly articulated—field of inquiry that attempted to reintegrate a wide range of visual, artistic, philosophical, cultural, and political concerns. Cross-disciplinary in nature, it has become a site of encounter for divergent perspectives, including competing attitudes toward the ethical status and ideological functioning of the visual itself. Emerging from interactions between scholars, artists, curators, and activists, visual culture has also encouraged multilayered, often hybrid, modes of investigation. These have done much to extend, even reposition, intellectual research beyond the traditional parameters of the university.

Given visual culture's highly differentiated character, this series of short coauthored books is not intended to be a comprehensive collection of representative texts. Indeed, its starting point—in the Visual Cultures department at Goldsmiths, University of London—was a discussion about our own diverse investments in this still-evolving field. Each publication, therefore, invites a multifaceted investigation of a single, pertinent topic. In each case, two colleagues with shared interests—and differing points of view—examine their chosen subject in a particularized and probing manner. The format is always the same: two essays and a conversation. But within this scheme, contents unfold in their own way with respect to their positions, polemics, and poetics. In some instances, it has been appropriate to combine newly commissioned work with essays that were written some time ago, or with material that has existed, until now, in lecture form only. The conversations, staged for the purpose of these volumes, provide fruitful context and offer a first layer of reflection and response in what are emphatically open and ongoing debates.

OTHER MARKETS

HELGE MOOSHAMMER

9

BUILDING CAPITAL

PETER MÖRTENBÖCK

39

PROTEST ECONOMIES

A CONVERSATION BETWEEN
HELGE MOOSHAMMER AND PETER MÖRTENBÖCK

69

BIBLIOGRAPHY

92

BIOGRAPHIES

94

PROTEST ECONOMIES

A CONVERSATION BETWEEN
HELGE MOOSHAMMER AND PETER MÖRTENBÖCK

Young Africans are less interested in aid and more interested in how they can create opportunity through business and entrepreneurship and trade.
Barack Obama

The doctrine which throws all its emphasis on the importance of opening avenues to individual advancement [...] is wrong in suggesting that opportunities to rise, which can, of their very nature, be seized only by the few, are a substitute for a general diffusion of the means of civilization, which are needed by all men, whether they rise or not.
R. H. Tawney, *Equality*, 1931

HM When thinking about the current wave of global protest movements, what really strikes me is the close entanglement of political upheaval and economic realignment. I found it quite revealing, for example, that in 2010 the Arab Spring protests were sparked by the self-immolation of a young street vendor in Tunisia. What followed was an escalation of a long-felt unease shared by many ordinary people in the Arab world characterized by a general sense of exclusion. But what exactly was it that people felt excluded from? It seems to me symptomatic that this question has been answered in many different ways. Some have seen the protests in North Africa and the Middle East as an expression of struggles for religious freedom and political rights, while others, such as the influential Peruvian economist Hernando de Soto, have argued that the ultimate objective of those who protested against the ruling governments was access to capital. As “extralegal entrepreneurs”—

street vendors, caterers, contractors, and the like—they are said to have felt *economically* excluded.¹ According to this account, what had been taken from already impoverished people in this region was something more fundamental than what any religious or political right could give them: collateral, and with it, the right to buy and sell. Without official recognition of their trade and without legal title to personal assets, these people could not get loans to expand their economic activities, and without such investment they could not generate business efficiently.

PM I think there has been more at stake in the recent uprisings against ruling governments than the continued oppression of an underground entrepreneurial culture. Attributing the widespread sense of exclusion and disenchantment to a lack of business opportunities and proposing a place in the modern capitalist economy as a remedy is, I believe, too narrowly conceived to address the range of problems faced by younger generations in many parts of the world. A merely economic conception of the current sense of disconnectedness does not adequately address the frustrations caused by a much more complex set of “expulsions,” to borrow a term used by Saskia Sassen in her recent assessment of contemporary global economic transformations.² Today, an increasing number of people are excluded from professional life, others are displaced or alienated by the established order, and many more feel barred from the arena of public opinion, let alone from official culture and politics.

This larger dimension of discontent, in my view, is well reflected by the extent to which social and mass media, galleries, museums, and other outlets of visual culture have engaged with protest in recent years. From violent images of political unrest to the protest camps that have been included in many art biennials,³ and from new collaborative experiments to people’s assemblies and visions of alternative societies, protest has been articulated visually as a series of transgressions, occupations, and collective actions. So I think

that reading the current global wave of protest solely as a struggle for economic inclusion misses a broader, more important point. Despite its ostensibly economic orientation, it has to be understood against a background of social fragmentation and recomposition, the ongoing transformation of existing institutions, and the emergence of new forms of connectivity—which is to say, against a climate of economically driven but nonetheless civic processes happening on many different levels of spatial and visual culture.

HM The insistence on producing these spaces and images that we see in contemporary protests is quite remarkable—as is the unbridled appetite for them in artistic and cultural work. When trying to unravel the connections between these phenomena, I think the notion of “visual cultures” as a practice rather than a discipline is important. Shifting our attention from a position of commanding knowledge to a process of actively engaging with subjects in formation has opened up a whole new range of approaches to, and opportunities for, creative collaboration. This kind of collectivized critical work—be it the creativity unleashed in social protests or collaborative artistic research—is not confined to a passive interpretation of a supposedly static body of material, merely adding another layer to an epistemological canon, but instigates a dialogical development of new cultural skills, values, and aesthetics. It forges critical encounters in which the meaning (and cultural functioning) of a studied situation undergoes an extended set of transformations.

PM I think this touches a quite a critical point in developing an understanding of “visual cultures as opportunity.” With this “practical turn,” as we have termed this shift in different fields of critical engagement, research—the production of new knowledge—takes on a much more involved and “creative” form of intervention.⁴



A PUBLIC BORDER CROSSING, "POLITICAL EQUATOR" 3, 2011

HM Yes. For me, one of the most insightful experiences of such a performative approach to knowledge production is architect Teddy Cruz's project "Political Equator," which he has been organizing with a group of researchers, activists, and artists since 2006. His project challenges the imaginary line that spans the world between prosperous and poor countries, dividing the material realities of the Global North and Global South through various steering mechanisms. A case in point is the boundary between the United States and Mexico, which is dominated by one of the world's most heavily guarded and sealed-off borders: miles of newly erected barriers; highly engineered dams, embankments, and drainage canals; and triple fencing with multilane ramps so the border patrol has rapid access to the points along the boundary.

This dramatic dissection of a naturally continuous territory by reengineering an entire border geology provided the backdrop for an unconventional border crossing organized in June 2011 as the centerpiece of the third edition of "Political Equator." Peter, you and I joined in as part of a group of around two hundred participants that, rather than queuing up at the congested US–Mexico border crossing of San Ysidro,⁷ had been granted permission from the border authorities to walk into Mexico, within a predetermined time slot, via one of the few physical openings in this heavily protected border. Our point of departure was the California side of an otherwise inaccessible and well-guarded man-sized culvert, a structure that was built to accommodate the natural course of Los Laureles Creek. The water running off from the informal settlements on the hills along Los Laureles Canyon on the Mexico side is supposedly so polluted by human and household waste that it is pumped into water treatment plants immediately upon reaching US soil. Tracing the natural south-to-north course of this tiny creek in reverse, the event, *A Public Border Crossing*, borrowed from the water body's "ecological" act of resistance—steadily forcing its way through to the other side, if you will—and, in doing so, managed to provoke a wider debate about the bureaucratic-industrial complex involved in US–Mexico relations, locally as well as in national and international media.

PM Are you suggesting that the way in which the event encroached on a contested border ecology—not by pointing fingers at the economic disparities between the two countries but by facilitating an extra-economic framework of cross-border circulation—had lasting repercussions on how to conceive of opportunities and policies arising from this conflicted site, or on the "civic imaginary," to use the event's terminology, which guides our sense of commonality?

HM For me, it's about this moment of interventionist reframing. Besides arranging the actual crossing, the organizers of *A Public Border Crossing* also had two big tents set up for meetings: one at the starting point in California, in the Tijuana River National Estuarine Research Reserve, and the other south of the border at the top end of Los Laureles Canyon, in one of Tijuana's informal neighborhoods. These assemblies were meant to allow many different voices to address what is at stake in this border ecology. These debates foregrounded the border not as a no-go zone, but as a space of all kinds of interactions—political, social, and ecological. Crucial for a reflection on the effects of such a rupture in the experience of the border is what made that event possible: it was only by signing up to partake in Cruz's meticulously negotiated and precisely orchestrated performance project that the two hundred registered participants were authorized to cross the border on foot, through the metal-clad concrete tunnel of the culvert, and to climb out of the Los Laureles Canyon on the Mexican side, while being carefully observed by US Homeland Security personnel positioned in the hills above.

Framing this border crossing as an artistic performance produced a range of possibilities for a discursive shift but, of course, created some tensions about its political currency as well. On the one hand, it was only the framing of the event as an art project that made this “unusual border crossing” possible;⁶ on the other, this strategy also placed limits on it. Many of the exchanges I had with other participants after the event focused in particular on the final gathering with locals in the Los Laureles neighborhood. There was a discrepancy between the excitement before and during the crossing—registering your name in advance, queuing in alphabetical groups at a precise time, waiting in the darkness of the culvert for your name to be called out, having your passport stamped by border police, and finally arriving at the rubbish-strewn Mexican side of the border fence—and the eventual “reward” for these endeavors.

PM Yes, I remember it very well. After a steep climb of a few hundred yards up the banks of the Mexican border highway, a group of buses was waiting to bring us to the final communal event. We were escorted by police on motorbikes all the way through Tijuana, and when we finally arrived at the informal settlement in Los Laureles Canyon for the concluding meeting, the wailing sirens and flashing blue lights caused the local residents to disappear. This was truly uncomfortable—while physically south of the border, as a confined group of participants coming from the north, we were still unable to reach out and connect. Despite expectations to engage at ground level with excluded communities, the authorities' management of the event prevented us from “restoring” a balanced politico-ecological situation. There was no salvation at the end of this “pilgrimage”—we had crossed the border and yet never actually arrived on the other side.

HM While this may have been frustrating on a personal level, I found the dynamics of the event immensely informative. In contrast to the material and visual immediacy of the linear territorial fortification, it became clear that the border's most powerful effect is not the way it ensures strict separation, but how it engenders difference and manipulates flows. The most endemic rationale of such borders is the way they act as an infrastructural means of calculating and controlling risks and gains. Even though the authorities had permitted the culvert crossing, ostensibly suspending the spatial separation, the participants of the unconventional art project had carried the border with them into Los Laureles Canyon, embodying the same elastic border that sees tens of thousands of Mexicans commuting daily in the opposite direction. This “border as method” props up a territorially controlled distribution of an undervalued labor pool that is instantly available but does not have to be provided for with housing, schooling, health care, or other social services, because where the actual place of residence of

these workers is kept resolutely outside.⁷ Here, the economic paradigm of externalization through border structures, off-loading costs to other realms, engenders a specific spatio-economic rhythm of global control in the daily movements of masses of cross-border workers.

In this sense, the performative dimension of the project—the combination of symbolic gestures with the act of literally penetrating the border—produced an array of insights into the functioning of the global “political equator.” It enabled us to look into what I think is a specific form of neoliberal governmentality—an interplay between the biopolitics of elastic border regimes and their combined material and symbolic power.

PM Which makes me think that the significance of this kind of intervention is precisely that it is more performative than inscriptive. It softens the space of an otherwise impenetrable border, enabling an international activist group to enter Mexico via a newly negotiated route, which in turn produces further revelations. Rather than giving visual form to an existing situation, the concern here is creating new opportunities. In this instance, the aim was to amplify the porosity of the culvert to generate a more general permeability that gives rise to a temporary suspension of order and disorder, planned process and improvisation, controlled movement, and the natural flow of wastewater from south to north. Of course, we could ask whether this facilitates a general perception of border crossings as performance and what politics this perception would imply. But how else can we perceive the dramatic orchestration of international border zones, with all their identity masquerades, communication templates, rituals of transit, and recurrent representations of legality and illegality? In this sense, perhaps it is only logical to see border passages, tunnel traversals, and ocean crossings as acts whose nature marks a transgression of thresholds on both factual and fictitious levels. Surely, an important provocation represented by an

enterprise such as “Political Equator” was that, despite the conditions of the limit that were foregrounded, conceptual and material flows between territories and communities were nonetheless activated—from sharing concerns about the ecological state of the Tijuana watershed to celebrating culinary traditions of local communities—that (temporarily) suspended the prevailing determination of this landscape.

HM I agree. I also think that the frictions during the event were not only due to the lack of exchange with the local population in Los Laureles, but also resulted from the fact that the act of participating changed our conception of what we would experience on the other side. Participating in the event undermined any expectations of a straightforward shift from one side to another and opened up ways to think through the mechanisms of expulsion and intervention. An often concealed economic structure made itself manifest in the process, one that includes not only the towering fortifications of the border and the unwanted urban poor they seem to guard against, but also the different ways we are all actively involved in the making of an uneven situation—as consumers, creators, citizens, or self-entrepreneurs. It made tangible how the biopolitics of the border extends well into the quotidian and into the practicalities of making this event happen (organizing the buses, catering, legal documents, etc.), but also helped to interrogate the visual and spatial execution of uneven power. In this sense, I see the border-crossing performance as a cogent example of how interventionist practices can open up fields of possibility, to paraphrase Irit Rogoff, through a set of questions rather than claims and assertions.⁸ The obvious benefit of this experience is thus not receiving the answers we might have expected or somehow wished for, but accessing a form of knowledge that wasn’t available prior to the event—a better understanding of the complex fabric that fashions, in this instance, borders the way they are: controlling and facilitating, mobilizing and discriminating at the same time.

PM There might also be a moment of multiplicity here: our investments and interventions can be directed both inward and outward, as opposed to identifying and protesting against an external adversary by isolating individual symptoms from the ecologies in which they are embedded. This is a moment that not only relates to the border-crossing event you brought up, but also to the numerous protests that have filled public spaces across the world in the past few years: from the Arab Spring and the continued occupations of Cairo's Tahrir Square to the Spanish anti-austerity 15-M movement, from the worldwide Occupy movement to the 2013 occupation of Istanbul's Gezi Park, there seems to be a longing for political and economic alternatives that go far beyond immediate pressures placed on an external authority. I think the ultimate reference point for most of these movements is not so much the current state of things but rather a form of economic and political organization to come. For me, this is manifested in the incredibly viral nature of recent protests enabled by social media and new technology, and especially in the closely intertwined, mutual influence of activist and artistic protest forms in recent years. Just think of the many different kinds of public gatherings that have become part of artistic repertoires, or the way in which high-profile art events such as the 7th Berlin Biennale or dOCUMENTA (13) in 2012, the year the Occupy movement continued to commandeer public squares in cities around the world, have either offered space or accommodated otherwise ignored or prohibited forms of assembly. And vice versa: creative and artistic work plays a critical role in new protest movements, be it as a means of direct aesthetic intervention or as a way of mobilizing what Hannah Arendt called a "space of appearance."⁹ Despite diverging interests, skill sets, and operational logics, there seems to be an increasing desire for critical exchange between different fields of collective civic engagement.

HM I see this evident precisely in the search for alternative forms of congregation, for horizontal techniques in managing physical assemblies and virtual communications. These experiments are a fundamental motor for different protest movements today. But these endeavors are often plagued by the lack of sufficient permeability between the different spaces where social concerns are negotiated. With the development of the modern state and globalization, including today's neoliberal political and economic scenarios, the connections between the spaces where politics is made and those in which social and economic exchanges are negotiated have been dissociated, rendering unrecognizable the shared public character of these different forms of gathering in civil society. In this context, recourse to the historical connection between sites of the polity and open spaces for assembly and exchange could be important for constituting contemporary democratic assemblies.

PM I think that it is also essential to see public spaces, and the particular form of exchange that is rooted in their physical sense of publicness, not so much as a foundation but as an arena of this construction. They are a tool for the development of a participative polity and a thriving sense of community. This public "space of assembly" cannot simply be a material setting or physical boundary in the city. There is a fundamental connection between the spaces in which we assemble and express a commonality and shared neighborhood work that signals solidarity in urban space. The assembly of an urban commons, as it were, therefore takes place *in* and *with* the spatial relationships of neighborhoods, and gives rise to new communal architectures. What interests me here is a notion of gathering, not as a declared community, but in a Derridean sense—a coming together of people who, as a collective entity, resist being named, which is what makes them a genuine multiplicity.¹⁰ I think it is this idea of a democracy to come—a genuinely open society—that has been explored in highly experimental and stimulating ways by

recent waves of protest, such as Occupy and the Indignados in Spain, with their enduring occupation of public spaces. And I think that one of the most important questions that has arisen in the wake of these experiments is how other spheres of critical engagement—be it the growing realms of creative production, education, or the arts—can connect with these moments of assembly and the opportunities they present. As I see it, the challenge of creating such permeability lies not in the “staging” of urban spaces in a type of alternative festival culture, or in merely bringing together different segments of the population, but in the next step, one that, as Slavoj Žižek puts it, does not stipulate “climate control” or an enclosure of the commons to defend against potentially “toxic” subjects.¹¹ Rather, this step should encourage broad participation in the urban realm based on open dialogue and radical inclusiveness.

HM I want to pick up what you said about a lot of current political dissent being provoked by unease about changes in society that are yet to come. During our joint research on the emergence of collaborative art practices and transnational networks, many discussions we had with artists and cultural practitioners in eastern Europe revolved around the ambivalence brought about by the dissolution of institutions following the collapse of communist regimes.¹² While the disappearance of an official state culture had opened up opportunities for self-initiated projects, there were also no other options. The spread of a rampant turbo-capitalism in the absence of reliable regulatory mechanisms forced whole populations to rapidly adapt to the principles of self-organization. Much of the talk back then was about how the situation in eastern Europe was not simply a matter of countries “in transition”—that is, of countries on the way to a developed market economy. In fact, this situation was also an indication of the changes that would eventually make themselves felt in western Europe as well, a region then still better protected by redistributive structures of the welfare state, such as cultural and artistic subsidies.

PM Many of the conversations we had with artists and activists during the production of our documentary and book *Networked Cultures*, in 2005 and 2006, revealed a feeling of a new kind of connectivity in this transitional moment between self-organized groups and individual stakeholders. It was a feeling that generated a lot of long-distance collaborations and alliances among cultural practitioners in eastern and southeastern Europe but also one that was largely disregarded by those who advocated the “natural” progression of the former socialist countries to a Western-style market economy. I am thinking, for instance, of the *Lost Highway Expedition* in which we both participated. A network of artists and activist groups in the western Balkans put out an open call for participation in this self-organized “expedition” tracing the modernist and socialist relics of former Yugoslavia in summer 2006. While its commitment to spontaneous cross-border cooperation echoed Yugoslavia’s postwar interethnic policy, the project went much further than sharing a nostalgic moment. Under the slogan “Europe Lost and Found,” it envisioned how the current realities of the Balkans could yield new bonds connecting perceived social and ethnic differences. It is impressive to see how many interesting projects have emerged from the documentation of and reflection on these encounters.¹³ As a matter of fact, our own research on informal markets and their role as nodes of global economic interaction was significantly informed by our visit to the Arizona Market in Bosnia and Herzegovina during the expedition. Reading spatial arrangements as part of a larger geopolitical narrative has become a common thread of our investigations into global economic trajectories—connecting drive-in-theater flea markets in California with trading hubs for pirated IT in Casablanca and the decades-old Hippy Fair in Belo Horizonte, Brazil, with a growing hipster market scene in Bangkok.

HM Indeed, it is striking to see how, ten years on, we are now faced with the far-reaching repercussions of an economy of self-organization that has gained a global dimension, albeit in a quite different form than these early transnational artistic collaborations, enabled by new technologies and modes of social interaction that weren't prevalent at the time of the *Lost Highway Expedition*. They also follow a different imperative, one that encourages creative entrepreneurship rather than short-term emergency solutions in wartime. What I am alluding to here is the rapid spread of peer-to-peer economies in recent years—both online and, increasingly, offline. Social-media technologies are introduced every day into yet another realm of social organization and another peer-to-peer product or platform is launched—from managing social-housing services via Facebook to peer-to-peer finance instruments, from online marketplaces for dining with locals to video lessons with handpicked experts. There is a sense of gold rush in the air, because whoever develops the relevant infrastructure first and establishes the know-how will dominate the market. There is also a real chance here that this development will fundamentally alter our perceptions of the familiar flows of power since its technological leverage opens up—or at least presents itself as opening up—ways to bypass traditional hierarchies and transgress so many of the boundaries we have become used to. While on the surface, power still seems tied up in territorial politics and the mechanics of national governance, the crowd economy, due to its virtual foundation, has the potential to shift effective power to informal networks. The question for me then is whether this diffusion will lead to individual empowerment—which is the perspective promoted by influential organizations such as the US National Intelligence Council¹⁴—or simply enhance the shift of power from democratically elected governments to the far less transparent world of transnational corporations and financial markets, and indeed, the influential role investors play in the development of

these new economic platforms may point to the latter. In any case, what interests me here is how the emergence of a crowd economy also spawns new forms of gathering and human coexistence, new ways of becoming community—not all of which are necessarily egalitarian. We might term this a “crowd society.”

PM When we talk about the emergence of a crowd economy on a global scale, as you suggest here, I think we also need to reflect on the changes in our engagement with the world and the different forms of being global. “Worlding,” at least in postcolonial critiques, has often been perceived as the way in which colonized space is brought into the world in the form of hegemonic narratives, policies, and representations. I think that this notion of worlding resonates well with the ongoing mutations of labor markets in the name of cheaper, faster, and more resource-efficient processes. One of the most far-reaching phenomena in this respect is certainly the fusion of knowledge economies with micro-tasking services. When companies allocate lots of brief individual tasks, colloquially known as micro-jobs, to millions of foreign crowd workers via online platforms, their way of being global rarely ameliorates conditions in world regions affected by high rates of unemployment and debt. Whether they are poorly paid assignments or online volunteer work—disposition of time is key to this economy.

HM It's not insignificant that most forms of peer-to-peer economic exchange have their roots in alternative networks of artistic production that aimed to sidestep the bureaucratic limitations of cultural funding bodies or traditional commercial production. What has emerged as a crucial parameter in our research on crowdfunded artistic projects is an increasing informalization of capital that entails two different aspects. One is a growing overlap between different kinds of capital, whether financial, social, political, or affective. The other aspect

is the emergence of entirely new producer/audience or requester/fulfiller relationships and a new understanding of our relationship to the “objects” we surround ourselves with—urban infrastructures, technological gadgets, household objects, works of art. What interests me here is the potential of these changes in capital operations to influence the ways these objects are produced, circulated, and consumed. Over the last century the conditions of artistic practice, for instance, have largely been governed by either the art market or public institutions, and it seems that crowdfunding, by facilitating new ways of making and displaying art, is going to have a profound impact on both.

PM In light of overlapping aesthetic, ethical, and commercial values involved in the art world, I don't find it surprising that fairly established actors from this sphere—major museums, galleries, and big-name institutions such as the Smithsonian or MoMA—have been among the first to pioneer crowdfunding schemes and incorporate them into their business operations. In some cases, crowdfunding helps them to compensate for budget cuts resulting from austerity programs and structural reforms. In others, the main target is to build up audiences to strengthen an institution's public reputation and social legitimacy and develop relationships with different stakeholders. In yet other cases—and I think these are perhaps the most alluring—the main emphasis is that incorporating crowdfunding initiatives into the operational matrix of an art and cultural institution adds an element of democratization, a sense of giving audiences the power to decide. Leaving aside the deceitful aspect of such practices, what I sense in all of these instances is a change in chemistry, one that favors an economization of the contemporary art world over a critical engagement with ideas articulated in creative and artistic work.

HM The whole idea of the crowd economy as being more egalitarian because of its horizontal organization is certainly debatable. For one, there's the issue of who's really the addressee in projects launched via online platforms like Kickstarter or Indiegogo and who can actually participate and cast their vote, given that this form of participation depends in most cases on monetary contributions and tends to focus its attention on investors in the Global North. Then there's the questionable practice of allocating different degrees of proximity that reward higher donations with privileged private access to a project, and other kinds of VIP treatment. In spite of careful manipulation, a strange allusion to a kind of Smithian “invisible hand” seems to be at play, as if the targeted crowds would simply follow their “natural” interests and act accordingly. But of course these interests are constructed too, and subject to political and economic calculation.

PM The emergence of crowdfunding initiatives cannot be seen as independent of the crisis logic of capitalism in the way some of the rhetoric around it might suggest. On the contrary, the 2007/8 global financial crisis and its fallout very much contributed to the need for and interest in crowd-oriented economic relations in all areas of life, beginning with arts and culture but also extending into entertainment and leisure industries, food production, lifestyle manufacturing, and even urbanism, as well as areas related more to the individual, such as education and health care. Life on all levels of human connection has converged with the volatility of global financial markets. In this new hyperconnected economy, the ups and downs of business can be felt by millions of people around the globe. Under these precarious conditions market initiatives have become the role model for a new type of citizen whose basic orientation is marked by risk-taking entrepreneurialism, the expectation of instant riches, and a radical-chic style. This model ultimately leads to social contracts that are not far from signing over

one's life to investors who take on the risk of the investee's entire future "performance," whatever the terms and methods of delivery might be. The growing popularity of "human capital contracts"—funding schemes that allow corporations or individuals to invest in another person's future economic success—is a harrowing example of the institutionalization of this spirit. Whether contracts on platforms such as Upstart, Pave, or Lumni step in for student loans, help someone launch a business, or simply promise investors to buy a stake in the next generation of geniuses, they always oblige borrowers to pay back a fixed percentage of income when their ideas turn into profit, which means that human talent in all its manifestations is conceived as a new asset, like shares, gold, or any other instrument, the value of which fluctuates according to the instrument's market performance.

HM I suppose the expansionist logic of capitalist markets and the continuous reliance on spatial restructuring to counter cycles of crisis—"spatial fixes," in David Harvey's terminology¹⁵—is what connects the different areas of life that are at stake here. But what is different in the current wave of bottom-up economies compared to the network of informal economies in post-1989 Europe is the generalization and diffusion of market opportunities to an almost indefinite number of market contributors. From crowdsourcing to crowdfunding, and from crowdlending to crowdinvestment, it seems that for every part of the contemporary economic landscape the crowd represents a new opportunity to enter the market, a new segment that could be the next big thing for investors. Crowdsourcing, in all its different forms and meanings, seems to be turning into the new outsourcing, leveraging all sorts of risks by off-loading them onto the individual speculation of lower-level players. On the one hand, this means that the new technologies of crowd formation—deregulated markets, social media, and so forth—are opening up channels to tap into the hitherto

unaccounted-for capital of the bottom half of the economic pyramid. On the other hand, the capital of this lower segment is itself undergoing far-reaching transformations. In an economy centered on exploiting debt, the manual power of the laborer in nineteenth-century factories and plantations and the cognitive capacities of the skilled worker in twentieth-century offices and laboratories have been replaced by forms of social credit as the principal assets of the have-nots.

PM I agree, to the extent that it's not just art and creative expression but life itself, that is increasingly turning into a form of collateral. Insofar as this is a common phenomenon I even agree with Hernando de Soto's claim about the exclusion of people in the Global South from the global production and distribution of assets that can be used as collateral. But I think that the production of collateral is not really at stake here. What is at stake is control over the *definition* of collateral, which leads us to a much broader question—the question of who decides what makes someone creditworthy. Who defines the opportunities embodied by each of us? This is reflected in the changes of how we conceive of the crowd: not by way of collateral gained through stable assets correlating to one's self-management, but with respect to one's disposition in creatively adapting to the dynamics of a globally emerging crowd economy.

HM It's important to note here that for all this connectivity and exchange to happen, a third party needs to facilitate this dialogue; the crowd of today's market economy—an electronically enabled temporary community—always needs a medium to interact. In the case of crowdfunding, the service platforms bring project creators and supporters together and keep a share of the transactions in return. Not surprisingly, a sizeable number of platforms are actually owned and operated by banks, the traditional financial institutions that crowdfunding was initially meant to replace.

But this absorption of a new consensus around equal opportunities into the strategies of financial players isn't always seamless, as we saw in the aftermath of the Occupy protests, when a Danish bank ran an ad campaign using the Occupy movement and its risk taking as an emblem of the values embraced by the bank itself.¹⁶ A similar example that comes to mind is the case of the Hong Kong app developers who turned the pro-reform civil disobedience actions of Occupy into a smartphone game.¹⁷ It seems that the world of business takes every opportunity to reflect changing realities back to its clients and consumers. My point here is not to moralize about such appropriations of sentiments, concepts, and values, not least because such transfers can often be channeled in both directions. I am more interested in dynamics that emerge from the contested sites of barricades and borders but are able to transgress the binaries of power and opposition, oppression and resistance. I think that these are the dynamics that help us move a step closer to a notion of the crowd as a creator of opportunities rather than a gleaner.

PM The figure of the crowd certainly stimulates a continuous shift in our imagination of what constitutes the public body. If modernity lay under the spell of a hitherto unknown power emerging from industrialization and proletarianization—the mass characterized by an immeasurable size and indistinguishability, as depicted in Edgar Allan Poe's 1840 short story "The Man of the Crowd"—the crowd of our current age confronts us with a different challenge: the high speed and economic pressure of globalization. Elias Canetti's 1960s account of the masses as a symbol of being *touched* by the unknown has given way to a trope of being constantly *connected* with the unknown.¹⁸ The fast pace of life and the drive for attention are the central steering mechanisms of this new form of collectivity. Able to rapidly swell to unprecedented numbers but also to disintegrate in an instant, today's crowd gives human form to the volatility of highly speculative ventures.

Whether we're talking about the Spanish political party Podemos, crowdfunding slogans, performative protests, or Obama's "Change" campaign, the idea of transformation always seems focused on the generative capacities of small windows of opportunity. While these windows are rhizomatic in organization, taking shape as assemblages, they are not free-floating or bodiless; they come into being through networks of affiliation and contact. If opportunities for producing alternatives to our current situation lie with crowd formation, then the question of control over the infrastructures and technologies of social interaction will have to be at the heart of political struggle. Currently, all the big players in facilitating crowd intelligence are publicly traded companies answering to short-term investors rather than to calls for openness and access. The important lesson to learn from the protest economy of recent years, as I see it, is that evoking change involves more than physically occupying the means of production. Change is not about inventing protocols to reconcile a crazed *Homo economicus* with the world either. The opportunity of the crowd is its performative dimension—how the associative culture of the crowd constitutes an opportunity to *imagine* the unknown.

While possibilities draw on an inherent quality of things or situations, opportunities entice an element of participation. Opportunities are latent in organization. In the prevailing climate of free-market heroism, the instrumental bias of the term opportunity, and its emphasis on fitness, convenience, and favorableness, have led to a problematic connotation of "taking advantage *of*." But recent protest movements and forms of crowd organization, such as alternative social and economic networks, already seem to hint at how we can recuperate the term's sense of initiative. Opportunity is etymologically rooted in the Latin *ob portum veniens*, "coming toward a port," as in catching the right wind. Currently we conceive of ports as an abstract global technology for handling commodities; however, nascent forms

of crowd exchange are already beginning to atomize the meaning, place, and form of the contemporary “port.” While catching the wind blowing toward the port depends on being in the right place at the right time, one also needs a certain set of sensibilities to recognize and respond to the stream of forces one is confronted with, as well as a desire to reach the port one is headed toward. I would like to see “visual cultures as opportunity,” in the sense of both a subject and a practice of inquiry, as an imaginative way of capturing the dynamics that lie ahead.

- 1 Hernando de Soto, “The Capitalist Cure for Terrorism,” *Wall Street Journal*, October 10, 2014.
- 2 Saskia Sassen, *Expulsions: Brutality and Complexity in the Global Economy* (Cambridge, MA: Belknap Press of Harvard University Press, 2014).
- 3 Examples of protest camps incorporated into prominent art institutions include the Occupy movement camp on Friedrichsplatz at dOCUMENTA (13), Kassel, and Occupy Museums, 7th Berlin Biennale, KW Berlin, both 2012.
- 4 See Helge Mooshammer and Peter Mörtenböck, eds., *Space (Re)Solutions: Research and Intervention in Visual Culture* (Bielefeld: transcript, 2011), 9–14.
- 5 With more than eighty thousand crossings daily, the San Ysidro checkpoint, between San Diego and Tijuana, is the busiest border crossing in the world.
- 6 “Art Festival Organizes Unusual Border Crossing through a Drain from San Diego to Tijuana,” *Washington Post*, June 4, 2011.
- 7 See Sandro Mezzadra and Brett Neilson, *Border as Method, or, The Multiplication of Labor* (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2013).
- 8 See Irit Rogoff, “Academy as Potentiality,” in *A.C.A.D.E.M.Y.*, ed. Angelika Nollert et al. (Frankfurt am Main: Revolver, 2006).
- 9 Hannah Arendt, “Power and the Space of Appearance,” in *The Human Condition* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1958).
- 10 Jacques Derrida, *The Politics of Friendship*, trans. George Collins (London: Verso, 1997), 296–99.
- 11 Slavoj Žižek, *Living in the End Times* (London: Verso, 2011), 268.
- 12 Helge Mooshammer and Peter Mörtenböck, *Networked Cultures: Parallel Architectures and the Politics of Space* (Rotterdam: NAi Publishers, 2008); see conversations with Margarethe Makovec, 28–29; Nataša Ilić, 30–31; Srdjan Jovanoic Weiss, 55–57; Branka Ćurčić, 58–59; Olga Lopoukhova, 64–65; Matei Bejenaru, 176–77; Asya Filippova, 181–83; Marjetica Potrč, 219–22; Tadej Pogačar, 228–29; STEALTH, 256–58; Igor Dobricic, 263–64; and Marko Sančanin, 279–81.
- 13 One such project is a publication of captioned photographs taken by dozens of participants, chronicling each day of the expedition from multiple viewpoints: Katherine Carl and Srdjan Jovanoic Weiss, eds., *Lost Highway Expedition 30/7–25/8/2006: Photobook* (Rotterdam: Veenman Publishers, 2007).
- 14 The National Intelligence Council is a center for long-term strategic analysis. It was established in 1979 to support the Intelligence Community, a federation of executive branch agencies and organizations that conduct intelligence activities for the United States.
- 15 David Harvey first developed the concept of the “spatial fix” in “The Spatial Fix: Hegel, von Thünen, and Marx,” *Antipode* 13, no. 3 (December 1981): 1–12; reprinted in David Harvey, *The Spaces of Capital: Towards a Critical Geography* (New York: Routledge, 2001), 284–311.
- 16 “Danske Bank: ‘A new normal demands New Standards,’” YouTube video, 0:50, posted by “Linus Noreika,” November 15, 2012, https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=n-pZj_cPBvw.
- 17 Love and Peace was designed by nxTomo. See Jonathan Kaiman, “Hong Kong Protests Inspire Mobile Game,” *Guardian*, July 4, 2014, <http://www.theguardian.com/world/2014/jul/04/hong-kong-protests-mobile-game>.
- 18 Elias Canetti, *Crowds and Power*, 2nd ed., trans. Carol Stewart (London: Victor Gollancz, 1984).

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