Abstract: Gary ANDERSON, Geoff BRIGHT, Gillian WHITELEY

‘What rough beast…?’ Monstrous practices of dissent and the ends of conviviality.

Paradoxically, alongside the eruption of anti-capitalist activism in Western Europe and the US, the rhetoric of the Arab Spring has been markedly pro-democracy. Globally, liberal democracy appears to retain ideological hegemony, making constant adjustments aimed at ensuring continuity through emerging strategies such as ‘ethical capitalism’. In fact, these deliver enormous riches for a tiny minority, and poverty, austerity and inequalities for the ‘99%’. Meanwhile, representative democracy fails to represent and the many remain ‘uncounted’.

In the UK, a programme of massive public sector cuts is jeopardising the survival of critical and cultural institutions. In this setting, the paralysis of the established political left has led to a proliferation of ‘concrete utopias’, ‘counter-democracies’ such as UKUncut and widespread occupations. New emergent forms of cultural and political contestation, borne of defiance and disobedience – rather than conviviality - are providing DIY, alternative and critical oppositions to power, from 'new mental prototypes’ to ‘hybrid monstrous institutions’.

At the same time, an insurrectionary consciousness has been visible on the streets in the summer ‘riots’ of 2011.

We are interested in exploring counter-convivial forms of contestation. This paper considers both the potentialities and limits of temporary/autonomous projects in the public sphere. We examine practices of ‘concrete utopia’ that contest democracy and challenge the subjectivities it creates in different ways and at different levels: from small-scale acts of defiance to expansive economic, cultural, social, pedagogic manifestations.

While Whiteley considers the critical and cultural contexts, Bright will consider the micro-level episodic acts of defiance carried out by youth against the educational project dominated by neo-liberalism. He will make reference to empirical material from an ethnographic study carried out in the resistant space of a former coalmining community. On the macro-level, Anderson will present examples of how the theoretical contextualisations indicated above, operate in particular instances close to his own everyday living with an introduction to aspects of the Free University of Liverpool, its connections with Occupy movements and how the Institute for the Art and Practice of Dissent at Home relates to these.

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1 WB Yeats, ‘The Second Coming’ 1919 – in this poem, basically a panic on Yeats’ behalf about the ‘mere anarchy’ supposedly loosed in the Bolshevik revolution asks, ‘what rough beast, its hour come round at last, slouches towards Bethlehem to be born?’


4 A comment on the hegemony of conviviality bred by Nicolas Bourriaud’s relational aesthetics and the preponderance of so-called ‘participative’ practices in contemporary art.

5 See Universidad Nomada’s ‘Mental Prototypes and Monster Institutions’ in G. Raunig/G. Ray (eds) Art and Contemporary Critical Practice: Reinventing Institutional Critique, Mayfly 2009