

THE REBEL CITY

curated by Miguel Amado

Kyle Goen & Dread Scott

Nicoline van Harskamp

Anna Moreno

Ahmet Ögüt

Oliver Ressler

Allan Sekula

Gregory Sholette

Stephanie Syjuco



The Rebel City

Miguel Amado

Demonstrations against the World Trade Organization's ministerial conference turned the streets of Seattle into a battleground on November 30, 1999, and the days following. The meeting was being held to launch a new millennial round of trade negotiations. But this was overshadowed in both the media and the collective cultural memory by the demonstrations. The events became known as the “Battle of Seattle.”

The demonstrators included local and international unions, students, and NGOs concerned with labor issues. Anarchist, “black bloc” activists were also present. The violent, direct action that took place—including vandalism of multinational retail stores in downtown Seattle—was largely attributed to these radicals. The coalition was loose, but a shared anti-capitalist sensibility kept it together.

Ever since, discord against the dominant global economic model has continued to flare up in the West, amplified by waves of uprisings. The Occupy movement, initiated in 2011 in downtown New York as an outcry against the Wall Street morality (or lack thereof), is a key example. Occupy began on September 17. The occupiers in New York's Zuccotti Park were finally evicted by law enforcement officers on the night of November 15. But, by then, similar rebellions had begun in approximately 1,000 cities in 75 different countries.

Occupy, according to the philosopher Noam Chomsky, “is the first major public response to 30 years of class war.” The opponents in this case were the self-announced “99 percent” versus the financial arena of corporations, banks, and rating agencies. Today, it seems, “the enemy” is finance, which works through the immaterial, “invisible hand” of the free market. Chomsky's response is partly predicated on anarchist thoughts on property, for instance Pierre-Joseph Proudhon's foundational claim in the mid-1800s that “property is theft.”

Occupy is a movement based on prioritizing solidarity over economic rationality. A similar mindset frames the turmoils that have been sweeping Europe in recent years. These have taken place mostly in southern European countries in financial crisis, from Greece to Italy, Spain to Portugal. In Spain, for example, the 15-M movement has brought together citizens—the “Indignants”—concerned with the precarious condition of the country's workforce.

The philosopher Alain Badiou considers these episodes of political antagonism symptoms of “the re-birth of history.” They capture the liberation forces of the masses in the context of a return of a revolutionary ethos. The intellectual framework against which Badiou is arguing is the “end of history” theory, of which the

economist Francis Fukuyama is the leading figure. The “end of history” thesis is that, with the end of the Cold War in the early 1990s, Western-style liberal democracy—with its free market system—emerged as the archetypal government, thus encapsulating the final stage of humanity's evolution.

With the “end of history,” a transnational peacekeeping power would emerge, inaugurating an era without conflict between nation states. But, according to the philosophers Michael Hardt and Antonio Negri, war is currently “both global in scale and long lasting, with no end in sight”—a permanent, perpetual condition. Conflict, under this logic, is no longer solely defined as military engagements; it increasingly involves other modes of strife in which the enemy is an abstraction, for instance capitalism.

The series of anti-capitalist undertakings inaugurated with the “Battle of Seattle” could represent, for Hardt and Negri, a manifestation of the “multitude,” a notion that encapsulates a “revolution to come” within a philosophical tradition that goes back to Spinoza. They claim that the multitude is an unmediated, immanent collective subject that might someday generate a different form of society.

The geographer David Harvey argues that capitalism is more and more marked by the inequalities that result from uneven development. He observes that a disrupted social order has emerged globally, and that it is most apparent in metropolitan areas. He concludes that “the revolution in our times has to be urban, or nothing.” The metropolis, for him, is a contested terrain, a domain in which deep currents of anti-capitalist struggle are rising to the surface. “The rebel city,” he calls it.

This exhibition is inspired by Harvey's concept. It examines the rebel city as a site of anti-capitalist frictions and insurrections. The featured works cite the “Battle of Seattle“, Occupy Wall Street, anarchism's role as a key theoretical source for contestation, and the financialization of daily life. They engage with dissent symbolically, by evoking the intellectual roots, iconography, and material culture of protest.

The selected artists are based in Europe and the United States—the regions where capitalism originally developed. They offer a critical perspective of its ideology, commenting on its historical and current effects, and criticizing the dehumanization it produces. In expressing the lived experience of the rebel city across the world, they aspire to be agents of social change.

This exhibition is the winner of the first edition of ADN Platform's Curatorial Challenge program. ADN Platform is the project space of the Barcelona-based ADN Gallery. ADN Platform is in Sant Cugat del Vallès and is open on Saturdays from 10.30 to 14.30 and by appointment. The exhibition runs from 24 May until 25 October 2014.

Gregory Sholette

United States of America, 1956 / Lives and works in New York

Counter-WTO Action Figure with Spring Action Arm, 2002

Mixed media

DIY Counter-WTO Action Figure with Spring Action Arm, 2002

Inkjet print on foamboard

Courtesy the artist and Station Independent Projects, New York

Gregory Sholette makes installations in addition to writing and teaching. He has been involved over the years with various collectives that operate outside the mainstream art world, exploring “invisible” narratives within contemporary politics, from histories of the working class to migration issues. He presents his works in galleries but also in the public arena. This installation consists of a poster and a handmade miniature figurine inspired by a picture of a demonstrator from the “Battle of Seattle”—a series of protests against the 1999 Seattle World Trade Organization summit. The image was culled from a police website showcasing surveillance photographs of people suspected of having participated in the event. The sign recalls instruction leaflets for direct action, while the sculpture can be understood as the result of such processes.

Kyle Goen & Dread Scott

United States of America, 1967 & 1965 / Both live and work in New York

We Are the 99%, 2011

Screenprint on paper

Courtesy the artists

This is a group of signs produced by Kyle Goen and Dread Scott in response to the Occupy movement slogan “We Are the 99%.” This expression alludes to the dramatic concentration of income in the United States of America among the 1 percent of top-earning individuals. The artists employed English, Arabic, Greek, Italian, and Spanish in order to convey the connection between Occupy Wall Street (the original iteration of the Occupy movement), the Arab Spring, and the uprisings that have swept southern Europe in recent years. The use of multiple languages also suggests the worldwide aspirations of the Occupy movement, a characteristic in line with the internationalism of past revolutionary enterprises.

Ahmet Ögüt

Turkey, 1981 / Lives and works in Istanbul, Amsterdam, and Berlin

Oscar William Sam, 2012

Single channel HD video, sound, colour, 4 min.; paint and bricks

Courtesy the artist

Ahmet Ögüt made this work in the Occupy Wall Street camp in New York's Zuccotti Park just days before the protestors were evicted by the New York police counterterrorism unit on November 15, 2011. In the video, a finger points out various demonstrators, and they are called by common American first names. This technique is often employed by law enforcement officials to single out individuals in a crowd. Given the anonymity of the protagonist, one does not know whether the viewpoint is that of a fellow squatter or a police officer. This uncertainty suggests the anxiety that is typical of zones of conflict. The video is presented on a flat screen against a cobalt-blue wall and a brick floor, an allusion both to the Occupy movement's many sites and to revolt's classic impromptu weaponry.

Stephanie Syjuco

United States of America, 1974 / Lives and works in San Francisco

FREE TEXTS: An Open Source Reading Room, 2012-14

Inkjet print on paper

Courtesy the artist

Stephanie Syjuco addresses countercultural practices, particularly as they operate within economic systems. This work consists of a wall of paper flyers, each with tear-off tabs at the bottom. These are printed with URLs where one can download a particular book for free; a description of each book is provided on the remaining part of the paper flyer. The work suggests to the viewer the possibility of building a DIY library. It has been installed on several occasions; in each iteration, it includes new titles that respond to the context in which it is presented. In the core versions of the work, the titles address issues of digital copyright and open-source culture. For this exhibition, the artist and the curator collaborated on an alternate selection focusing on topics such as anarchist traditions, the notion of property, the development of metropolises, recent global uprisings, the status of capitalist society, and speculations on the neoliberal condition.

Anna Moreno

Spain, 1984 / Lives and works in the Hague

Read the Newspapers, 2013

Inkjet print on paper

Courtesy the artist

Anna Moreno's project *The Barnum Effect*, of which this work is a component, is informed by *The Art of Money Getting*, a book by the American showman P. T. Barnum published in 1880. In it, Barnum offers advice on accumulating wealth from a “self-made man” business mentality. Moreno has been employing Barnum's set of rules in works that consider the role of the artist today and historically, particularly through economic lenses. This work is based on articles about entrepreneurship and funding for cultural organizations that have recently appeared in the Spanish media. The artist compiled them alongside her own drawings inspired in various visual sources, as well as titles of cartoons made by the Spanish satirical cartoonist El Roto. The texts and images come together in a self-published newspaper displayed in a Communist-style public reading board.

Nicoline van Harskamp

The Netherlands, 1975 / Lives and works in Amsterdam

To Live Outside the Law You Must be Honest, 2007

Single-channel HD video, colour, sound, 24 min.

Courtesy the artist

Nicoline van Harskamp explores anarchist theoretical traditions in her videos, staged performances with actors, and reading groups. This video contains three sequences: one shot in Christiania, an autonomous “free town” in the center of Copenhagen, and two shot in London. In each sequence, the same actor delivers a text in different scenarios in a lively manner, as if he was making a speech. The text is scripted—written by the artist based on interviews she made in the two cities. In Christiana she spoke to various local residents; in London she specifically talked with left-wing and right-wing libertarians. Throughout, issues of participatory democracy are addressed, and opposing narratives emerge. Property is a key concern for the Christiana residents, while the Londoners primarily discuss violation of freedoms by state authorities and other forces, both governmental and corporate.

Oliver Ressler

Austria, 1970 / Lives and works in Vienna

Property is Theft, 2014

Inkjet print on vinyl

Courtesy the artist

Oliver Ressler makes films, signage, and publications that examine forms of resistance to power in realms such as the economy and government. His works draw attention to alternative schemes to mainstream politics, focusing on collective action as a means to transform reality. This work is a banner on which an almost imperceptible rendering of the logo of Santander, Spain's major bank, intersects the sentence “Property Is Theft,” written in a vivid red. It represents the recent American and European government bail-outs of key financial institutions, and the fact that these took place at the same time that austerity measures were being levied on the general populace. The expression “Property Is Theft” was coined by the philosopher Pierre-Joseph Proudhon in the mid-1800s and became a slogan of anarchism. This work illustrates what is a binary of antagonistic forces at play today in the Western world: capital versus idealism.

Allan Sekula

United States of America, 1951– 2013

Waiting for Tear Gas, 1999-2000

35mm slides, colour, silent, 14 min.; self-adhesive vinyl

Collection of the Museu d'Art Contemporani de Barcelona

Allan Sekula was known to chronicle emerging forms of activism, often in the realms of global trade, labor, and migration, as a means of examining contemporary politics. He made this work during the “Battle of Seattle,” a series of protests against the World Trade Organization summit that took place in Seattle in 1999, which subsequently triggered further anti-capitalist demonstrations across the Western world. Sekula took numerous photographs over the course of several days, from dawn to late at night. The pictures show demonstrators in portraits and group scenes. Unlike most reporters, he focused on collateral circumstances and came away with a highly nuanced understanding of the events. The work is presented as a sequential projection of 81 slides alongside a personal account of the “Battle of Seattle” in the form of a wall text.