

SUBVERSION FROM WITHIN

Editorial

Angela M. Bartholomew

In 2016 activists gathered in Bologna to conceal every painting by the street artist, Blu. Successively eradicating one work after the other, the faction left behind a series of gray silhouettes—a probable palimpsest. But this act of vandalism was perpetuated at the behest of the artist himself.¹ The organizers of the exhibition, *Street Art: Banksy & Co. — L'Arte allo Stato Urbano* had taken action to begin the removal and transportation of Blu's paintings into the galleries of the Palazzo Pepoli.² With the stated purpose of “salvaging them from demolition and preserving them from the injuries of time”, the foundation would thus accumulate street art in a single space—one which charged admission.³ Without legal grounds to prevent the abduction of his paintings by the museum, Blu's tactic to subvert their “paradoxical and grotesque” incorporation was simple: destroy the work.⁴

This two-part issue of *Kunstlicht* explores the tenuous state of subversion in artistic practice, and the forces with which an artwork must contend when posing a threat to reigning hegemonies. It sprung from a colloquium organized at the Vrije Universiteit Amsterdam in February of this year, which brought together researchers to discuss the ways in which artists contend with the space of exhibition, or what Daniel Buren has called the “enhancing receptacle” [*receptacle valorisant*].⁵ From there, our interest in subversion grew to consider practices that engage with constraints both inside and outside exhibition space.

In the case of Blu's murals—and their eradication—the subversion is two-fold. Street artists like Blu have subverted established processes for the production and valuation of art, working without commission to make art in unsanctioned spaces for an audience that has not requested it. Yet the notoriety some have gained—for the guerrilla nature of their practice and their use of urban imagery, is precisely what grants it commodity status. While Blu's elimination of the work is an extreme solution to subvert the aims of an art institution that would commodify dissidence, not even iconoclasm is a guaranteed strategy. Images of the work live on, and may be framed by discourse that institutions effectually produce. The ‘story’ of street art can thus be repackaged, published, sold, and distributed regardless of the fate of its material artifacts. And subversive art—like subculture in general—is perpetually at risk of being maneuvered into the cultural mainstream.

Already in 1958, Guy Debord referred to the “rigged game of official culture”, in which subversive

ideas are forbidden access to public discourse.⁶ Subversive ideas by means of pure suppression, however, remain subversive and potentially effective via other channels of distribution. In order to disempower subversive ideas—Debord argues, “[t]he ruling ideology arranges the trivialization of subversive discoveries, and widely circulates them after sterilization”.⁷ Under this logic, subversive practices may come to strengthen the very institutions they intend to challenge. The institution of art excludes and dictates, thus presenting an impetus for artists to subvert its aims. But there is likewise a propensity for institutions to consume criticism and reflect it back, or even commission their own criticism—a categorical *performance* of criticality.

In the first article of the issue, Susan L. Power discusses the practice of the French artist Bertrand Lavier, an artist who affronts the boundaries that distinguish the work of art from the exhibition, as well as those that distinguish his role as an artist from that of a curator. Lavier transforms gallery devices and art world clichés into works of art, turning the exhibition format into his own subversive strategy. He thus draws attention to the space in which art is installed both as a *container* and as its *content*, and conveys the influence of setting and context on the perception and reception of art.

Also writing on an artist that appropriates the space of the exhibition, Catalina Imizcoz explores the miniature world of Sebastian Gordín. Upon *not* receiving an invitation to present his work inside the Instituto de Cooperación Iberoamericana (ICI) in Buenos Aires, Gordín opted instead to create his own exhibition on the sidewalk in front of the building. There he showed a miniature maquette of the gallery of the ICI filled with his own exhibition of miniature works. This reduction of scale resulted in a reversal of what Jackson Pollock achieved with his employment of “mural-scale paintings [that] ceased to become paintings and became *environments*”, giving the viewer the sense that she is “confronted, assaulted, sucked in.”⁸

Lavier and Gordín can be considered in a line of artists that incorporate the conditions of display into their work. Far earlier, seeking to eliminate the boundaries between art and life, James McNeil Whistler went to great lengths to shape the presentation and reception of his work. This leads Rachel E. Schwartz to position Whistler as an early precursor for artists of 20th-century installation art. For Whistler, art went well beyond the frame, filling every aspect of the space of its installation, invading all aspects of life. His refusal to conform to the expectation of his private patron also highlights the power relations at work in the production of art.

In light of the claim that subversive practices that work within the museum may strengthen the institutions they intend to challenge, it should come as no surprise that several of the authors in this issue are wary of the “institutionalization of critique”.⁹ Among them is Isabelle Sully, who suggests a way out of the

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One of Blu's best-known murals, a collaboration he worked on with JR and Lutz Henke in Kreuzberg, Berlin, was also painted over in 2014. Henke takes responsibility and speaks to the motivation behind the act in, ‘Why we painted over Berlin's most famous graffiti’, *The Guardian*, 19 December 2014. Accessed through: <https://theguardian.com/commentisfree/2014/dec/19/why-we-painted-over-berlin-graffiti-kreuzberg-murals> on 12 June 2017.

2

Street Art: Banksy & Co. was on view in the Palazzo Pepoli in Bologna—a cultural space backed by the banking foundation, Fondazione Carisbo—between March 18 and June 26, 2016. It included 250 works of ‘street art’.

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Sarah Cascone, ‘Italian Street Artist Blu Destroys 20 Years of His Own Work to Protest Upcoming Exhibition’, *artnet news*, 14 March 2016. Accessed through: <https://news.artnet.com/art-world/blu-destroys-bologna-street-art-448658> on 2 June 2017.

4

Wu Ming, ‘Street Artist #Blu Is Erasing All The Murals He Painted in #Bologna’, Wu Ming Foundation, 12 March 2016. Accessed through: <http://wumingfoundation.com/giap/2016/03/street-artist-blu-is-erasing-all-the-murals-he-painted-in-bologna/> on 2 June 2017.

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Daniel Buren, ‘Exposition d'une exposition’, in: *documenta 5* exh. cat., Kassel: documenta GmbH/C. Bertelsmann Verlag, 1972, pp. 17–29.

6

Guy Debord, ‘Report on the Construction of Situations’, in *Guy Debord and the Situationist International: Texts and Documents*, Tom McDonough, (ed.) Cambridge, MA: MIT Press, 2002, p. 39.

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Ibid., p. 31.

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Allan Kaprow, ‘The Legacy of Jackson Pollock’ (1958), in: Jeff Kelley, (ed.) *Essays on Blurring of Art and Life*, Berkeley, CA: University of California Press, 1993, p. 6.

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Hito Steyerl, ‘The Institution of Critique’, European Institute for Progressive Cultural Policies, *transversal, do you remember institutional critique?*, 01.2006. Accessed through: http://eipcp.net/transversal/0106/steyerl/en/base_edit on 1 June 2017.

conundrum of an artist's "institutional complicity". Sully puts forth a framework for the artwork as lobby, positing that the liminal space of the lobby—precisely as a result of its position within *and* outside the jurisdiction of the institution—can enable a work to inflict change from within.

Also bearing in mind the boundaries of the museum, Alida Jekabson provides an account of the exclusion of Hélio Oiticica's *Parangolé*. When the vivid procession that comprised *Parangolé* was not allowed into the Museum of Modern Art in Rio de Janeiro, the performance carried on in front of the museum. The work has since been re-presented repeatedly by arts institutions, a factor of the myth it generated, and Oiticica's popularity. But in each re-interpretation, the integral moment of exclusion is neglected. The example of Oiticica's *Parangolé* illustrates what happens when the tide shifts, and art institutions welcome previously excluded practices. Does this newfound acceptance entail an equal footing, or are there explicit conditions under which newly embraced artists must be framed?

Patricia Kaersenhout's work accentuates these limits. In her performance as a cleaning woman of the Stedelijk Museum Amsterdam, Kaersenhout disappears into the setting of the museum. In this manner, she carries out a reversal of the 'maintenance art performances' of Mierle Laderman Ukeles, whose extensive enactment of custodial duties made visible the labor of maintenance workers.¹⁰ Unlike Kaersenhout, Ukeles performed these duties *as herself*—a white female artist. Kaersenhout, in her guise *as a cleaning woman*, instead draws attention to persistent discrimination within institutions of art against people of color, who are invited into the museum under two conditions: as service personnel or on account of the multi-cultural capital their presence will bestow upon the institution. There are notable echoes between Kaersenhout's *The Clean Up Woman* (2016) and the practice of Betye Saar. Saar's washboard sculptures, such as *Extreme Times Call for Extreme Heroines* (2017), make use of outmoded cleaning devices to recall legacies of slavery and persistent systems of oppression (fig. 1). In addition to washboards, metal tubs, and soap, Saar's work appropriates derogatory depictions of black people from various sources—a decision made with great prudence. Speaking of appropriation in her work, *The Liberation of Aunt Jemima* (1972), Saar has explained:

I had a lot of hesitation about using powerful, negative images such as these—thinking about how white people saw black people, and how that influenced the ways in which black people saw each other. [...] I was recycling the imagery, in a way, from negative to positive, using the negative power against itself.¹¹

Her practice uses 'powerful, negative images' as a strategy to disempower such images, but in doing so she opens the door for a discussion about the ethics of appropriation.

When does the employment of 'powerful, negative images' effectively subvert the interests of those served by their circulation? Can their appropriation be

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The performance alluded to is *Washing/Tracks/Maintenance*, performed as part of the exhibition *c. 7500* (1973, curated by Lucy Lippard) in the Wadsworth Atheneum, Hartford, Connecticut.

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Betye Saar, 'Influences: Betye Saar', 27 Sept 2016, *Frieze.com*. Accessed online through: <https://frieze.com/article/influences-betye-saar> on 10 June 2017.



fig. 1 Betye Saar, *Extreme Times Call for Extreme Heroines*, 2017. Mixed media assemblage, 21.5 x 8.62 x 1.5 in (54.6 x 21.9 x 3.8 cm). Courtesy of the artist and Roberts & Tilton, Los Angeles, California. Photo: Robert Wedemeyer.

justified by framing them as ‘art’? These questions are at the center of Rosa te Velde’s article on the commission of *Street View (Reassembled)*, a work by Anssi Pulkkinen. The work features the actual ruins of a Syrian home, destroyed by the conflict in Syria before being shipped to Europe and placed upon on a traveling stage. The work toys the line with its instrumentalization of controversy and shock value, but is all the more problematic for its position as a key work in the promotion of the centennial celebration of Finnish independence.

Making observations regarding trends of national art funding, Eva Fotiadi looks at two cases in which artistic production is impacted by neoliberal policies. In the Netherlands and in Greece, Fotiadi reveals how the aesthetic choices made by artists are swayed by policies that stress the potential societal ‘impact’ of the work. In such a situation, in which art is employed as a means to fill the gap left by the retreating welfare state, how can art remain critical without further promoting the neoliberal forces that it seeks to unmask?

In the final article of the issue, a similar dilemma is presented by Luna Goldberg, who considers the position of artists in Israel. As evidenced by the cancellation of Miki Kratsman’s exhibition at the Tel Aviv Museum of Art, censorship in the form of funding withdrawal is a concern for Israeli artists. Yet even when criticizing Israel’s policy towards Palestine on an international stage, they risk appearing complicit with Israel on account of their identity as ‘Israeli artists’ —promoting Israel as tolerant of dissensus.

Let it not be said that determining which practices engage with institutions, and which do not, is easily done. As Dick Verdult, one of the artists whose work, *1 Mb Communications* pops up throughout the issue, was quick to point out—institutions are not limited to museums of art and halls of legislation. While “we are the institution”, so, undoubtedly, is Facebook.¹² Dick Verdult is an artist who has worked in every imaginable medium. He is perhaps best known as a musician; his alter ego Dick El Demasiado is responsible for the invention of an entirely new subgenre of underground music, the so-called ‘cumbia lunática’. At the same time, he has developed a signature form of ‘trash aesthetics’ that can be seen in everything from graphic work and sculpture, to films and web design. Clearly, Dick Verdult is anything but an artist who fits into an institutional structure. Paying no heed to boundaries, disciplinary or national, he finds “being askew” an auspicious position.¹³ In the issue, you’ll find several of Verdult’s memes—previously distributed via social media—that display his patent fondness for “corrupting clichés by enriching them”.¹⁴

Finally, let us not forget that *Kunstlicht* is itself an institution. That we choose articles for inclusion (and exclusion), and select themes that we deem important to touch upon, makes us agents in determining what is worthy of attention.

The limits of a journal—a text-based medium with unidirectional information transmission, that employs a particular mode of pseudo-intellectual, art-world language—are evident. Is it enough to acknowledge our own role in the production of power relations? Can we maintain our position as a journal of repute while calling into question the hegemony our authorship

¹² Andrea Fraser, ‘From the Critique of Institutions to an Institution of Critique’, *Artforum* 44, 2005, no. 1, p. 281.

¹³ Dick Verdult in: IT IS TRUE BUT NOT HERE, Dir. Luuk Bouwman, NEWTON film/serious-Film, 2017, documentary film.

¹⁴ Ibid.



fig. 2 Wouter Huis, *Disclaimer*, 2012. Plaque installed within the entrance to the Vooruit in Ghent. Photo by author.

promotes? In the hopes of demystifying this process, we include a brief correspondence shared with the ‘anartist’ Gian Luigi Biagini in a contribution we’ve opted to call, *Passional Fusion*. He found the process for our commissioning of his work too overbearing. As we continued, we experienced firsthand how challenging it can be to align the aims of an artist whose intentions are subversive, with the goals of a journal on that very topic. The email correspondence we feature in addition to Biagini’s ‘transversal cut’ through the issue: an account of *Passport for the Invisible* (2014), a ‘disturbanist intervention’ that took place at the Kiasma Museum in Helsinki, and incidentally inspired the phrase that graces our cover.

In making this issue, what has come to the fore is that the tactics used to subvert are contingent on the circumstances of their production and presentation. Strategies of parody and détournement are able to shift perceptions by thwarting expectations, but this is only made possible by an essential grasp of the status quo. When the same works that employ these strategies engage with a different setting, they are subject to an entirely new set of mediators. The fleeting nature of subversion is well illustrated by Susan Sontag’s statement regarding the potential reproduction of Alan Kaprow’s Happenings. “One cannot hold on to a Happening,” Sontag writes, “and one can only cherish it as one cherishes a firecracker going off dangerously close to one’s face.”¹⁵

It is similarly perilous to nail down the principles of subversion. Yet even in the act of discussing this kind of artistic practice, we fall into the trap of subjecting it to classification. By approaching this topic through an academic lens, we crystallize the position of such practices in a canon

¹⁵ Susan Sontag, ‘Happenings: An Art of Radical Juxtaposition’, in: *Against Interpretation and Other Essays*, London: Penguin Classics, 2009, p. 268.

of 'successful critical art' and effectively normalize it. A power relation and hierarchy is thus produced, in which art historians and critics write themselves into the history of (disempowered) subversive acts. In Power's article, she makes references to a quote by Judith Butler that is particularly poignant in this regard. For Butler, it is futile to classify subversive practices as such. "[S]ubversive performances", Butler declares, "always run the risk of becoming deadening clichés through their repetition and, most importantly, through their repetition within commodity culture where 'subversion' carries market value."¹⁶ "The effort to name the criterion for subversiveness", she continues, "will always fail, and ought to."¹⁷ Therefore, in this issue we resign ourselves to offering an account of situations in which the subversion of institutions may, or may not, have occurred (fig. 2).

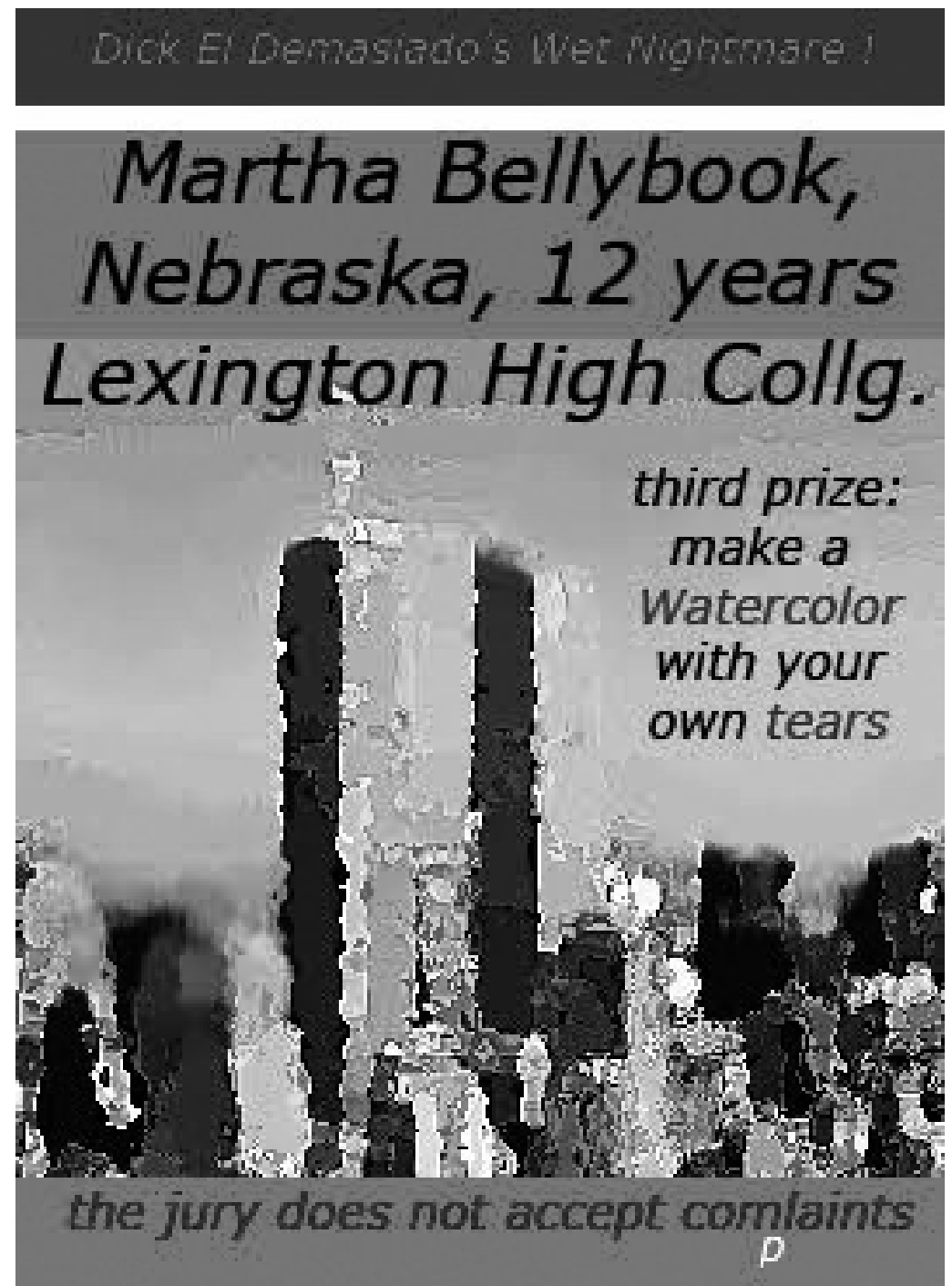
We would like to thank all of the artists and authors who have contributed to this issue with a special thanks to the assistance of Rosa Mulder. Thank you also to the subversive students of the Master's Seminar on the *Art of Exhibiting: Artistic Strategies in the 1980s and 1990s*—whose contentious insights have contributed in countless ways to the issue—and to Katja Kwastek, for her unwavering support of young scholars and their ambitions. With this issue, *Kunstlicht* bids farewell to Marianna Maruyama and welcomes Esmee Schoutens to the board of editors.

¹⁶
Judith Butler, *Gender Trouble: Feminism and the Subversion of Identity*, New York and London: Routledge, 1999, p. xxi.

¹⁷
Ibid.

On behalf of the editorial board,

Angela M. Bartholomew



In this picture of 38kb you can clearly see a watercolour of the twin towers, made by little Martha Bellybook of Nebraska, 12 years, pupil of Lexington High. She won the third prize in the category 'make a watercolour with your own tears'. The jury (Dick Verdult) does not accept complaints.