

Forbidden cities

On Notes towards a dissipation of desire

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It is an old saw. A movement's decadence becomes evident when protesters assemble merely to keep each other company. Demonstrating becomes more a habit than an effective means of showing truth to power. Strategy and tactics become atrophied. The company kept offers more motivation than specific political objectives. Typically, the saw of skepticism comes out at precisely that moment when the original objective - blocking a piece of legislation, disrupting a transnational assembly, or precluding a military adventure - moves beyond reach. Why continue this hollow campaign? The saw-holder asks.

A more productive question might be asked: How does the desire to occupy a public place - to congress in an act of becoming a public - in itself constitute a movement's decadence? Specific objectives change, as is the way of all engagements with history. Do we retreat from our occupations to determine the next course? Is it not possible that these things can be worked out in the midst

of taking streets, canvassing neighborhoods, picketing sidewalks and disrupting the flows of pedestrian life?

Perhaps there is a concern that the larger objective – civil rights, global justice, anti-imperialism, anti-militarism, etc – will suffer should the protests lose volume and density. Nothing suggests a loss in momentum like shrinking numbers. No consensus can be effected by a gathering of three thousand, one thousand, five hundred, fifty, twenty-five, ten. All that remains is a loyal opposition consumed by its own marginality. After all, when confronting power, particularly power emboldened with a 'power-over'¹, the opposition cannot risk the appearance of weakness. The image of a weak opposition only attributes greater strength to that which hoards the 'power-over'.

Better to roll up the PVC banner, recycle the cardboard signs, and return the stakes to the garden than give 'power-over' additional legitimacy through images of small and negligible demonstrations in the rain. If demonstrations of tens of thousands, hundreds of thousands and millions clearly show a counter-consensus, then equally manifest is the inverse. A demonstration will always show clearly a position in relation to power: but the strength

of that counter-valence is, as the old saying goes, in numbers.

This fact can, of course, lead well-intentioned people to adopt accounting tactics not dissimilar from new economy mathematics. A protest of three thousand becomes, in the minds-eye of the invested, thirty thousand. Five thousand bodies appear to be one hundred thousand. Those without access to the organizer's minds-eye, who see five thousand as five thousand, are labeled liars, betrayers of the faith(where faith is hope in the absence of the seen).

In this case, both those inflating numbers and those ashamed by the actuals are on the same page; committed to the power of the image, invested in the notion that 'power-over' must be met with volume and density. Also on that page are the proponents of 'power-over', using all the media at their disposal to fabricate images of hysteria, legitimization and righteousness. A rock concert for patriotism receives wild airplay. Images of a people grateful for their subjection find wide distribution. And the ten supporters of tyranny receive as much press coverage as the hundred thousand gathered in opposition. From third-world military juntas to first-world super-

powers, the tactics are the same. There is strength in numbers. And the proof of numbers is in the image. In the contest of accounting, the clash of demonstrable power, and the conflict of apparent consensus, the image alone prevails.

Perhaps another form of skepticism is required than that old saw about decadence and dissipation. Reservations about imaged power become increasingly tangible in the torrent of still photographs and video images of street protests. After years of drawing on archival images from days long gone by, we are now up to our eyeballs in shots of heroic masses, valiant affinity groups and a teeming citizenry on the side of right. What was three years ago the sole purview of independent media activists has become wallpaper on the screens of the corporate worldview.

Yet a skepticism accompanying this tidal wave compels us to ask if we might be missing something. Can images of bodies pressed against the city replace the experience of the same? Old saws about spectacular alienation aside, are the experiences so different that in consuming the former for the meaning of the latter we lose an excess that meaning fails to abide?

A heroic mass is seen unleashing their corporeal indignation upon the façade of urban space. The filmmaker mediates the nature of that indignation. The rightness of the mass is assumed into discourse and evident in the image.

But what of the point of contact between the mass of bodies? What of flesh against concrete, breath on chemical agents, sound on the abstractions of urban design? What of the mundane but substantive processes that precede and continue long after? The image deals only in the residues of power. All that is heard, all that is felt and all that is smelt – the caverns of perception susceptible to the vagaries of desire – these are forbidden. In the project of social transformation, these and not the heroic moments are the stuff of our labors.

The problem of wayward desire has been taken up by video artists Beth Bird in her D2KLA (2001), John Greyson's Packin (2001) and Knut Åsdam's Notes towards a dissipation of desire. For Åsdam in particular, there is little illusion that the image of power is other than a reinscription of power as an image. From this point of

clarity, the demonstration concealed in much so-called demonstration footage, Åsdam asks can the image recover what the 'power-over' deems superfluous to its mission? And, more importantly for the subjectivity of resistance, can that superfluity contribute to acts of anti-power, the dissipation of negation?

What Notes proposes is a contradictory enterprise fully dependent upon the waywardness of desire: a project that begins in the occupation of schisms – between the image of power and the touch of forbidden associations.

At the center of Notes the video camera follows a small protest through rain-drenched streets. The videographer plays catch up to the march, trailing behind a line of police vans and then, later, from across the street. The distance is irreducible. Interrupting this scene is a series of crudely drawn sketches of figures. What should be projections of triumph, moral certitude and political speech, are in fact imaginings of brokenness. A figure flees the scene. Another has stumbled to the ground. One figure takes cover within an auto-embrace that suggests pain, disappointment, exhaustion, despair. For one figure,

all that we see is a hand resting between a green sleeve and a field of blue darkness.

The crudeness of these images resonates with the verité of the now-familiar indy-media videographer. It is an objectivity presented on the armature of a passionate subjectivity. The one who holds the camera does so not out of dispassionate inquiry but from a near feverish compulsion: this must be seen, and I am the one to bear witness.

It is this sublimated martyrdom, the bearing witness of something that will inflict the pain of consequence that is so easily exploited by power. At the same time, or more importantly, in the same space, what is exploited by power becomes the means of a schism: the 'power-over' feeds off the 'power-to'.

Architecture, like the city, begins its decline the moment people take up residency. The ultimate 'power-over' imagines a world of the subjected, no man, no woman, no child, no body moving from one to the other. Power imagines a city of striking silhouettes, vacant windows, lights whose purpose is only color and texture, not illumination.

And so these images cut into the footage of the protest. A tranquil urban environment scrubbed clean of human contact. A night sky, green with envy.

What Åsdam presents in Notes is a puzzle, a sketchbook, an instruction manual for turning desire against the 'power-over' drive of the image. Rather than succumb to cynicism and withhold a guide, legend or key from the reader, Åsdam furnishes two.

The first key arrives in a visual void. Over blackness a voice announces; "Notes toward a dissipation of desire." We are urged to take up "a schism between translucence and watering_holes." The voice continues to narrate the images (or, conversely, according to the 'in order of appearance' convention, the images narrate the voice). The schism is transfigured as between (sketchbook image) desertion, and (archive photograph) dissent. Words are lost in the metallic sheen of the affected voice. Pitched up, higher frequencies are accentuated and then phased in a competition of difference and sameness. The accumulated effect of these processes on the voice is demotion of syntax and rhythm for grain. The voice dances within a

subjectivity that is impossibly (and possibly) self and not self: 'power-to' and not.

The second key is offered over a quotation from Michel de Certeau: "Something happened to us. Something began to stir. . . ." A video clip: a slow-motion light moves through a forest of vertical shadows. Repeated. "Emerging from who knows where, suddenly filling the streets, the factories, circulating among us, becoming ours but no longer being the muffled noise of our solitude, voices that had never been heard . . ." From here begins something far less certain, far less heroic, and more along the lines of a murky trajectory through a forbidden city. We return to the funereal procession of police vans following an unseen demonstration in a winter's rain. All that is left to us is the suggestion of senses – the fields of perception both represented and denied by the image. This is a strategy for occupation incumbent upon the flesh, the changes of life and the projection of desire into places made human. This is a strategy for the nothing that eludes the image: for living defined by desertion and attack. A 'power-to' that eats away at the 'power-over' and, at the other end, dissipates the desire for more.

In the long march framed on either side by neither certitude nor heroism, no other strategy is possible. Notes is a video, not for artists or even for the ephemeral activist. Notes is a guide for organizers of rage and hope.

¹ See John Holloway, Change the World Without Taking Power: The Meaning of Revolution Today, (Sterling, VA: Pluto Press, 2002), 36. "'Power' . . . conceals an antagonism (and does so in a way that reflects the power of the powerful). 'Power' is used in two quite different senses, as power-to and as power-over. [. . .] However, posing the distinction in these terms can be seen as pointing merely to a difference whereas what is at issue is an antagonism, or rather, an antagonistic metamorphosis. Power-to exists as power-over, but the power-to is subjected to and in rebellion against power-over, and power-over is nothing but, and therefore absolutely dependent upon, the metamorphosis of power-to."