

## **Halt the expulsion of foreign comrades!**

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For the last forty years we have had to witness reassessments of 1968 by those who have since entered the mainstream media and politics of the center. One reason why the soft Right and the emergent Centre has spent so many years attacking those who came of age in the late 1960s is because that period directly attacked stable value systems both in art and elsewhere. Extremely elegant arguments are made in the art context against the influence of that period. But the ironic subjectivity of the present is a direct result of a demand for difference to be acknowledged at all times, so it won't do to claim that subjectivity is an apolitical celebration. The super-subjectivity that we see now is not some strange product of a spontaneous relativism that cannot be explained or rationalized. It is the direct result of attempts to create a better situation where difference could and should be accentuated as the primary marker of a creative and democratic society. The situation prior to 1968 was often an intolerable class ridden hierarchical stasis punctured by moments of explosion, defiance and sophisticated coquetry. It worked well for some and not for others. It is our obligation to the memory of those who died that year from Mexico to Saigon, to live up to their demands for a better set of human relationships. The project is not complete. And our contemporary focus on eco-political consciousness alone will remain only a totalizing projection of potential rather than a detailed understanding of how to behave. While it is true that the barricade has become dispersed and has multiplied. We might try and move towards it still, even as it keeps shifting just out of sight.

So let's think about less contested terrain. During 1968 in Los Angeles Joe Goode took photographs of his friends in their vehicles. He does not claim to have been at the center of action. He wasn't on the steps of the Autonomous National University of Mexico or the streets of Paris. He merely produced a calendar with his images. A calendar for the year 1969, each page showing a different artist with their car. A marker of the near future, it is a publication that shows the everyday and art merging. Larry Bell, Ed Ruscha, James Turrell and others are pictured in trucks, cars and at least two Porsche Coupés. The calendar is a representation of fact and function, showing a specific community (all white, all men) as a contingent artwork. The task of producing this functional representation pointed to a new set of concerns, it was self-produced, modest and precise. A revealing set of images showing a degree of contentment during a moment of profound change.

Goode's work points beyond its immediate context towards a future where agonizing over ecology and the relation between people and machines has taken over from battles to

possess socialist rhetoric. It now seems an indirect but consequential addition to the more precise actions of the time. Even in the soft glow of a Californian smog it was necessary for an artist to rethink the way things could be and reassure everyone that there would be a 1969 at all. 1968 was a year of argument and disagreement. We inherited an accentuated sensitivity to difference and found new models of co-habitation. Cars were torched and used for barricades on streets throughout the world. The great symbol of post-war affluence became an object of destruction and protection.

Having grown up in the 1970s in London, the progressive school teachers had all formed their ideology in the atmosphere of 1968. But within ten years the emergent British form of punk had taken much of its initial rhetoric and activated stance from the pre-68 Situationists in terms of its relationship to spectacle, anarchy and use of boredom in the face of disappointment. The people who had experienced the hopes and struggles that came to a head in 1968 were also our early curators, critics and editors. They had all fought to revise our relationship to art, ethics, aesthetics and politics. A complete shift in power relations was implemented. The most engaged of that time had literally fought hard to change structures. Their obligation and desire was to alter a deeply unjust society towards something that might offer an opportunity for the next generation to live within a new set of horizontal relationships. This would be achieved through self-conscious critical thinking. It would be achieved via direct action. It would be described by a complete rethink of the status and function of art within society. All of which would have to take place within an awareness of post-colonialism, new feminism and a revised understanding of the relations of production in the face of increasing corporate power.

By 1979 Margaret Thatcher was swept to power, soon to be followed by Ronald Reagan. They were part of a concerted effort and planned exercise by the right and consolidated corporate power to insist that the failures of the present be blamed on the liberalism of the 1960s. This was an insult to those who had fought so hard to create clear relationships that might not be subjected to the random and authoritarian descriptions of power. 1968 was about engaging with real structures not vague promises. The work of Lawrence Weiner is exemplary in this context. A practice essentially defined in that year, which produced a structural framework that might propose a way to image new relationships between objects and objects and objects and people. From that point on a structured rethinking of relationships that would have to be taken into account in order to understand any future "work". The emergence of the new art had nothing to do with nothing, but a lot to do with asking precise structural questions about relationships and exchange.

It has been suggested that the US did not experience 1968 in the same terms as some in Europe, particularly within the cultural field. But the battles were parallel. The cross-

fertilization of ideas was profound. What European institutions absorbed within the post-68 period was matched by the direct action and new structures proposed by artists in the US. Such echoes also existed in the broader political arena. The struggle of Ireland against the legacy of British colonialism was helped by lessons from the Civil Rights movement, the students in Paris were inspired and in communication with the Students for a Democratic Society. In Europe much of the driving motivation behind direct action in relation to the state was a lingering response to the mass murder and forced migration of WWII. The project was concerned to flush out the guilty participants who had smoothly moved from positions of power in war-time to the heart of the new post-war states, whether in art institutions or banking. Such a process did not happen in the US. It was not seen as necessary. This led to the strange version of nationalism and inconsistent approach to democratic freedom that we experience in the US today.

1968 cannot be easily commemorated in an art magazine. Students were massacred, peasants were slaughtered, political figures removed by force. Changes were made in a permanent way that benefited all who came next from the right and the left. We don't have a specific issue of Artforum to celebrate the end of the Second World War or the collapse of the Berlin Wall because 1968 was an extended year, which reaches out in both directions yet cannot be treated in political or aesthetic terms alone. The revisions were institutional as well as personal yet any immediate way of assessing results was necessarily inconclusive leading to a permanent reassessment of positions rather than a singular moment of change. That is what was fought for – a multiplication of sensitivity and doubt. It was the last major moment of change within the art context and battles over theory and practice have taken place in art schools ever since. Any rethinking of artistic structure or institutional activity is intimately connected to precise changes from that time. Many institutional frameworks attempt to disguise or veil this fact, yet each demonstrates a clear necessity to respond to the lessons of the period. Most of the troubled recent discussions about markets are rooted in its struggles. All contemporary structural questions can be understood through the use of critical tools that were activated over that period and placed into direct action or denial since. This is not opinion, it describes the critical and cultural terrain in which we operate. The 1968 that really affects the contemporary art context has nothing to do with the Reagan/Thatcher image of soft liberalism and a lot to do with asking precise questions about roles and differences within art and society.

By 1990 artist Philippe Parreno was extremely clear about one thing, it would have been better if the progressive forces of the recent past had spent more effort attempting to occupy time rather than space. Paradoxically 1968 taught us to be skeptical about the notion of specific turning points, singular histories and standard readings of hierarchy. It is notable that 1968 represents argument and disagreement as well as an event moment. To put it another

way – the reason that 1968 becomes a subject in this magazine context is due to the fact that it is essentially a discursive and contested moment. This fact means that we don't have to resolve the normal conservative criticism that only a few experienced 1968. As with the most dynamic socially structured art today, attempting to resolve how many people are "present" as a point of validation is not the point. In this case the work and the event operate with parallel potential. Presence or absence is sublimated by a particular combination of social momentum, individual dynamic, intense self-critique and a constant assessment of how close one may or may not be to the center of action. This text is a symptom of such simultaneous assertion and doubt.

If we accept that artists broke with the standard system of artistic representation in the late 1960s, then the challenge to authority and hierarchy during that year applies to dates as well as administrations. 1968 was a year people died, not just a "symbolic moment." It was a year where people stood up to repressive authority and were faced by increasingly desperate and direct action by the state. The difference between the struggles of 2008 and 1968 is that organized protest in 1968 led to hysterical and uncontrolled state response rather than consistent and predictable force. This differentiation will be hard to take for all those locked up during the Republican National Convention in New York a few years ago. But while we no longer trust the notion of a singular moment as a key marker of change, we know that the dominant forces in the culture are better prepared to out maneuver the occupation of a University or a street.

When looking at consecutive twenty year periods, it is clear that the one between 1988 and 2008 is harder to describe than 1968 to 1988, not merely because it reaches our present condition. The period of time between 1968 and 1988 encompassed a massive shift in critical thought and social formation. It was a period where attempts to negotiate the potential of art took place within a context of ideological battles, compromises and a degree of backtracking. However hard you try to reject the reassuring illusion of historical cycles, there are parallels between the still booming art market of 1988 – following the economic panic of 1987 – and the current muffled hysteria that surrounds an anticipatory art context. The return of the Right and varied forms of conservatism combined with the end of the Soviet system was combined with the growth of third-way or so-called consensus politics. The left moving to the centre and the right moving to the right. Yet all taking place within a general context where the necessity to recognize "difference" has generally been accepted by both sides in developed parliamentary democracies. The key word to describe the legacy, both artistic and political over the last forty years has been "difference". This has led to an art context, as predicted by Donald Judd in 1962 that has become more and more "specific". It has also meant that at least the discourse of difference has had to be grudgingly acknowledged by the entire mainstream political spectrum. However, I am probably not alone in occasionally being

surprised that the lessons and demands of 1968 haven't become more thoroughly embedded in the art field. But then the project of "differentiation" could not lead to precise results. It was not supposed to. Yet, even twenty years ago I didn't imagine that we would still have to be wondering about poorly reconized demographic difference within art exhibitions or looking at the same old systems of structure and control – that the notion of working collectively might still be problematic to assess within art school systems or that art fairs would have become a dominant model of exchange.

In 1972 Jean-Luc Godard and Jean Pierre Gorin directed *Tout va Bien*. The film operates as a parodic exposé of the battles and desire of its recent past. The idea that a moment in time can offer a promise of potential is the enduring mirage that unlocks the significance of 1968 and leads to its schizophrenic lure. The idea that all relationships have to be reassessed and a permanent form of self-conscious critique replace and challenge the hierarchies of the past is a project that still exists as an analytical phantom structure, one that will keep returning as long as specific power structures maneuver over the desire for difference to be acknowledged and reproduced.

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