

Peter Weibel

Preface

For some years now, we have been seeing the rise of a new activism among critical citizens¹ all over the world, which was the focus of the *global aCtIVISm* exhibition that ran from December 14, 2013 to March 30, 2014 at the Museum of Contemporary Art at ZKM | Karlsruhe. The exhibition documented the approaches, tactics, strategies, and methods used in this “performative democracy,” and by means of photos, films, videos, blogs, social media, and other documents disseminated through the mass media charted a first map of this global activism. The “activism” that arises from the combination of activism and art is perhaps the twenty-first century’s first new art form.

With *global aCtIVISm* ZKM continued its series of exhibitions which addresses the political and social changes brought about by new media that began with [*CTRL SPACE*]. *Rhetorics of Surveillance. From Bentham to Big Brother* (2001/2002), *Iconoclash. Beyond the Image Wars in Science, Religion and Art* (2002) through to *Making Things Public. Atmospheres of Democracy* (2005). The exhibition *Cross-border. Contemporary Female Artists from the Arabian Mediterranean Region* (2013), which documented the heroic struggle of female artists in this region, was what then prompted us to devise *global aCtIVISm*.

Global activism is a consequence of both globalization and technological advances. Globalization occurred in two phases: first, in the industrial, machine-driven revolution from 1800, and second, in the data-based information revolution since 1900. Digitization, the transition from an alphabetic to a numeric code, laid the technical foundations for the personalization of the media and the global networking of individuals. In the age of the monopolistic mass media (a product of the industrial revolution) each person became a recipient and only later, in the age of social media (a product of the information revolution), a broadcaster or sender. The Internet gave rise to new horizontal and transversal social structures.

We no longer live in a small-data environment, in which interaction between people and their surroundings is limited to a few data items, but in a big-data environment in which such interaction takes place more or less by the second. In the stimulus–response behavior between humans and environment not only has the volume of data increased immensely, but so has the frequency. Each person has to

¹ See: Pippa Norris (ed.), *Critical Citizens. Global Support for Democratic Government*, Oxford University Press, Oxford, New York (NY), 1999.

process an ever greater volume of data in an ever shorter period of time. All the recipients respond almost simultaneously to every stimulus sent, generating greater communication and performance, and in terms of the “performative turn”² we construe this as increasingly changing the world of things by the transmission of signals and the response to them. As a result, we now talk of the Internet of Things.

In sharp contrast to this daily experience of the reciprocal influence of humans and environment via the new media, citizens in most representative democracies only have an opportunity to influence the major political decisions by voting every few years. In the highly technological lifeworld of the twenty-first century, such fundamental changes in both social relationships and in the relationships between humans and their environment are occurring that society seems to be overextended. The only term it knows to describe these changes is the concept of crisis; from climate crisis to financial crisis to the crisis of democracy (Peter Sloterdijk calls this a statist “neutralization of civilians”³). Today’s protest groups, for example, the *indignados* or the Occupy movement, constitute new “cultures of repair” as it were, which search for ways out of these crises and the partial inability of politics to act.

The new types of spontaneous mass protests by individuals recently showed during the Arab Spring how established power systems can be upended, at least for a brief moment in time. Problems of democracy and the economy, above all corruption, are just as much the target of global activist protests as is the call for human rights to be observed, for peaceful solutions to global conflicts, for immigration policies that emphasize human dignity, for health care, for the protection of animal rights and the environment.

In the Anthropocene epoch we see conflicts between friends and enemies of the globe. For this reason, new tribunals and new contracts are aspired to between humans and nature (for example, in terms of sustainability), between generations and nations, between citizens and the state, and such agreements seem possible especially in a digital society. The first products of this extension of the legal sphere were the NGOs (nongovernmental organizations), which in recent decades have played an immensely important and preparatory role for global activism. One only needs to think of the high-profile campaigns captured in the global media and organized by Greenpeace, Amnesty International, and Transparency International, amongst others. Evidently, large parts of society think that not only does the state not protect civil rights, on the contrary, it actually violates them. For this reason, citizens have created new forms of organization to perform this task themselves. In the wake of the global city⁴ and global governance⁵ we are now witnessing a new form of social action centered around “global citizens.” They represent the survival interests of all humanity and of the Earth itself which

are disregarded by individual states. Global activism thus arises on the bedrock of “global citizenship.”

Performance-based interventions by artist collectives and individuals combined with distribution through the mass media have shown how activists can make a real contribution to overcoming crisis situations by being unequivocal about problematic conditions, often using artistic means to do so. The practices of artistic performances and the participation of the audience, which have existed in art since the 1960s, are now making inroads into the sphere of politics. The expansion of the arts associated with the “exit from the image”⁶ has spelled its entry into politics. The participation of the audience in art has morphed into the participation of the citizens in the sphere of politics. Global activism not only relies on “classical” basic rights, such as freedom of assembly, or the instruments of direct democracy, such as citizens’ initiatives, but also on artistic, performative practices. A new form of public art is emerging, namely public politics. We are witnessing the evolution of a “performative democracy,” a social model that was already anticipated in the performative and interactive (media) arts. The *global aCtIVISm* exhibition and, moreover, the present publication, highlight the parallels between performative, interactive, and participative art forms and global activism.

The present publication is divided into five main themes, each of which is addressed in extensive essays and numerous positions adopted by artists and activists.

Chapter I, “Activism and the Citizen,” provides the theoretical foundation. The authors discuss the state of the modern *res publica* as well as the very different varieties of participative democracy, ranging from civic participation to participation in political opinion formation and decision-making, and to resistance and civil disobedience. The focus is on elaborating the right to resistance in terms of the philosophy of law, as well as social perspectives, such as the idea of the commons.

Chapter II, “Public and Private Sphere,” outlines how activism asserts and establishes a new form of public sphere by inverting traditional relationships. Increasingly we are seeing the occupation of public spaces by private persons, as well as the publication of

2 See: John Langshaw Austin, *How to Do Things With Words*, The Clarendon Press, Oxford, 1962.

3 Peter Sloterdijk, “Last Exit Indignation: On Neutralizing Civilians in Democracies,” this volume, pp. 111–118; originally published in German: “Der verletzte Stolz,” in: *Der Spiegel*, November 8, 2010, available online at: www.spiegel.de/spiegel/print/d-74948265.html, accessed 02/09/2015.

4 See: Saskia Sassen, *The Global City. New York, London, Tokyo*, Princeton University Press, Princeton (NJ), 1991.

5 See: The World Commission on Environment and Development, *Our Common Future* (Brundtland Report), Oxford University Press, Oxford, New York (NY), 1987.

6 See: Laszlo Glozer, *Westkunst. Zeitgenössische Kunst seit 1939*, DuMont, Cologne, 1981.

nonpublic information by private persons. The lines dividing the private from the public sphere are blurring. The political debate is shifting away from collectively managed and hierarchically structured institutions, away from parliaments to the press, to the individuals, who either on their own or in large groups seek a public presence, be it in local urban spaces or through the global mass media, in order to articulate global interests and concerns.

Chapter III, “How to Do Activism,” offers an idea of how activism is constituted in both specific contexts and specific countries.

The authors take a stance, for example, on the Arab Spring, on whistle-blowing, and on women’s rights movements, and discuss different sides to activists’ practice and the significance of symbolic languages and images. As regards the potential for nonviolent resistance, the immense reach of creative forms of protest and artistic interventions is explored.

Chapter IV, “Tactical, Social, and Global Media,” focuses on the role modern communications technologies and social networks can play in the emergence and the actual course of protests, for example, in terms of processes of mobilization, information, and expressing solidarity. Further, selected examples demonstrate how relevant on-line real-time reporting is, which in many countries, such as Iran, Turkey, and China, has frequently triggered mechanisms such as obstruction or censorship, or led to existing repressive mechanisms being intensified. Innovative, technological, and artistic examples show how simple means can be used to circumvent controls and censorship.

Chapter V addresses the phenomenon of so-called “artivism” – the wide variety of ways of utilizing artistic means to intervene in socially relevant processes. Artivism refers to the interface of art and activism in the sense of a turning away from *l’art pour l’art*, art for art’s sake, and also a turning away from twentieth-century art. This had turned its back on reproducing reality in images, that is, representing the world of objects, as early as 1900. Means of representation such as dots, lines, surfaces, and color no longer served to represent the world, but represented themselves. This spawned abstract art. With the banishing of the representation of objects, real objects forced their way into the art system. The result was the self-representation of objects, object art. In the course of the twentieth century everything that was representation was replaced by reality. And now, together with the new media, art for humans’ sake is evolving. This art replaces the expansion of the concept of art with an expansion of the concept of the artist. Scientists as well as ordinary citizens can become artists, just as citizens and artists can participate in scientific projects, and artists and scientists can

participate as citizens in politics. This is why we speak of “citizen artists” and “citizen scientists.”

The exhibition and this book were only made possible by the enthusiasm and passion of the curatorial and organizational team. I would therefore like to thank most cordially the curatorial team of Andreas Beutin, Andrea Buddensieg, Elisabeth Klotz, Joulia Strauss, Tatiana Volkova, Philipp Ziegler, and our committed project manager Sarah Maske, who was ably supported by Sabiha Keyif, Linnea Semmerling, Annika Etter, and Elisa Kaiser. Moreover, I am deeply grateful to the entire team of the ZKM | Karlsruhe that contributed to the development of the exhibition. Our thanks go to Freddy Paul Grunert for pointing us in the direction of and getting us in contact with Teatro Valle Occupato and Ugo Mattei. Parallel to the show in the museum there was also an online exhibition – and here our thanks go first and foremost to Dietrich Heissenbüttel for managing the blog.

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Translated from the German by
Jeremy Gaines.

global activism

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in the 21st Century**

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