

Counteractivity, Counterculture & Alternate Encounters

Bryan Tucker

The nexus linking resistance and protest movements with underground artistic practices is distinct, with significant overlap existing between the participants and qualities of both. It's no surprise that overt resistance to existing circumstances intersects naturally with activities that are radically discontinuous with production/consumption-based existence.

Artistic practice and the artistic gaze de-conceptualizes perception, de-conditions thought, and corresponds with the ability to look at the warped aspects of civilization. The value and characteristic overlaps between anarchist and underground practices can include direct accessibility, intimacy, anomaly, going beyond kitschy surfaces, play, collaboration, and the night.

Many phenomena exist on, and move between, the border of counterculture and explicit opposition to the social structure, and sometimes it's impossible to discern where one stops and the other starts (e.g., Occupy Wall Street, the groups involved in the Anti-globalization movement).

The primal vitality in many subcultural practices helps chip away at the persistently reconstituted, blood and sweat stained lead walls of certainty and calculability which have been erected to conceal and restrict the range of our experiences. Examples of this dynamism can be found in Dada art, the Theatre of Cruelty, Butoh dancing, and street skateboarding.

The international Dada art movement of the early 20th century was a reaction to banal conformism, idolatry, and logic/enlightenment taken to illogical/unenlightened extremes, qualities Dadaists felt underpinned World War I. Demonstrations, journals, theatre, sound events, collage, and three-dimensional visual art were all aspects of the Dada attack on conventional society.

The art form from this movement that has most thoroughly stood the test of time is collage—newspaper and magazine clippings forged into overloaded, nonsensical, forms.

The original Dada groups aspired to expose all that bourgeois sensibility venerated as sacred, reveal the emptiness/nowhereness of reality, and transform the useful to the useless.

Antonin Artaud's Theatre of Cruelty, beginning in the 1920s with its aim to break frames, includes audience immersion, and lighting and noise phenomena designed to jolt nerves and senses in order to produce irrational subjective states.

Theatre of Cruelty audiences can be arranged, dispersed throughout the theatre space, in the center with performers encircling, or into other positions which defy the standard audience and performer divide.

Artaud felt theatre should transfigure observers via the presentation of dangerous and dynamic realities. This style of theatre (like many underground practices) highlights direct experience and aims to minimize barriers of exclusivity.

Artaud vents his frustrations about elitism and containment/compartmentalization in his 1938 book *The Theatre and Its Double*:

“If we are prepared for war, famine, plague, slaughter...we only have to continue as we are; behaving like snobs, rushing en masse to hear such and such a performance which never transcends the realm of art...to marvel at such and such an exhibition in which exciting shapes explode here and there but at random without any genuine consciousness of the forces they could rouse.”

Butoh, which is commonly translated as “the dance of darkness,” is an unconventional type of performance art that developed in post-World War II Japan following nuclear devastation.

Butoh aims to express and sublimate distress, and to pervert the ideals of bourgeois society. Stylistically and methodologically it is anti-productive, exploratory, and purposeless, with an orientation that embraces grime and pain with a slowed, deadened, masochistic pace and movement style.

Audiences that attended performances in the first decades of this art form’s existence (the 1960s and ‘70s) were largely involved in political resistance movements in Tokyo.

Street skateboarding is a practice which aims to transform the useful to the playful and to sublimate bodily drives. During the peaks of skate sessions an enveloping excitement for one’s, and one another’s movements, rhythms, and styles predominates.

An alluring practice of finding ways into terrains for the potential fun that can be had skating around what has been fenced off and reserved for productive and consumptive purposes is a multi-decade tradition kept alive by venturesome skaters in current times. However, the transformation of skaters into consumers and competitors sanctioned to existence within corralled areas has become increasingly common in the last decades. any other examples could be touched upon as simply as these four as distinct practices that embody and express distinct sentiments of rejecting or disregarding commercialized existence.

For instance, noise shows focus upon audio play utilizing distortion, chaos, and absence; underground metal with its concerns for space, the elements, the primitive, and with blackness/shadow; kink and alternative sexual practices in the play with extremes and contradictions, and the shattering of typical roles and identities; and underground raves which are explicitly nocturnal, ecstatic, focused upon group consciousness, and atmospherically open. Many practices like these enable a temporary diminishment of polished, domesticated aspects of the mind, and allow for a more primitive bodily existence to come forward.

Though dominant, banal cultural forces commonly inter vene to repress, regulate, and/or recuperate that which allows for primal connection/expression. For instance, in the 1990s legislators in New York City resurrected obsolete cabaret laws to outlaw dancing in clubs in order to repress scenes that had largely been formed by the working/lower classes.

In this same period, the UK passed the Criminal Justice and Public Order act to stop roaming or unlicensed raves (which were frequently held at squatted, liberated, and outdoor locations); as a rave movement that largely transcended class had formed which was perceived as a threat to those atop the political and capitalist apparatuses. Decrees such as these have contributed to the repression and cultural triviality that has characterized too much of the 21st century.

Perhaps more impactful than explicitly repressive laws are the implicit counterrevolutionary forces of corporatism with its imposition of objectivity, efficiency, and quantity.

The technologized commerce and commercialized technology that undergirds educational, economic, and political systems has forged our nightmare civilization of simulation and decimation. And the denial of the dysfunction of this model is mind-boggling. After a couple centuries of this fanatical scientific computationalism we find ourselves in polluted, flooded, scorched, and fascistic circumstances.

Immense amounts of data have been gathered on the extent of carbon in the atmosphere, number of acres burned, amount of people displaced, diseased, or deceased, all the while social and environmental problems continue intensifying.

The present seems to be teetering with the pervasive delegitimization of politics/politicians, mental and environmental exhaustion, extreme economic inequality, contradictions and conflicts unable to be smoothed over by prevailing ideologies, and global capitalism kept alive via numerous life support mechanisms (e.g., monetary manipulation and austerity measures).

During past social-political collapses and interregnums, when the apparatuses of civilization were declining, atrophying, and flaking off, spaces often opened for play, intimacy, frenzy, and imaginative new ways of relating

and existing. Much sentiment in the current hot spots of unrest, including those in North Africa, the Middle East, Asia, and Europe, is not towards desiring different governance.

Many want a qualitatively different type of existence altogether than what is currently available.

Bryan Tucker likes to construct visual art, spend time in expressive subcultures, and has been involved with social equality projects in the Bay Area for over a decade.



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