The Citizen Artist: An expanded Discussion

The following article was written for the Photography Research Forum hosted by the Research Centre for Transnational Art, Identity and Nation (TrAin) at the University of the Arts London (November 5th, 2010). The paper is a discussion of what I believe to be a shift in contemporary art practice as evidenced in the work of artists discussed below and outlines the characteristics of what I envisage to be the realm of a Citizen Artist.

I will attempt to do three things: 1) briefly outline an observation of our contemporary socio-political circumstances, 2) discuss Diarmuid Costello and Dominic Willsden's idea of a 'new' tendency in art practice in the context of contemporary examples and 3) discuss how a Citizen Artist fits with and extends the ideas raised.

The term Citizen Artist comes from reflecting on the social and political role of citizen journalists, their role in society and the foundation of my own practice as a fine artist. I launched a website in 2009 and since then the term has popped up on the internet and denotes a range of activities: from the unflinchingly commercial to an umbrella term for public art.

My own use of the term is more specific to a conflation of journalism and art. For example, Citizen Journalists value their independence from the mainstream media and in the dissemination of their reports (via blog etc.) they escape the gatekeeping that exists within media organizations and in turn, challenge the power and cogency of those institutions. Not surprisingly, their independence is often called into question. They have been accused of partiality, lack of accountability, opinion dressed up as fact etc. Yet, on closer inspection, established media organizations are equally prone to misconceptions, false assumptions, opinion, even misinformation. That many people rather than one person partake in a belief does not make that belief true. Established media organizations then are best understood as a collective of partial perspectives rather than a singular 'objective' voice.

Artists too have long suffered from the accusation of subjectivity and it is true in some cases where individuals have sought to operate in a hermetically sealed self-referential world ( for example, the objectives of 'autonomous' art in the last century looked inward and thus sustained itself through non-involvement in politics).

But, the idea of a Citizen Artist does not share in the inheritance of formalist thinking, even in its incarnation as 'post-modernist' discourse. To be more specific, the politics of a Citizen Artist cuts across the post-modernists' discourse where issues of "aesthetics vs. anti-aesthetics, non-object art, autonomy, authorship, commodification, the spectator" etc. are no longer the focus of concern, particularly in the examples which I will discuss below.
Equally, in political theory thinkers such as Deleuze, who through his metaphor of a rhizome, falsely promoted a fiction of cultural variety that was in fact pinned together under the auspices of the nation state. I am aware that my reading of Deleuze pushes him into a politic that he did not actually state. Nevertheless, I believe his epistemological model entails what I have claimed above.

Why does this matter? I believe we are still haunted by the rhetoric of post-modernism. It is my belief too that we are living in a time when journalism is rapidly collapsing into art and Deluezian pluralist models, for example, just aren’t up to the task of addressing these shifts in thought. The authors Diarmuid Costello and Dominic Willsden have identified a 'new' tendency in Art (1). The 'new' tendency points up an approach to art amongst those who, "seek to document, reflect, supplement or intervene in representations of conflicts worldwide....What is primary...is the possibility of representation and counter-representation of points of political fracture."(p.12) This new tendency lies outside of modernism (post modernism's legacy) and picks up on the strands of Realist thought that atrophied after the First World War.

What is taking shape is that a growing number of artists are producing artwork that reaches past their own artistic objectives through to the political subject. This conflation of art, politics and journalism has echoes of the Realists' intention to portray 'what is' but is also akin to the fit that religious art had within (medieval) society. I have in mind here the way in which say, religious iconography, the totems etc, were 'understood' by everyone in a community. People could 'read' these items without an extra layer of explanation (without say, an artist's statement). The meaning of the artwork was embedded in religious practices and fused together society's values, perceptions, and the reality of their daily lives.

My idea of a Citizen Artist places the artwork at the centre of a public and political discourse. My concern is to point up the importance and value of identifying, researching, exploring and critiquing the social and political tensions that are present in the public sphere. The role of the citizen artist then is to offer, in part, a pictorial or visual commentary on public issues, allowing for an expansion of meaningful discourse not available from corporatised media outlets. There is a real role for the Citizen Artist to engage with or in some cases replace media strategies in framing public political perceptions.

This of course is only meaningful in the context of the profound changes that are taking place within the public space today. Our economic melt-down, the collapse of the nation state as a symbol of representative democracy and it being replaced by an 'authority'
preoccupied with policing and monitoring individuals, the negligence of (all) politicians in stripping away the state machinery and withdrawing its support for education, social welfare etc., and the impact of the digital revolution that we have all been experiencing, has meant that our lives have become highly urbanized and individuated.

Media organizations are clearly tied to these changes and are rapidly adapting themselves to the 'marketplace'. Larger corporations are increasingly embodying branding in an attempt to demarcate themselves from other 'products', attracting the lion's share of advertising revenue etc. Smaller organizations such as local community newspapers and radio stations are either diffused within the internet or they are disappearing. The consequences of these changes deeply impact on the way that we participate in the public space and that in turn calls into question the functioning of our Democracy.

Understanding the manner in which our social and political life is structured therefore is germane to this discussion. The following will outline Michael Hardt and Antonio Negri's idea of the multitude as a way of underpinning my discussion of the Citizen Artist. I aim to show how their observations give us a clearer idea of our 'post-modernist' past and the subsequent gap between that and current conditions. Understanding where we were intellectually can create a space for thinking about how art and politics are genuinely coming together in today's post-post modernist phase.

Hardt and Negri characterize society as a 'multitude'. They suggest that under the banner of an 'Empire'--i.e., a political domain-- society can no longer be understood as a cohesive whole. Instead, the social space is constructed of a "plural multitude of productive, creative subjectivities". The multitude is 'nomadic', 'deterritorialized', "in perpetual motion". In short, the multitude is a boundless mass of networks of people who "express, nourish, and develop positively their own constituent projects" (p.61). Hardt and Negri have characterized a world that is peopled by active autonomous networks. They argue that these vying networks and associations are vital to the development of democracy. Why? Because the presupposition is that democracy only thrives under a social and political discourse that embodies difference. Difference, intellectual conflict, debates etc. inherently constitute the power of the sovereign.

I believe Hardt and Negri correctly identify the shift away from the conceptualization of society as a collective mass. However, where they are wrong is in their assumption that the multitude is deliberative. The networks could equally be understood as indifferent. They are amorphous and nebulous groupings, subjective, yes certainly, but ultimately self-selecting alliances based on emotional need, shared beliefs and ambitions and/or life style. They are not analytical or objective. The networks are, for the most part, family, friends
and fans. In political instances that extends to single issue 'direct-action' groups, unions etc.

I'd like to step sideways for a moment and contrast this with the history and practice of transgression within the Fine Arts. We are all very familiar with the numerous examples in the modern era, from the 18th c to 20th c, when artistic activity was driven by a ding-dong between vying 'movements'. Artists pitched themselves against each other and/or against their society, directly criticizing beliefs and behaviour (classic modernist examples are Dada through to the Conceptualists). Groups of artists took up their respective ideological and aesthetic positions, (I include here the 'post-modernists), which in turn framed the context in which their work was meaningful. The early Avant Garde's transgressive or indeed, subversive acts, the credibility and integrity of their revolutions, were framed by their struggle against extreme and oppressive state powers.

In the case of the latter part of the 20th century, in the context of a liberal democracy, conceptual artists also operated under the tacit assumption that 'society' was a singular 'mass'. (Recall the outrage that ensued when Thatcher declared that there was no such thing as society). In opposition to this, the post-modernists posited a view of pluralism and (falsely) positioned it as outside of the concerns of the early modernists. Ironically, their critique was intrinsically tied to early modernist arguments and they too ended up positing a meta-narrative--an ideological 'canon'.

Hence, the fallout of this intellectual inheritance for us today. If to transgress (that is, if it is at all coherent to use that notion now) is to cross or exceed a boundary--a taboo--what does this mean in view of the fact that we currently do not live in a time when there are clear conceptual boundaries demarcating the structure of our social and political life? Hardt and Negri have helped us by characterizing the consequences of social pluralism. We have already lived through that moment and now are faced with a reality where there is no centre to our 'society'. There are no margins. There are no insiders or outsiders. There is no subject and object. Hardt and Negri's multitude is actually in disarray. The public landscape is increasingly a place where no one entity moves very far from its own satellite of associations and the lines of communication, the means of public discourse, have dissipated. And along with this the role of the Media as a social glue has rapidly come unstuck.

If I am right, where does this leave us? In this vacuum, I believe there is a role for Citizen Artists. The following will outline what I have in mind via a small sampling of artwork. The artwork touches on a 'new' realism that is taking shape--or rather, a realism that picks up on the concerns of the 19th century when artists sought to map the ethical implications of
the power relations between peoples, events and experiences and dare I say it, sought to draw their public into a discourse in the pursuit of 'truth'. This 'new' tendency brings us back to reality.

Before discussing examples in detail, I’d like to make a distinction between artwork that generally falls under the banner of political art and what I have in mind as the domain of a Citizen Artist. The two things are not of the same kind. That is, I am not suggesting that my term Citizen Artist is a synonym for political art.

Equally, under the heading of Citizen Artist, there are two distinct approaches to artistic practice. One is interested in commenting on the representation of the social and political. Representations of normative assumptions, the clichés and tropes etc. extend to public/political rhetoric. The art is reflective rather than reflexive. The art does not turn inward on itself but instead it does the job of interpreting political issues and offering up a perspective where the viewer is an equal participant.

The other approach to making citizen art actively challenges centres of authority. It adopts journalistic strategies used in news reporting, documentaries etc. and thus, runs parallel to conventional Media production, presentation and dissemination. The works draw us into moral dilemmas where we, as witnesses, join the artists in their interrogation of our Democracy.

The artists I have selected to illustrate these two categories of citizen 'artistry' is Chto Delat?, Oliver Ressler, Wolfgang Bellwinkel, Eva Weinmayer and as crass as it may be to discuss one's own work, I will refer to a few of my own projects as a way of fleshing out the notion in coining the term Citizen Artist. The following will first discuss examples that fit with a journalistic approach and then outline the more overt strategy of working with normative representations i.e., visual rhetoric.

**Oliver Ressler's** series of films titled 'What is Democracy' is a documentary style set of interviews where various activists and political analysts in 15 different cities are asked to respond to the title's question. The film presents us with a sequence of talking heads. However, unlike a standard documentary film the speakers talk for as long as they need to and there is no interference from Ressler himself in the persona of a interviewer.

What is interesting for us as viewers is that Ressler does not obfuscate the content by say, mashing up the speeches or the visuals, burying it under a set of extraneous artistic or aesthetic objectives. The work points away from itself -- it is indexically linked to the subject.
The result is that one enters into a dense forest of differing perspectives and understandings of Democracy. Ressler has succeeded in "(re)present[ing] a kind of global analysis about the deep political crises of the Western democratic model."

His grounding assumption is that the 'crisis' of democracy is one in which the state no longer 'represents' its citizens but instead acts on behalf of corporations and capitalist entities. This has long been the complaint of many people since the 1980's and I agree with this assessment, even if the point is a bit laboured. But, that is not the point. His set of films remind us of the importance of these changes within our contemporary liberal 'Democracy'.

There is of course another complexity to his work: as viewers we are faced with an aesthetic problem in understanding the film as an 'artwork' or seeing it as a piece of journalism. We move in and out of these two contexts. If we see it as an artwork, then we are left reflecting on what the implication might be for our Democracy. What exactly does this 'artwork' do to a political discourse? As a piece of journalism, we are drawn into the extended monologues and are left reflecting on the absurdity of the range of conflicting views. We see how idealized the notion of Democracy is and how easily reducible it is to a vague and nebulous concept. Ressler has usurped mainstream media strategies and bent them to service the interrogation of the political subject. This approach to handling the representation of political discourse is central to the idea of a Citizen Artist.

Wolfgang Bellwinkel is an artist/photographer who might, at face value, be described as a photo-journalist. His series of images titled 'The Everyday Nature of War, Bosnia 1993-1994' chronicle aspects of that war but from the perspective of an empathetic eye. Bellwinkel's photographs are subtle and touching in their portrayal of daily, commonplace events. He does not exploit the subject or the audience by pandering to the 'emotions'. That is, he does not photograph the dying child, the decimated face of a person after say, an explosion etc. They are not explicit displays of carnage nor are they aestheticized, sensational, photographic trophies (barring one photo which actually is a bit sensationalist but it doesn't dominate the series). The images therefore do not fit with the expectations of media agencies. In this sense, he is wholly outside a photo-journalistic remit and it is for this reason that I believe he is an interesting example of the scope of a citizen artist's practice.

His photographs of the war's aftermath are complex and layered. In the act of reading the image, and because the images require that we scrutinize them slowly and carefully, we are converted from viewer to witness. The images are imbued with contradictions and odd and subtle juxtapositions of ordinary life conducted in a context of violence. The aftermath is also after the photograph. We are always scrutinizing the past, as much as the photographer had when taking the photograph. We see only traces of what has been, and
in this act of looking we too experience the contradictions that a people would have had to contend with at a specific place in time. We are embroiled in their dilemma. We unwittingly become participants in this moral pradadox and are drawn into examining the ethical implications of these contradictions and of the war itself, free of the distraction of glib and gratuitous cliches. We cannot escape with impunity. We are participants regardless of whether we wish to be or not.

Bellwinkel’s photographs --his 'artworks'--carry us into the world of current affairs and it is this quality, this attitude, that helps to outline what the scope of a Citizen Artist might be.

Chto Delat?’s work is unusual in that it straddles the category that I have attempted to describe above and work that pivots on visual rhetoric. I will first discuss a film that fits with what has been said above and then follow this with a discussion of the latter.

'Bellville' is a documentary film that reports on the destruction of the homes of a group of Romany gypsies in the New Belgrade district in 2009 to make way for the erection of the International Sports Event Summer Universiade. We learn that the people were given no warning before their homes were plowed to the ground by bulldozers with families literally being dug out from their homes during the night.

The film does not 'interpret' that incident. It does not refer to it for inspiration in an effort to universalize an immoral tale. Instead, it simply records the Gypsies efforts to press the authorities for justice. It is a straightforward news report. In fact, it is more aloof than that. There is no narrator, there is no one to talk over the incident, no one to 'contextualize' it.

What is interesting is that the collective had gathered information that had otherwise been overlooked (or ignored) by the mainstream media and this places the artists, to my mind, at the forefront of valuable news gathering. We are aware that we are not witnessing a packaged, tailored news report that fits with the aesthetics of a prime-time broadcast. Nor are we looking at an aestheticized 'artwork'. The camera is genuinely hand held, images jump, the lighting is poor, it is difficult to hear what everyone is saying etc. But, the film does not obscure the issue in hand. Like all news reports the ethical issues naturally flow from the piece in the same way they would if it were made by any citizen journalist.

What is important here is that the artists are not intentionally making art. Instead, they have picked up what the mainstream media missed out. They answered to a need--in the case of the film, the need for the Gypsies to be heard, and our need as citizens, to know that injustices do not necessarily go unnoticed and are not easily swept aside. In this example, Chto Delat? are activists working directly as citizen journalists.
In stepping back we, as audience, are however faced with a similar problematic to that of Ressler's work. Because the piece is displayed in a gallery (ICA) or is released as an online film on the site of the artists collective, one realizes just how far the public sphere has dissipated. Information has truly become particularized and critical discourse is hived off into self-selecting, individuated groups. Nevertheless, the role of the artist as activist is a potent one and it too extends the idea of the Citizen Artist.

Above I mentioned a second category, that of artists working with representations. We see an example of this in another body of work by Chto Delat?. Their series of films titled 'Songspiel' are a choreographed public discourse that parodies the propaganda of the new 'Democratic' Russia. In 'Tower', the story-line is based on actual events such as the building of a Gazprom tower in St. Petersburg but, it is enacted by characters representing archetypes. A Gazprom executive, a gallerist, an artist, a priest and politician, are portrayed as totalitarian authorities who spin out a range of justifications for the erection of a public artwork for 'the people'. A politician stands up and addresses the people with classic hyperbole: "We are building a symbol of Russia. What is Russia? A very big corporation".

'The people' are a collection of equally archetypal figures in Russian society; the emigrant, the worker, the petty bourgeois who has been dispossessed of their job and status under the new democracy, silly people who chirp their enthusiasm for the capitalists' vision of the future and an older generation who feel duped because their values, having pivoted on the soviet project, are defunct in this neo-capitalist state.

The film spins us round these two groupings of figures aping the composition of a soviet propaganda poster with a hierarchy that transposes the virtuous hero-worker with an oligarch standing astride, the ready worker with oppressed people standing below. The cinematography pitches people in high relief and the use of symbols to parody genuine current events marks the film out as a direct challenge to the political establishment. But the work of Chto Delat? does not suffer from artiness. The work is intentionally mannered but this carries its discursive scope. The dialogue is focused and pointed and their work as a whole is informed and insightful. The artwork embodies a critique that sustains itself. It fingers the problem of capitalism imported into Russia and the moral vacuum that has ensued for Russians in their daily life.

Chto Delat?'s use of stereotypes and emblems are the building blocks of their artwork and in turn, their critique is central to my own interests in making imagery that partakes in the public discourse. I'll conclude with a brief reflection on one previous project and also, the citizen artist site itself.
One series of my own paintings (and in particular 3 images from that series) called 'Urban Epic' was created as a response to the political rhetoric that justified the implementation of security measures (security cameras etc.) in London's streets during the early 1990s. Following the 'Poll Tax Riot' (which I had witnessed), discussions in the media featured social and political analysts, politicians, etc., who all premised their arguments with the assumption that urban life was unbearably violent. This of course did not address the issues raised as political ones, nor did it illuminate our understanding of urban living. However, I was intrigued by the gap between these assumptions and one's daily experience which so obviously contradicted that belief. I set out to 'picture' the city as described. I wanted to portray the world that we were allegedly meant to be living in, to capture the visceral quality of violence and terror, and thereby point up the falsity of the assumptions that policy makers were operating from and the misinformation they perpetrated in their desire to push their security agenda.

The references to McDonald's in the paintings extended from my own politics at the time, my concerns about the consequences of corporate capitalism on civic and private life and their influence on Government. The images went on show in 1996 in Germany (Regensburg—an historical centre of governance in southern Germany) and coincided with the Anti-capitalist May Day riots that took place in London in that same year.

The motive for the Citizen Artist project then is to find a locus for both art and politics to co-exist in commenting on the visual (and text based) rhetoric that populates our media. It is about the artist as agent of action-- as a citizen--as an interlocutor that shapes the public space, where the artwork's discursive content is accessible and understood as a critique of contemporary socio-political life.

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Oliver Ressler: www.ressler.at

Wolfgang Bellwinkel: www.wolfgang-bellwinkel.de

Chto Delat?: http://www.chtodelat.org