PROCESS AND PRACTICE: NEW DISTRIBUTIONS OF THE SENSIBLE

See to believe: the Center for Tactical Magic’s sleight of hand

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Abstract
The Bay Area’s Center for Tactical Magic has been performing “magical” art interventions since 2000. The Center’s work augments traditional activist techniques by offering new conceptions of what art and activism can entail in a contemporary urban context. This article explores how Jacques Rancière’s reconfigured relationship between art and politics can be applied to the Center’s work, providing new distributions of the sensible for participants.

Keywords: The Center for Tactical Magic; activism; distribution of the sensible; art as dissensus; alterity; oppositional device

INTRODUCTION

The Tactical Ice Cream Unit—a large white van reminiscent of a communist era spy vehicle—drives into a public gathering (Figure 1). Out of the van emerges a small man with a handlebar moustache and mirrored sunglasses. He offers to the passerby “political” ice cream flavors from a “propaganda menu.” The ice cream flavors have vaguely political names, but they are on separate menus. Then the magic comes in, in what

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Citation: Journal of Aesthetics & Culture, Vol. 6, 2014 http://dx.doi.org/10.3402/jac.v6.23713
magician’s call a “force.” Rather than asking if someone wants info with their ice cream, he asks: “What flavor of propaganda would you like with your ice cream?” The public is given a choice of flavors, but not a choice of whether or not to make a choice—it’s assumed they want both. The public leaves with a “treat for the streets” and “food for thought.” The truck then disappears.

Magic reminds us that we don’t always see everything.

The Center for Tactical Magic (CTM) (website tag line: “Mixing Magic, Art & Social Engagement since 2000”) uses the magician’s craft to engage audiences in new and different ways. This San Francisco-based art collaborative has been performing interventions in public places since 2001, and with projects like the Tactical Ice Cream Unit, they provide the public with alternative sources of information about current events. Inside the private space of a museum or gallery, their magic renews perceptions of art, history, and political and social issues with “magic” installations. Using disguise, humor, surprise, and tactical magic they make an incisive commentary on popular media forms.

A large body of the CTM work is informed by the processes in which magicians perform and incorporate elements of magic. I discuss a few of these magic elements here, but also the more “straightforward” interventions they stage. CTM embraces all kinds of magic—secular, mystical, and popular—in developing project concepts and themes. A good example to illustrate this could be Magic(k) Wands (2008) (Figure 2) at Los Angeles County Museum of Art. The wands were displayed alongside other anthropological artifacts as well as contemporary art. According to the Center’s website:

The installation with that displayed of the most encompassing symbol of magic: the wand. Like so many useful technologies over the last few thousand years, wands have gone through changes, becoming more and more differentiated, designed, and specialized. In many cases they are so removed from their origins that one easily chooses to forget their roots. Today, UV sanitizers, security wands, cosmetics, remote controls, “personal massagers” barcode scanners, “magic markers” join the traditional tools of ritual and entertainment to conjure the magic of our daily lives. Their subversive (although permitted) placement carved out a discursive space for visitors to recalibrate their preconceptions of exotic cultural artifacts, and come away with an enhanced understanding of magic(k) in the everyday.

Wands entered into a discursive territory by simultaneously adapting to the given modes of inquiry and representation, with the hope of subverting visitors’ expectations for what is being displayed in a cultural context and the meaning and value a seemingly innocuous cultural artifact can have.

Aaron Gach, the group co-founder and Director of Operations, sees “occult practice on a broader, historic level, with a sweeping gaze, you will see that a lot of occult practice has been invested in a broader goal of social liberation”1. In another interview, he stated: “even in a down economy, there’s no shortage of advertisements trying to convince you of their products’ magical powers—whether they are promises of instant wealth . . . or the lure of beauty, prestige performance and so on.”2 Many people like to be told what to do, what to buy, and what to think. CTM capitalizes on this, and they started by giving away “alternative” ice cream.

Gach describes their magic as a tactic to engage audiences and reveals what he mimics and what he critiques in some of his work—it is the creative and conceptual impetus for evoking magic in his work.3 Gach’s identity as an artist operates strategically
and has allowed him more subversive behavior than most street activists; he is not interested in “activism per se . . . but hopes to [be] adding another element to activism by participating [artistically].” He feels there are better ways to protest than marching; although this type of protest does have its place, he feels the energy goes into organizing the march, not necessarily into the message and how it is delivered. He likes the playful element of his work, which allows for interactions with audiences in a different capacity. Humor creates a different form of delivery, a new access point, brings people in, especially when dealing with controversy or political issues that can create discomfort. CTM implicates itself in social spaces, engages their audiences, and utilizes art methods for activist means.

Maybe we are a long way off from an economic and political sea change, but perhaps something expressed more subtly can keep us informed and aware of the need for change, and even alter our understanding of what is possible, what can be said and experienced in relation to politics as well as art, which is why I will use Jacques Rancière’s reconfigured relationship between art and politics as a framework for this analysis.

Using art methods for activist means is nothing new. They’ve been around since the early part of the 20th century when the Dadaists enigmatically displayed their contempt for the machinery of war. The 1960s continued this legacy, and the subversive tactics of Abbie Hoffman and the Yippies as well as the Situationist International taught us that art methods offered political and social activism new avenues and means for engaging the public, a public increasingly susceptible to media saturation. In the 21st century, this remains the case, perhaps even more so with a visual sphere so crowded with information that valid information has become impossible to discern. And importantly, in the United States a “mainstream” media environment saturated with sensationalized stories, dismissive reporting, and governmental responses, that is, activism, protest and opposition, generally form part of a story or “democracy at work,” not a space where critical public discourse emerges.

The highly visible Occupy Wall Street movement of 2011 raised awareness of the rightly disenfranchised. The diverse camps, later coopted by fringe groups, displayed contempt and directed anger toward the 1%. They outed the corporate greed, the dysfunctional economic system, the incompetencies of the governments, but they offered no real alternative, a way out; that is, except for accountability. But this directive becomes a near impossible feat, and the well-oiled capitalist machinery sprung back into action. Back to the grind, the panaceas are working; the patches to the system keep most fears at bay, if not invisible. How then to keep the momentum going, motivate and inspire the world to act, not suffering from “occupy fatigue”?

The group builds on important historical precedents that have performed what I deem “conceptual activism.” One inspiration for their work is the Situationist International, best known for their methods of détournement; the creative disruption of everyday life (within an urban context) would facilitate new relationships and perceptions of life. Gach related one of his favorite Situationist quotes from the 1961 magazine edition, Instructions for An Insurrection: “People’s creativity and participation can only be awakened by a collective project explicitly concerned with all aspects of lived experience.” He connects his influences; seeing the potential for art making change, he suggests that creativity is not only a social force and a liberating force, but also a force for social liberation.

As activism, the creative and performative work allows the public to engage work they may not deem art, yet the conceptual approach CTM uses couches their work within the art world and provides a context to ask, “What can art do?”. Further, it is with this question that we can look deeper into their potential impact: what can art do that other forms of activism can’t? Are different subjectivities produced that reorient relationships amongst participants, with each other, and in response to social and political concerns? From this survey of the group’s work, I will argue that such tactics for intervention augment—and are perhaps more effective than—more traditional forms of activism (protests, strikes, direct action) and overtly political art forms.

The CTM work can play a critical political role in disrupting our sense of the contemporary world, our understanding of what can happen in public space, who can be highlighted in that space, and what can be said in that space. This article examines the trajectory of CTM’s work that has woven activist ideas into public spaces and museums. It looks at the group’s seminal
pieces that attempt to intervene in the “distribution of the sensible,” and in this context I argue, reflects “art as dissensus.” Joseph Tanke expands: “aesthetic dissensus means that works of art fashion and sustain new subjects; they create new objects and new forms of perception; and, finally, they offer experiences fundamentally dissimilar from the everyday order of sense.” As we will see below, the CTM makes inroads into dissensus through their use of “tactical magic.”

Magic reminds us that believing is not always seeing.

ART AND POLITICS

Shannon Jackson states, “the confusion that emerges whenever a discussion of politics and aesthetics is underway, especially over how such discussion provokes and is provoked by a categorical crisis around performance as both an aesthetic form and a social one.” Her comment reflects the ongoing debate within the contemporary art world regarding the efficacy of socially engaged art practices, often referred to as “social practices.” Any lengthy discussion of this debate is outside of the scope of this paper, however, much of the debate is predicated on binarisms of evaluation. Jackson outlines some polarizations that have informed the debates that the art world as constructed around this type of work: “1) social celebration versus social antagonism; 2) legibility versus illegibility; 3) radical functionality versus radical unfunctionality; and 4) artistic heteronomy versus artistic autonomy.” Such constructs overshadow the complexity, the uniqueness, of each art-work. The binarisms hold steady a particular ontological view, reinforcing certain subjectivities and limiting capacities.

Edward Soja calls for a critical strategy of “thirding-as-Othering,” in which he embraces a move towards “open(ing) up our spatial imaginaries to ways of thinking and acting politically that respond to all binarisms, to any attempt to confine thought and political action to only two alternatives, by interjecting an-Other set of choices.” Given that political and media portrayals of protesters are often replete with binarisms—good/bad; black/white, right/wrong, clean/dirty, etc., problematizing these spaces reveals the complexity of the art intervention and the potential experience it can elicit and the capacities it can set in motion.

Soja envisions “Thirdspace” along the lines of Henri Lefebvre’s concept of “simultaneous worlds of the real-and-imagined” as a space of “radical openness” where according to Soja, “Everything comes together . . . subjectivity and objectivity, the abstract and the concrete, the real and the imagined, the knowable and the unimaginable . . . the mind and body . . . everyday life and unending history.”

Postcolonial approaches to culture, and Rancière’s to the arts, interrogate the construction of binaries, in particular the ones used to construct criteria for the contemporary art world’s approach to socially engaged art. In its most basic articulation: undermining the ontological and epistemological categories in which we, as western subjects, have been living. As such, discomfort with knowing, living contradiction and paradox, ambiguous truths all became a new reality. For Rancière this can be “experienced” through dissensus and a challenge to this “distribution of the sensible,” and thus can be art’s “political” role. Dissensus and even aesthetics are messy, yet the art world, as much of the western world, prefers the neat cutouts of either/or instead of the messy and/both.

Rancière’s definitions of politics are different than popular understandings; the normal, everyday structures that are “policied” by institutions, what he calls the “police”; and, real politics which he sees as disrupting the distribution of the sensible, which he calls dissensus. In a contemporary art context, Rancière uses the “aesthetic regime” and “distribution of the sensible” to speak to the relationship between art and politics in terms of relations between visible/invisible, participant/observer, and consensus/dissensus. Art and the aesthetic experience are already inherently political for Rancière, which needn’t be sequestered into content driven art forms. Art is always subject to different forms of what he terms the “distribution of the sensible”—which is how we perceive and that which regulates that perception of our social roles and the subsequent affective response.

Therefore, socially engaged art needn’t render the political in form or content. Such artistic interventions present a challenge to an embedded understanding of whom can speak, under what circumstances, and about what. It is work expands the political field and reshapes our ideas of who can participate in politics, and even what kind of activity is even thinkable as political. Such work
builds on postcolonial theories about art and culture, even politics, and puts it into a contemporary framework of socially engaged art.

The work of Rancière might provide a productive reordering of how we engage in the discourse of activism as well as the popularity of socially engaged art within art world circles. Rancière pries open a space between polarities and look to productive ways of viewing these types of art practices as potentially political and emancipatory. The CTM addresses the tensions in these polarities through their work. I will first discuss CTM’s relevant projects as they apply to Rancière’s framework of analysis.

The Tactical Ice Cream Unit

One cool San Francisco evening in 2006 Aaron Gach gave me a red, white, and blue ice cream, “Da Bomb.” I was at the opening of The Lab, an alternative arts space in the Mission district in San Francisco, for Détourned Menu: Food in the Form of Activism. CTM parked their Tactical Ice Cream Unit (TICU) and serve up “political” flavors from its “propaganda menu” (Figure 3). This multipurpose truck distributes “righteous propaganda” news and information. Gach designed the truck to look like “the bastard lovechild of an ice cream truck and a S.W.A.T. van.”

The TICU, an ongoing roving art work, can and does travel from place to place, and it functions differently for each context in which it operates—an art exhibition or a political rally, etc. The ice cream disguises CTM’s dual purpose; the truck is equipped to support protest, and has within it the tools and capacity to support the activists present with a legion of surveillance cameras that can monitor police activity. Whether at a protest or an opening, Gach states, “in each case we are providing a set of services that can be measured concretely; yet, we are also presenting familiar cultural forms combined in an unfamiliar way.”

The ice cream he gave me was a linguistic play on the still popular 1955 “Bomb Pop” of red, white and blue bought from ice cream trucks and grocery stores. By combining elements of popular culture that are then recombined with satire, the result is what Gach hopes is disarming, while “the operational potential as an activist command center forces a social re-imagination of the terms of engagement in a theater of operations that includes both the visible landscape and the invisible realms of affect and empowerment.”

Another of CTM’s conceptual and activist interventions also included an unknowing public, yet this instance had a more overt political aim for the Center.

Wells Fargo Embargo and Bank Heist Contest

Well before the Occupy Wall Street movement took hold and shifted our expectations of what a populist activism would look like at the beginning of the 21st century, and long before protestors in San Francisco took their dissatisfaction with big banks to the Wells Fargo headquarters, CTM had already interrupted the bank’s daily operating procedures with their 2008 Wells Fargo Embargo, which tricked the bank’s customer’s into being participants in a protest against Wells’ financial dealings.

The “hold-up” occurred at a branch of Wells Fargo Bank in Santa Cruz, California (Figure 4). With the help of students from nearby University of California Santa Cruz, CTM formed the Wells Fargo Embargo. Participants in this performative...
intervention formed a never-ending line inside the bank. They would wait in line for a teller, and once they approached the counter, they would hand in a “withdrawal slip” (that mimicked Wells Fargo’s own withdrawal slip) that asked the bank to withdraw their investment in a private firm that operates prisons such as Guantanamo Bay. The goal was to disrupt business: a “denial of operation.” CTM legally occupied the area and kept the bank from doing business. This intervention acted as a “beta test for looking at a protest tactic that could be deployed in any town with very few people... it can be done nationally and simultaneously.” For the (art) participants it revealed “different layers of complicity, [we] moved from submissive position to a position of power by taking form of bank line, waited to gain access to our own accounts and using that against establishment itself.” Gach indicated the bank's reaction was “interesting; initially they weren’t sure what was happening, and had to figure out how to deal with it... [Our group] had to make it clear that we were not antagonistic toward the workers or customers, and we tried to emphasize that throughout.” The outcome of this intervention suggested a push towards equality. Tanke describes this type of “shock” to what a daily activity can entail and subsequent result in terms of empowerment, as reminiscent of the Situationist International’s (a heavy influence on CTM) detournement.16

Similar to the Wells project, but on a larger and national level, CTM’s Bank Heist Contest (BHC) (Figure 5) of 2012 builds on the Wells Fargo Embargo. From the Center’s website:

The Bank Heist Contest offered $1000 for the best bank robbery proposal. Period. No need to assemble a team or snag a getaway car. Applicants just needed to plan it out, draw it up, and describe it as best as possible. The winners are $1000 richer, with no risk of jail time.

The BHC functioned on a couple of levels that apply specifically to Rancière: as a conceptual work, the project began the moment someone hears that they can win $1000 for planning a bank heist. This generative moment began to work on the senses in reconstructing one’s relationship to banks and even what constitutes legality and banks. A poignant move, considering how many banks were culpable and generally unaccountable, for the Global Financial Crisis. Whether or not they actually produce or submit a proposal, applicants begin to imagine how banks are vulnerable. The project also looks at the funding structure of art and crime and asks us to examine the function

![Figure 4. The Wells Fargo Embargo.](image)

![Figure 5. The Bank Heist Contest Guidelines (excerpt).](image)
of risk vs. reward in a precarious economy. How much labor is put into a project for how much economic return, and what are the associated risks? How do we assess criminality in a society that rewards corrupt profiteering at the highest levels while extending the risks to the general public? This project offers a more literal subversion of the police order.

CTM hopes to be a source of inspiration for others to act, by helping people come up with the tool, providing tactics that can be replicated by others, and “examining manifold expressions of cultural activity, not just market driven aesthetics.”17 This comment underscores a recent, and perhaps more “shamanistic” than activist project, Witches’ Cradle (2009–2010).

**Witches’ Cradle**

This interactive installation reimagines a time when witches were hunted, captured, placed in sacks, and then swung from tree limbs; CTM appropriates this technique to induce alternative states of consciousness for participants. In this project Gach “established conditions for immersive investigations of collective subjectivities such as altered states of consciousness, extra sensory perception, and other cognitive phenomena”18 (Figure 6). With Transporter, a part of the Witches’ Cradle project, CTM utilized a 1969 Volkswagen suspended on a crane (Figure 7). Each “run” of the cradle could carry up to 13 travelers who sit inside the “cradle” with all the windows blacked out. They are then pushed and spun; the “cradle” swings while slightly suspended off the ground. Being deprived of light and moving freely creates a sense of confusion for the participants. According to Gach, this project used equal parts technology, urban amusement ride, and a subversion of use-value. The Transporter is a sort of bizarre reckoning of a late 60’s radicality with the current political environment of torture and contemporary witch hunts. The two vehicles—hippie bus and construction crane—serve as ideological opposites connected by a single strand. The utilitarian, powerful, and imposing crane is used to construct an ordered world that constantly rebuilds itself in an effort to maintain hegemony. At the other end, the idealized “magic bus” of ’69 represents a free-wheeling, sub-cultural drive towards a more autonomous, optimistic and empowered society. The buses are representative of movement across the borders of nation-states, and CTM wants the current passengers of Transporter to “continue the journey and deliver its passengers to magical destinations within the current socio-political landscape.”19 The project taps into the nostalgia of a time period (activism, hippies, and the 1960s in general) that has been sold back to us, devoid of context, politics, and passion.

The logic of this work as aesthetic and disruptive defies bodily comfort and disorients participants’
popular understanding of history (1960s and Witch Hunts). Rancière looks to art in relation to politics because he recognizes that politics is ultimately a platform for determining social realities, and this is essentially manifested as and by aesthetic practices. That notion of reality shaping is also integral in the CTM, but it is frequently examined through the precursor of magic, which attempts to tap into that desire to produce a dominant reality but in a non-hierarchical, egalitarian manner. Projects such as the *Witches’ Cradles* are directly informed by this question: Is it possible to facilitate visionary experiences for participants in a manner which challenges dominant reality forms? This challenges comes from this discomfort, and for artist and critic Lars Bang Larsen, “when artists promote radical alterity, the potential of the unknown is acknowledged as productive force.”

Tanke describes this aesthetic as something that “cancels the logic binding bodies to specific places and times, and it is through these operations that new capacities can be discovered and invented.” In *Witches’ Cradle* this process works physically and figuratively.

One of Gach’s latest projects may not be giving out ice cream, but it is no less potent in political flavor. The *Stop & Frisk t-shirt project: Love is A Souvenir* also sought to blur the distinction between art and activism in a way where symbolic values can potentially effect policy decisions by leveraging social forces like tourism and public relations against the dominant political spin. Offering t-shirts on the streets of NYC as a protest against New York Police Department’s “stop and frisk” policy may not be magic in a strict sense, yet it highlights that what we see is perhaps what we should believe. Such is the sentiment with the group’s most recent project, which took place on San Francisco’s Angel Island in the summer of 2013.

### The Field Trip: the Politics of Abstraction and the Abstraction of Politics

From the group’s website:

Hiding in plain sight, the San Francisco Bay’s Angel Island has served as a Civil War outpost, US Immigration Station, a Prisoner of War Processing Center, a Nike missile site, and currently, a California State Park. How do these rich historical narratives connect to current social debates? Come experience the island like never before during this one-day, roving symposium speculating on contemporary politics, artistic abstraction, data visualization, and the military’s Cold War-era psychic spying program known as remote viewing.

The Field Trip considered the “distribution of the sensible” by asking, “What do we see, how do we see it, and what connections can we make to other fields?”. The tagline for the project “abstraction of politics and the politics of abstraction” refers to the ways in which contemporary political struggles—both at the state level and in popular forms—has become increasingly abstracted through tactics and media representation (Figure 8). Two examples underscore this sentiment: when Greenpeace activists board an oil derrick there is nothing abstract about that political gesture even though it’s meant to function in a somewhat symbolic manner. When the news reports on Edward Snowden’s former girlfriend or his high school report card, it is totally abstracted from the immediate context of the content of his leaked documents.

There are many similar examples, yet for the Field Trip, the Center chose to focus on just a few: The radical agendas of artists who were creating 20th century abstract art: How was abstraction thought of as a radical model for causing not just representing social change? The military’s declassified psychic spying program, aka “remote viewing”: How does the facilitated visionary experience lead to the acquisition of hidden information that can inform decision-making? How do the materialist agendas of scientists clash with those of generals in a framework for exploring experimental data gathering? How do we assess the “impossible”

![Figure 8. The Field Trip (press info).](image-url)
in a useable manner? How do we use technology to confront abstract policies that bear grave material effects in out-of-sight areas of the world (i.e. using data visualization methods to depict drone strikes)? What happens when the crisis of representation becomes not only about representation of social reality, but also about political representation, that is, how does democracy get compromised through domestic spying?

By situating these conversations in a landscape that had already witnessed the effects of previous wartime policy, the idea was to affect the senses in a way that an article or a lecture hall could not. Rather than just providing a historical tour about past issues, this was a way of contextualizing current issues in relation to varied pasts. The aims were less directly tactical in terms of facilitating a political outcome. Still, the intention was to present a platform for reaching beyond the obvious parameters for having engaged discussions of contemporary politics and aesthetics.

**MAGIC, ART, AND POLITICS**

CTM attempts to engender a radical alterity in its audiences; that is, to create experiences for audiences/public/participants that are drastically different from something familiar to them, inspiring a sense of awkwardness, unfamiliarity, or discomfort. When speaking of the performative and the equality that is engendered through resisting the active/passive binarism, and which can be applied to the multiple works I have discussed, Rancière states:

> What has to he put to the test by our performances—whether teaching or acting, speaking, writing, making art, etc.—is not the capacity of aggregation of a collective but the capacity of the anonymous, the capacity that makes anybody equal to everybody. This capacity works through unpredictable and irreducible distances. It works through an unpredictable and irreducible play of associations and dissociations.22

This “magical” art is caught in a persistent tension between being “art” or mixing with other activities or other ways of being. Rancière suggests, “The aesthetic regime asserts the absolute singularity of art and, at the same time, destroys any pragmatic criterion for isolating this singularity. It simultaneously established the autonomy of art and the identity of its forms with the forms that life used to shape itself.”23 Instead, Rancière's “politics of aesthetics,” the dichotomy of “becoming art or life,” and the “resistant form” (of art) always exist together. Rancière also sees much of relational aesthetics as an extension of modernist art practices that sought to become life and thereby provide a new form or model of life.24 Rancière would prefer that art offer possibilities for life, not a model for life, and we see many of these possibilities performed in the Center's work. The “politics of becoming life or art” then sees aesthetic experiences that resemble other forms of experience, and therefore can dissolve into other forms of life. In a contemporary context where there is often a shrinking space of public discourse or “visible” political action, such art practices reflect the political inherent in the aesthetic regime. The aesthetic regime sees art and politics to be rebuilt at the intersection between a work of art and its interpretation, and it is this reordering of the senses (or sensory experience) that for Rancière can engender social change, or be marked as “political.”

The Center creates situations in which the audiences become involved in the work. In “The Emancipated Spectator” in the context of Brecht, Artaud, and Boal's theater, Rancière describes how, in his view, the spectator is never passive, and as such the audiences who encounter CTM’s “performances” wittingly or unwittingly participate.25 He argues that the acknowledgement and subsequent value placed on contemplation erase the division between the active and passive—strategies of art’s autonomy and its social use—viewer, which becomes part of his “distribution of the sensible.” With this perspective, participation can be privileged or passive viewing, and can just as quickly be the opposite.

For Rancière, the idea of emancipation “implies that there are always several spaces in a space, several ways of occupying it, and each time the trick is knowing what sort of capacities one is setting in motion, what sort of world one is constructing.”26 This perspective questions the common belief that there are some who have the “ability” to understand and some who do not. For spectators, audiences, and the public, this allows a gaze or an encounter other than what is programmed or expected. He relates this emancipation with dissensus, which in the context of art,
means to constantly reexamine “the boundaries between what is supposed to be normal and what is supposed to be subversive, between what is supposed to be active, and therefore political, and what is supposed to be passive or distant, and therefore apolitical.”

In “The Art of the Possible,” Rancière (in conversation with Fulvia Carnevale and John Kelsey) outlines more clearly how he reimagines the relationship between art and politics. He does this by formulating an approach that reestablishes “an element of indeterminacy in the relationship between artistic production and political subjectivation.” This shift in the formulation between art and politics, for Rancière, opens the space for art to intervene and thereby be political, if it modifies what is visible and how this can be expressed and perceived, as well as its subsequent experience as tolerable or intolerable. These ideas build on his idea that “Suitable political art would ensure, at one and the same time, the production of a double effect: the readability of a political signification and a sensible or perceptual shock caused, conversely, by the uncanny, by that which resists signification.” In the context of the CTM, this belief suggests that the practices’ revolutionary potential comes from their ability to present what is possible, what capacities are set in motion, not what is actual. A complete reordering not only of categories but also of the senses—arts autonomy does not dissolve, but remains in tension with its desire to become life. This is its political—and perhaps magical—role.

CONCLUSION

It may be difficult to measure the “success” of CTM’s projects, or the social or political outcomes, if any, that they offer—it may be better to think in terms of the questions they raise regarding the ability to challenge the “distribution of the sensible,” which includes predetermined art world objectives and the efficacy of certain forms of activism. For Rancière, this type of “critical art” holds the potential and “plugs the gap by defining a straight relation between its aims and its means: its ends would be to provoke an awareness of political situations leading to political mobilization.” Yet Gach believes “we have no real way of measuring if this happens [new mental categories to account for what people have seen], or if so, when the cognitive process results in some sort of social action.”

Importantly, we can continue to ask: How does Rancière’s relationship of art and politics translate out of an academic context into the lived experience of the people who participate or are “targeted” as recipients? Are these notions interpretive strategies or does a chasm remain between a discursive and lived space? One provisional answer is to see CTM’s work within the context where Rancière states:

Artists, like researchers, build the stage where the manifestation and the effect of their competences become dubious as they frame the story of a new adventure in a new idiom. The effect of the idiom cannot be anticipated. It calls for spectators who are active interpreters, who render their own translation, who appropriate the story for themselves, and who ultimately make their own story out of it. An emancipated community is in fact a community of storytellers and translators.

Part of the notion of the “distribution of the sensible” articulates the fundamental idea that any aesthetic regime renders some topics visible while occluding others, and the group’s secular magic (illusions & tricks) and spiritual magic (ritual and so on) is very much set on shining the light into the dark places and seeing what lurks in the shadows. At the same time, it is a shadow show itself that is trying to shed some light on our socio-political realities. CTM’s “oppositional device” then opposes reason, an embodied state of the “unknown” that speaks to other ways of knowing and experiencing the world, which reflects Rancière’s proposal of an aesthetic experience and open up a space for a new distributions of the sensible.

CTM’s work also presents an interesting dilemma: How do artists engender change, promote social action, and themselves survive in a market-driven economy, notwithstanding the art world’s collusion with the latter? In his own words, “nothing short of the complete and irrevocable unleashing of the creative and prophetic potential of the multitude.” CTM creates insertions in public life in a manner that doesn’t rely on an audience’s knowledge of art, or activism for that matter. Gach states, the illusion is crafted to create a magical sense of potential where other possibilities might emerge. Yet, mentioning the
“multitude” necessitates a different type of action, or even a stronger magic—an impulse to radically rethink and change the visible and invisible in our political landscape, and thus pushing towards one of Rancière’s goals: equality. CTM and Rancière also overlap in thinking about the positional aspects of any aesthetic effort—not just a work that represents a politics but also one that takes an active position in relation to determining a political outcome.

Gach states:

The CTM incorporates concepts of magic to create tactics that can be used by others and adapted to achieve their own strategic goals. What’s interesting about magic in all forms is that there is a sense of defying norms and creating exceptions through hidden knowledge and power. Like art, the worst kinds of magic fall flat on their promises and end up feeling delusional or boring. But, like art, the best kinds of magic can shift reality for the practitioner AND the community for which they are performing.

Taken together, these art projects and the philosophical perspective I have applied to analyze them complicate clear definitions of what art and activism can be in contemporary culture. A shift away for preconceived ideas of both enriches the discourse, and with any luck, transports us into new ways of being and acting in the world.

Notes
1. Alison Beth Levy, “Tactical Magic: A Talk with Aaron Gach,” Reality Sandwich, (2009): para 8. http://www.realitiesandwich.com/tactical_magic_talk_aaron_gach (accessed December 11, 2013).
2. Leah Modigliani, “Behind the Curtain: Leah Modigliani Interviews the Center for Tactical Magic,” C Magazine 106 (2010): 4–9.
3. Unless otherwise noted, all quotes from Aaron Gach are from personal correspondence with the author (2007–2013).
4. Jacques Rancière, The Politics of Aesthetics: The Distribution of the Sensible (London: Continuum, 2006).
5. The Situationist International, Bureau of Public Secrets. “Instructions for an Insurrection.” (“Instructions pour une prise d’armes” originally appeared in Internationale Situationniste #6 (Paris, August 1961). This translation by Ken Knabb is from the Situationist International Anthology (Revised and Expanded Edition, 2006). http://www.bopsecrets.org/SI/6.insurrection.htm para 5.

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6. Joseph Tanke, Jacques Rancière: An Introduction (London: Bloomsbury, 2011), 103.
7. Shannon Jackson, “What is the ‘Social’ in Social Practice? Comparing Experiments in Performance.” In The Cambridge Companion to Performance Studies. ed. Tracy C. Davis (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2008), 137.
8. Jackson, “What is the ‘Social’ in Social Practice?” 139.
9. Edward Soja, Thirdspace: Journeys to Los Angeles and Other Real-and-Imagined Places, (Cambridge, MA: Blackwell, 1996), 5.
10. Ibid., 54.
11. Ibid., 56–7.
12. Jacques Rancière, Aesthetics and Its Discontents. (Maiden: Polity Press, 2004); The Politics of Aesthetics: The Distribution of the Sensible; “Art of the Possible,” Artforum 45 (2007), 256–68. “The Emancipated Spectator,” Artforum 45 (2007), 271–80; and “Aesthetic Separation, Aesthetic Community: Scenes from the Aesthetic Regime of Art,” Art & Research 2 (2008), 1–10.
13. Modigliani, Behind the Curtain, 8.
14. Ibid., 8.
15. Aaron Gach and Lab. Mimesis, (2007): para 21. http://www.tacticalmagic.org/CTM/thoughts/Mimesis%20interview.html (accessed December 20, 2013).
16. Tanke, Jacques Rancière: An Introduction, 90.
17. Modigliani, Behind the Curtain, 6.
18. Ibid., 7.
19. Ibid., 9.
20. Lars Bang Larsen, “The Other Side,” Frieze (2007): para 10. http://www.frieze.com/issue/article/the_other_side/ (accessed December 12, 2013).
21. Tanke, Jacques Rancière: An Introduction, 84.
22. Rancière, “The Emancipated Spectator”, 6.
23. Rancière, Aesthetics and Its Discontents, 23.
24. Rancière, Aesthetics and Its Discontents, 53; “Aesthetic Separation, Aesthetic Community”.
25. Rancière, “The Emancipated Spectator.”
26. Rancière, “Art of the Possible,” 262.
27. Ibid., 267.
28. Ibid., 256.
29. Rancière, The Politics of Aesthetics: The Distribution of the Sensible, 63.
30. Rancière, “Aesthetic Separation, Aesthetic Community” 11.
31. Modigliani, Behind the Curtain, 8.
32. Rancière, “The Emancipated Spectator,” 10.
33. Brian Holmes, “The Oppositional Device or, Taking Matters into Whose Hands?” In Taking the Matter into Common Hands: Contemporary Art and Collaborative Practices. eds. Johanna Billing, Maria Lind, and Lars Nilsson (London: Black Dog, 2007), 35–41.
34. Aaron Gach and Lab. Mimesis, (2007): para 25. http://www.tacticalmagic.org/CTM/thoughts/Mimesis%20interview.html (accessed December 20, 2013).

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