

Polemic

On refusing to pretend to do politics in a museum

John Jordan on what happened when Tate programmed a workshop on disobedience

What is it about the word 'disobedience' that the institutional art world doesn't understand? Last autumn the Nikolaj Contemporary Art Centre in Copenhagen dropped the Laboratory of Insurrectionary Imagination's (Lab of ii) *Bike Bloc* project when it realised that the 'tools of civil disobedience' that we were going to build were not gestures but actual tools and tactics for the protest actions around the UN's COP15 Climate Change Conference. The curator told us that she feared that the museum's funders, the City of Copenhagen, would not support any 'illegal' activity. It seemed that she had assumed we would pretend to do politics - see 'Art & Activism' AM333.

Fast forward several weeks to another international contemporary art museum, London's Tate Modern. The Lab of ii had been invited by Tate to run a two-day workshop on art activism, looking at the issues of the museum's environmental impact and exploring, in Tate's words, the question: 'What is the most appropriate way to approach political issues within a publicly funded institution?' After several months of planning, we received an email from the curators that casually ended with the paragraph: 'Ultimately, it is also important to be aware that we cannot host any activism directed against Tate and its sponsors, however we very much welcome and encourage a debate and reflection on the relationship between art and activism.'

There were two things that we could have done in response. We could have refused to run the event under such draconian criteria and pulled out, or we could do something much more interesting by keeping shtum and making the email the primary material for the workshop. At the end of the final planning meeting, at which it was confirmed that the workshop would conclude with a public intervention, one of the curators excitedly announced that it was 'incredible that it took Tate until 2010 to work with a 'real' activist'.

Entitled 'Disobedience Makes History: Exploring creative resistance at the boundaries between art and life', the workshop was promoted on Tate's website and soon sold out. On a chilly January Saturday morning, I and 33 participants, together with the curator, sat in a circle on the top floor of the museum and began the first day-long event. All was going well as we played games to build conviviality, discussed our personal acts of disobedience against injustice, studied consensus decision-making techniques and explored the work of artists who had applied their creativity to acts of civil disobedience, ranging from Gustave Courbet to Sylvia Pankhurst. When I began to talk about the climate crisis and the context of Tate, mentioning the fact that BP was a major sponsor whose former CEO, John Browne, was head of the board of trustees, things started to change. Then, when I projected the email on the wall and asked the students to stand along a spectrum line to begin to open up discussion as to whether we should or shouldn't obey the demand from Tate, the curator tried to sabotage the process of discussion, claiming it was 'limiting' the participants' experience. The participants, meanwhile, were thrown into heated debate, and after several hours two-thirds of the group decided to plan an intervention at Tate the following week, targeting the sponsors and highlighting issues of censorship.

The following Friday, I was summoned to Tate to discuss the planned intervention. I was met by four people, including head of visitor services and the head of safety and security. They asked me what was going to happen and I told them that I knew as much as they did: that, following the Lab of ii's methodology, the workshop was now entirely self-managed by the participants and that the intervention would be designed by them during the final workshop. The head of security explained

that there were three principles paramount to Tate: the safety of people, the protection of artworks and, finally, to ensure the quiet enjoyment of the public. I reassured him that no action we would take would ever hurt anybody or anything and that, in fact, all our work is precisely about minimising the damage our system does to people and to eco systems.

The discussion then turned to the issue of 'reputational risk', about the fact that an action could affect a funding deal, that Tate prided itself on free access to art and that if its funding was hit it would not be a positive thing for anyone. I asked whether they were in effect attempting to censor the workshop; 'censorship?', I was told, is 'an emotive word?'. The tense and frank meeting lasted almost two hours, during which time we talked about BP's use of the museum to give it social legitimacy and about the fact that the sponsors should not be 'embarrassed?'. I was told that, though Tate did not have a problem with the 'intellectual content?', three Tate staff would be present at the next workshop and would halt any activity that was not 'commensurate with Tate's mission?'.

The next morning the participants arrived even more enraged than before; the more Tate tried to shut things down, the more the students were learning about how corporations drape themselves in a cloak of cultural legitimacy while those who work in our (so-called) public institutions play along. They experienced at first hand the hypocrisy of cultural institutions that claim to be sites of progressive practices. Eight hours later, the workshop ended with the words ART NOT OIL placed in the windows of the top floor. And, thanks to Tate's attempts at censorship, the participants are now continuing to work together and are designing a much more ambitious act of creative disobedience as well as planning a long-term campaign to get oil money out of Tate by 2012. A pedagogic success beyond anything we could ever have imagined.

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