

In the Middle of a Whirlwind



Some theses on militant sound investigation, or, listening for a change.

Ultra-red

The members of Ultra-red submit the following text as a preliminary statement toward a praxis of what we have termed, militant sound investigation. In a desire to put into circulation a collection of ideas, the text asks that we think rigorously about organizing rather than rushing headlong into activism with its predetermined end-points and self-righteous festivals. In asserting the priority of organizing, Ultra-red herein - as so often over the years - invokes the procedures of thematic investigation developed by Paulo Freire. Additionally, we wish also to acknowledge the more recent interventions into a praxis of research militancy by collectives such as Precarias de la Deriva and Colectivo Situaciones. Contributing to a dialog already advanced by these agents past and present, Ultra-red offer these theses for militant sound investigation for testing in the crucible of practice and reflection; the pillars of our constitutive utopias.

Prelude

It was dusk. Do you remember? It was dusk and the evening wind pulled at our banners. Our demand: —. What did you hear? For two hours the amplified speeches of movement leaders, representatives and those supposed to know better than we echoed through the towers downtown. When they gave the signal, we and five thousand others moved through the avenues, our scripted utterances echoing earlier statements. Our destination was another amplification system, another program of speeches, further echoes of the echoes. What did we hear?

1

We begin without demand. We are without object. It is our task to organize the silence in which we begin. A felt need - shared and articulated as a collective demand - may be a catalyst for a militant sound investigation. A felt need is only one contour in an unbounded field of desire. To order the desires that guide us to our demand we do not demand to begin. Silence is the condition for listening. That is, *listening is a site for the*

organization of politics. In listening, we order desires in relation to need and so *transition to demand.*

2

Our impulse to take the microphone out of the box and switch it to RECORD must be considered critically. If we wait to RECORD until the demand is articulated, we will be too late. If we use the microphone only to RECORD the demand, we have not listened. The microphone is an instrument for listening to the undifferentiated field of need-demand-desire. Its capacity to privilege the demand must be constrained so that it may call us to the silence that is the condition for listening. That is, the demand exceeds our need. When we take the microphone out of the box and switch it to RECORD, we produce a remainder. We hear beyond need. This remainder is the medium of inter-subjectivity. It is a manifestation of trust to be without demand for a time. Trust in/is the process.

3

The microphone does not have a perspective on the site of struggle. It does not stand apart from the struggle. Rather, it is a site for the production of the conditions of struggle. Inquiry is conditioned by the collective organizing of demands. In a militant sound investigation, we take time to organize the social field to be recorded. Social field + organizing = soundscape. The organization of the social field demands that we listen in desire and that we listen beyond the echoes of our need.

4

A militant sound investigation must collaborate across localities, identities, and disciplinary borders to formulate a science of struggle. Such a science, implicit and finely tuned to affective logic, is an analysis of the conditions of desire as they inform (and exceed) the enunciation of demands. If the word "science" is overdetermined, then let us call for an "acoustics of change."

Interlude

We call a meeting. It convenes in silence. What do you hear? When were you last here? What is the relationship between this place and streets beyond? So we collect in the course of listening. Listening is our agenda and method. The apparatuses vary. Some days it is a microphone. At other time it is a flip-chart, paper and markers. It is always our bodies together, located in silence. Each encounter is a request for trust. Each encounter is an act of trust. What is important is that we have a RECORD: paper, disk, experience. We and our collaborators enter a state of crisis at the loosening of coordinates provided by pre-inscribed demands. The terms of analysis determine the terms of intervention and the terms of our sponsors, patrons, boards, ideologues, are exhausted. Existing interventions are

increasingly ineffective. We build anew from what we hear in our investigations: needs, desires, demands. The question is not: What do we lack? The question is: What do we have?

The period of our work together is undefined. If we take to the street it is not a closure but another site for investigation and an opportunity to listen anew. Each new site is an undifferentiated field of silence to be investigated, around which to gather and to engage needs, desires, demands. When we have a RECORD we compose with it. This is not a repetition of analytic terms. Rather, it is a re-listening inflected by our growing understanding of the conditions that define the sites and moments of our meetings. They are compositions because they apply a set of collectively defined procedures, the results of which are carefully examined and the procedures reworked. These compositions are the questions and themes for the next phase of our investigations. We RECORD again. We review this RECORD. We compose, RECORD, review. Each composition is a protocol for investigations to be conducted in organizations, homes, institutions, parks, plazas, streets. Then the apparatus is no longer in our hands. We make a future where we are unnecessary.

5

An acoustics of change begins with an encounter. The apparatus of the microphone, in that it amplifies the desire to be heard, need not be the only means for staging this encounter. Metal and filament have no perfection on flip-chart paper and markers. Through either or both, the encounter convenes in the course of listening. Listening organizes itself before the microphone.

6

It must be recorded that the militant sound investigation brings collaborating organizations and localities into crisis, especially so if the investigation calls into question the fundamental conceits of the organization. For instance, such investigations reject victimhood as a status for political subjectivity. The claim of victimhood, however, may be necessary for political and granting purposes. Similarly, militant investigations will inevitably map the interrelation of struggles (e.g., migration, HIV/AIDS, housing, racism, health access, etc.). This may contradict the collaborating organization's insistence on a single-issue analysis that sees one issue in isolation from others.

7

Bringing the collaborating organization into crisis is inevitable if the investigation is not preceded by years of sustained engagement and the constitution of a community in struggle. The absence of that duration is the condition for suspicion. Trust makes it

possible to engage productively in crisis rather than seeing it as one more threat to survival among many. The investigation may become the object of extreme anxieties, which mark fundamental contradictions within the collaborating organization. The intervention conducted by the investigation targets the contradictions of the organization itself. Certainly, this intervention has its pedagogical uses - and its profound dangers.

8

This science of struggle is often called pedagogy, or, the dialogical formation of demands. Pedagogy requires silences of some duration. The initial subject of an inquiry - the research militant - dissolves in pedagogical time. The research militant is neither the hero nor the punctuation of collective action. The research militant increasingly comes into her or his irrelevance. The research militant is a technician of silence. This is a rejection of the value form of participation in which thousands serve simply as echo to the voice of the ideological patron.

9

We know ideological patrons by what they conceal in their pockets: a crisis of their own. At the moment when the performance of listening obviates the investigation team, and those organizers with ears molded by the locality assume the facilitation of further composition from contradictions, further listening from compositions, and further contradictions from listening, at that moment the team confronts the possibility of fixing itself into a vanguard of ideological patrons. Or the team follows through on its promise of being technicians of silence. Betrayal makes up the substance of silence, either way. The terms of analysis will condition the terms of intervention.

10

If the microphone is only used to make oneself heard, then one has mistaken the microphone for a mallet. The demand scripted by an ideological patron, movement leaders, representatives and the ones supposed to know better than we, organizes a politics of one. That one only uses the microphone to make himself heard. Thus: the echo of amplification occupies a site that would otherwise be used for organizing by a collective; and, the organization of participation by the amplification occupies a site that would otherwise be used to organize toward collective demands. If we operate according to an acoustics of change, the one who holds the microphone listens in the space of silence. Silence is the desire of the other. It organizes a politics of many. If the microphone is only used to amplify oneself, then one may as well have grabbed a hammer.

Epilogue

It will be dusk soon. The demand presented in bodies pressing against the city will materialize as the result of a process simultaneously intended to

constitute those bodies and the demand itself. And yet this will not be the moment in which we will be existing. In this place and time soon to come, thousands will come together based on some individual need to refuse their alienation in the wake of repressive and ideological state machinery in a conjuncture of over-development. The catharsis pretending to be politics, in the end, will grant no remedy for that alienation, only a placebo in participation's value form.

The militant sound investigation team will enter into this situation under cover of the public address system. The team will move through the crowd calling those around them to gather together. Questions will be asked: questions developed within the space and processes of their own engagements with communities in struggle. Here one can imagine Marx's worker inquiry where the one-hundred questions arise out of a series of encounters. Instead of a questionnaire, the team will have adopted the form of a score. The questions in the score will resemble a composition founded on problematics enunciated in the course of investigations undertaken in another space and an earlier time. The impromptu gathering huddles in the plaza under the belly of the modernist public sculpture. With microphones in hand, the team members will diligently record the group's every reaction to the questions. Even those reactions that analyze the questions as either prelude to or refusal of an answer will become incredibly significant. While the grand sound-system amplifies one speech after another, these groups will work through the score, teasing out the themes it contains therein.

*Later, when the mobilization spins out its solipsistic course, the team will compare their recordings of the discussions. An analysis will be written, proposals drafted based on the thematics to arise out of the group discussions. And those thematics will take on new compositions - sound works, street theatre, graphic designs on posters, handbills, or counter-chants - that will be reintroduced into that space during the next value form rally and mass gathering. These compositions will compel two things; 1) they will not be read without being acted upon, this being the definition of listening, and 2) in reading and acting upon the compositions, the listeners in the street will organize themselves into a new form of cooperation. Out of this encounter, alternative or contrary actions will be planned in distinction from the value form that diminishes participation to an echo. While we cannot know now the precise demand these acts will come to perform, we do know that the organization of the demand will enact a sonorous refusal of participation in its value form.**

* The discourse of community development refers to the cooptation of grass-roots participation as symbolic participation: the contribution of base communities in symbolism only. The current "tyranny" of participation requires a more rigorous science (or acoustics). Here we would do well to distinguish between the kinds of knowledge produced by the rituals of participation and their opposite. Lacanian psychoanalysis assists us in offering the terms symbolic and imaginary forms of knowledge. Let us be clear, by symbolic

we do not mean the same as the kind of value attributed to participation as it is currently practiced in much of development. In that world, liberal acquiescence to anti-colonial struggles (struggles that cost many lives and brought many suppressive regimes into crisis) has resulted in rituals of solicitation where the hopes and fears of "target populations" are brought into compliance with systems of management and control. The purpose of such performances of participation is not the emancipation of those hopes and fears but their extraction in value form only.

We understand the symbolic to be an inter-subjective web of signs by which subjects make meaning and act in the world. The key term here is inter-subjective: where those who make meaning and act accordingly do so as incomplete entities not entirely known to themselves or to each other. Thus the symbolic accounts for conscious and unconscious registers of experience and the meanings made of experience. For this reason the demand is always inclusive of both its conscious articulations and that indivisible remainder known as desire. When we think of participation, an acoustics of participation, we can think of that which produces a kind of symbolic knowledge of desire. This is not to say that no knowledge results from those rituals of participation by which subjects subscribe to the will of the state, the non-profit development corporation, the non-governmental organization, or the institution charged with administering crisis. In its value form, participation produces a very specific kind of knowledge. That knowledge aligns the subject with the terms of the master. In other words, in contrast to a symbolic participation that interrogates the very claims of signification ("Am I who you say I am?"), the value form of participation produces all manner of imaginary identifications that serve to impede the ability to produce knowledge of desires ("I am the product of the *master's* desire for knowledge").

When we talk about the value form of participation, we're talking about the university discourse; where the truth unsaid is the master signifier masquerading behind the agency of knowledge (the master's desire to know). Rather, with inter-subjective participation, the hidden truth is the object cause of desire - which, in the invocatory, is the object voice; the object cause of the desire to listen. Knowledge, then, is the product - knowledge of the truth of one's unconscious desire. As a result, the split subject acts upon the master signifier, questioning it, interrogating it, testing its limits. And what it produces by acting upon the signifier (where action occurs through and along with reflection), it produces knowledge of the symbolic.

We would do well to remember that, according to Lacan's four discourses, if the discourse of the analyst is the inverse of the master's discourse, then the hysteric is the inverse (the undoing, the bringing into crisis) of the university. In the latter, the master signifier (the truth owned by the master) lurks behind knowledge that acts upon the desires of the other, resulting in a subject stamped with the imprint of that master signifier. If this analysis invokes the image of a factory, one can think of the neoliberal term "knowledge factory" as descriptive of both the process of interpellating subjects but also a particular mode of over-production as the basis of value. But this analysis should not be reduced to the specific institution of the university alone. The university discourse as analyzed by Lacan captures the operation of interpellation by any, in Althusser's term, Ideological State Apparatus - whether that apparatus assumes the institutional framework of the university, the church, the trade union, the family, the law, or any civil society institution managing the other on behalf of the state. The question is, do those hailed by these institutions resolve their hysterical demands by establishing a new apparatus by which to be managed, or do they realize their utopian capacity and make the transition from desire as the hidden truth of agency to desire as agent? If our organization of participation has any effect beyond mere value, it will contribute to precisely this transition.