

## Art, Activism and the Tate

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### Abstract:

The display of Allan Sekula's *Waiting for Tear Gas (white Globe to Black)* at Tate Modern from July 2013 to May 2014 coincided partly with *Liberate Tate*'s creative civil disobedience against Tate's engagement with their sponsor British Petroleum. The paper examines these two parallel episodes of Tate's recent institutional history, focusing on the tension emerging from the Tate's display of an artwork, which stems directly from a grassroots activist movement, and the institutional reluctance to engage with an artist-activist collective that targets the museum itself, or its sponsors. The paper argues that Sekula's artwork and *Liberate Tate*'s collaborative artistic interventions and participatory performances are part of a horizontal and rhizomatic network of anti-capitalist struggles against the privatization of every aspect of life, the destruction of the environment and the degradation of human relations and attest to their unfinished nature.

**Keywords:** Allan Sekula, the Tate, *Liberate Tate*, activism, civil disobedience, protest photography

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The display of Allan Sekula's *Waiting for Tear Gas (white Globe to Black)* at Tate Modern from the 26<sup>th</sup> of July 2013 to the 11<sup>th</sup> of May 2014 as part of its 'Transformed Vision' display coincided chronologically with some collaborative artistic interventions by *Liberate Tate* against Tate's reliance on British Petroleum's (BP thereafter) sponsorship. *Liberate Tate*, as the collective of activists and artists who came together in 2010 became known, organized

collaborative artistic interventions, participatory performances and creative civil disobedience to confront directly Tate's claims for supporting practices of sustainability, which contradicted their sponsor's destructive actions in the environment. The direct confrontation and performative elements of *Liberate Tate's* civil disobedience and their questioning of the privatization of the public sphere and environmental destruction as a result of the implementation of neoliberal policies bore striking similarities with the tactics and claims of the Seattle activists, documented in Sekula's project. This paper focuses on these two parallel episodes of Tate's recent institutional history attending to the tension that emerges from the Tate's display of an artwork, which stems directly from a grassroots activist movement, and the institutional reluctance to engage with an artist-activist collective that targets the museum itself, or its sponsors.

### **PART I: Allan Sekula's '*Waiting for Tear Gas*' at Tate Modern**

On 30 November 1999, an internationally-led protest gathered in opposition to the World Trade Organisation (WTO) at the Washington State Convention and Trade Centre in Seattle. The protest widely known as N30 or the Battle of Seattle brought together an unprecedented number of organisations, trade unions and activists in a common fight against hyper-deregulated markets, precarious employment contracts, privatization of public goods and environmental destruction. Allan Sekula immersed himself in the experience of the demonstration, positioning his body alongside with the other bodies in revolt, moving with the flow of the protesting crowd, and experiencing the police violence and tear gas alongside them. His resulting project, *Waiting for Tear Gas: (White Globe to Black)*, is a series of eighty-one 35mm coloured slides. Initially, thirty-two of his photographs were published at the end of a collectively-authored book entitled *Five Days that Shook the World: Seattle and Beyond*. Edited by Alexander

Cockburn, Jeffrey St. Clair and Sekula himself, the book consists of Sekula's photo-essay and an account of what at the time of the anti-WTO protest was widely perceived as a "new movement."<sup>1</sup> In a gallery space at the Tate Modern, the slides were projected in a sixteen-minute long, timed, slide-sequence. The photographs document the three societal groups present in Seattle—the protesters, the police and the governmental representatives with their aides and secretaries—with Sekula placing the greatest emphasis on the protesters and their movements within the public space.

Throughout his career, Sekula held a fascination with photography, which stemmed from his belief in photography's 'unavoidable social referentiality, its way of describing—albeit in enigmatic, misleading, reductive and often superficial terms—a world of social institutions, gestures, manners, relationships.'<sup>2</sup> Fully aware of photography's descriptive nature and referential potential, Sekula understood the photographer as a social actor, working within concrete social circumstances in search of 'certain realism, a realism not of appearances or social facts but of everyday experience in and against the grip of advanced capitalism.'<sup>3</sup> This 'critical realism' was informed by the practice of revisiting pivotal moments in the development of the documentary genre, such as the Russian and Weimar workers' photography of the 1920s and the Farm Security Administration project as part of the New Deal in the USA during the 1930s. Integral in this process was a reconsideration of the limits, potentialities and functions of photographic realism. It is this return to photography's 'critical reflection and representation of the conditions of labour and the social production of everyday

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1. Alexander Cockburn, Jeffrey St. Clair and Allan Sekula, *Five Days that Shook the World: Seattle and Beyond*, Verso, London, New York, 2000.

2 Allan Sekula, *Photography Against the Grain: Essays and Photo Works 1973-1983*, The Press of Nova scotia College of Art and Design, Halifax, Nova Scotia, 1984, p ix.

3 Ibid, p x.

life' that Benjamin Buchloh argues to be one of the reasons why Sekula's work was rendered effectively illegible in the late 1960s and early 1970s, in the wake of emergent conceptual practices and the structuralist theorization of the photographic image.<sup>4</sup>

Embracing the role of the photographer as a social actor, Sekula started out in the early 1970s, documenting sociopolitical issues, as he experienced them within his immediate environment and on an everyday basis. His intention was to initiate a political dialogue.<sup>5</sup> In his *Untitled Slide Sequence* (1972), Sekula documented workers leaving the General Dynamics Convair Division aerospace factory in San Diego at the end of the working day and in *Aerospace Folktales* (1973), he produced a portrait of his own family and recorded his father's experience of unemployment. In *This Ain't China: A Photonovel* (1974) Sekula created a photo-textual narrative of the working conditions at a San Diego pizza restaurant, at which he himself worked. As Buchloh argues, all three works share in common the domestic, the autobiographical and the body as points of departure for analyzing political and economic issues pertaining to capitalism.<sup>6</sup>

The human body and its effort to resist neoliberal globalisation is also at the core of *Waiting for Tear Gas*. The series is a combination of individual and collective portraits, shot over the course of the three days of demonstration, whilst the photographs were taken in the daylight, at night or in the midst of tear gas. The majority of the photographs are of a group of protesters of a very diverse range of ages and racial and ethnic identities, dressed up as turtles or devils, or naked, marching, celebrating and 'waiting for tear gas.' There is a deliberate effort to focus

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4 Benjamin Buchloh, 'Allan Sekula or What is Photography?', *Grey Room*, 55, Spring 2014, p 118.

5 Allan Sekula, *Photography Against the Grain*, op cit, p xi.

6 Benjamin Buchloh, 'Allan Sekula or What is Photography?' op cit, p 126.

on some of the various individuals who participate in the demonstration: for example, trade unionists and younger as well as older protesters with a strong emphasis on female protesters. Moments of comradeship and solidarity are captured: young people holding hands, hugging each other, helping one another after the police release tear gas into the crowd. This alliance of diverse societal groups is the “new face” of protesting, which is portrayed in the project descriptively, without Sekula making any claims to definitely represent the new movement. The photographs provide a “simple descriptive physiognomy” of the new movement, whose unique composition was “stranger, more varied and inspired” than the narratives that unfolded after the events, as Sekula eloquently described it.<sup>7</sup>

Sekula did not simply assume the role of the bystander, documenting an emerging movement. He located his practice within a context of directly experiencing the social relations that transpired during the 1999 Seattle protests, by using a very simple method: a small 35mm camera, use of available light, and no digital correction of the colours cast by street lighting.<sup>8</sup> This purposeful rejection of more complex photographic methods, which can be considered as a conscious endorsement of de-skilling, reinforced his position as an integral part of the concrete situation of the demonstration. As he recalled in an interview in 2012, he decided to align himself with the workers’ unions that took part, as they were groups with whom he felt a personal affinity.<sup>9</sup> This choice may have resonated with his stated views that the protests in Seattle were ‘an expression of the working class’s anxieties about the future’, a struggle against the abstraction of global capital, as he put it in his introductory text to the work.<sup>10</sup> As he

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<sup>7</sup> Alexander Cockburn, Jeffrey St. Clair and Allan Sekula, *Five Days that Shook the World*, n.p.

<sup>8</sup> Ibid, n.p.

<sup>9</sup> Allan Sekula, Interviewed by Silverman K. ‘The Demonstrators also Waited’ 2012, Available online on [https://slought.org/resources/demonstrators\\_also\\_waited](https://slought.org/resources/demonstrators_also_waited) (Accessed 18 October 2016)

<sup>10</sup> Ibid

argued, ‘it was the men and women who work on the docks, after all, who shut down the flow of metal boxes from Asia, relying on individual knowledge that there is always another body on the other side of the sea doing the same work, that all this global trade is more than a matter of a mouse-click.’<sup>11</sup> The ocean, this “forgotten” space, is the subject of the only two photographs in the series that do not depict Seattle. Both of these photographs show a globe in an office setting; the ocean appears white in one image, and is black in the other. The ocean, as a space that links sites of capitalist goods’ production with international markets and consumers, is central in two of his subsequent projects, *Ship of Fools* (1999-2010) and the award-winning documentary film *The Forgotten Space* (2012).

The two photographs of the globes in the Seattle series function metonymically for neoliberal globalisation’s unseen social relations. It is neoliberalism’s deregulated markets, precarious labour and increasingly privatized public sphere that have resulted in detrimental effects not only for low-paid, industrial and service sector workers across the globe, but also farmers, indigenous people, students, and the unemployed. Many grassroots movements and smaller organisations that fought at local levels for labour rights, the rights of women, freedom of migration, preservation of the cultures of indigenous peoples, environmentalism, biodiversity, food safety, organic farming, among a wide range of causes, mobilised in Seattle in 1999 in numbers that took local law enforcement by surprise. The successful organisation of the demonstration in Seattle was facilitated, to a great extent, by the Internet. As its widespread use became prevalent almost in temporal parallel with the emergent movement for global justice, the Internet revolutionised the ways in which activists networked, built coalitions, campaigned and promoted their struggle to the wider world. The indigenous movement of the

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<sup>11</sup> Alexander Cockburn, Jeffrey St. Clair and Allan Sekula, *Five Days that Shook the World*, n.p.

Zapatistas in Mexico, and the British activist group *Reclaim the Streets* were among the first to effectively exploit the Internet as a platform via which to disseminate accounts, documents, photographs and videos, and to build non-hierarchical networks of solidarity in the mid-1990s.

There is a clear correspondence between many of the photographs taken by contemporary activists and distributed by them on the Internet, which provide documentation of a “new language of civic disobedience”<sup>12</sup> and Sekula’s photographs of Seattle in 1999. The photographs taken by activists in the *Global Days of Actions*, in the mid and late 1990s, focused on the ways in which the protesters fused dance, music and carnival with direct action, in their effort to reclaim the streets and transform them temporarily into communal spaces.<sup>13</sup> During the *Carnival Against Capital* on 18 June 1999 in the City of London (the financial and commercial centre of the capital) photographs taken by amateur photographers and distributed online offered an alternative story to the mainstream media’s representation of these events. The majority of these striking photographs depicts happy protesters in street party settings, and appear to celebrate the principles of creativity, direct action and horizontality. As such, they contradict the spectacular black and white photographs of violence that appeared in the mainstream news media’s coverage of the events in Seattle. These photographs were ‘poor images’ par excellence, as Hito Steyerl would have it: taken on cheap cameras, often of poor resolution and quality, they were products of collective editing, sharing and distribution.<sup>14</sup> Steyerl argues further that these ‘poor images’ rely on unconventional methods of distribution

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12 David Graeber, ‘The New Anarchists’, *New Left Review*, 13, 2002, pp. 61-73.

13 Global Days of Action were direct action protests, which were organized in the late 1990s around the globe and signaled the emergence of the movement against neoliberal globalization and for global justice. On June 18<sup>th</sup> 1999 the Carnival Against Capital (J18) took place in the city of London and simultaneously in over seventy five cities around the globe, an immediate precursor of the global actions in Seattle in 1999 and in Genoa in 2001.

14 Hito Steyerl, ‘In Defense of the Poor Image’, in *Beyond Representation: Essays 1999-2009*, Verlag der Buchhandlung Walther König, Cologne, 2016, p 152.

through which the images are accessed by globally dispersed audiences. In her words ‘the poor image thus constructs anonymous global networks just as it creates a shared history. It builds alliances as it travels, provokes translation or mistranslation, and creates new publics and debates.’<sup>15</sup>

Sekula’s deskilled photographs can be seen as part of this circuit of poor images. These photographs along with activists’ writings, pamphlets and other activist ephemera constitute a radical tradition bequeathed to subsequent anti-capitalist struggles. The non-specialised equipment used by Sekula could have been used by any other activist in the demonstrations and as a result it minimizes the distance between the protesters and the photographer.<sup>16</sup> This is a crucial difference from the professional cameras placed in particular places by professional photojournalists: it is often the sheer presence of these cameras which urge particular groups of the demonstrators, such as the Black Block, to enact ‘symbolic confrontation’ and ‘spectacular violent performance’ in order to gain coverage in mainstream media.<sup>17</sup> On the contrary, Sekula’s photographs are not the result of the photographer’s staging of the subjects nor of considered decision-making regarding the moment of image capture; but, rather, they result from a fluid and continuously changing relationship between Sekula as social actor within a collective body of activists. When he turns his lens to the Japanese WTO delegates, it is clear that they are angered by the camera presence, in the same way that they are visibly displeased by the protest itself. There are no photographs of any of the clashes between the protesters and the police. Although the police are often present in the images (and their presence

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<sup>15</sup> Ibid.

<sup>16</sup> The documentation of demonstrations by activists themselves has been a widespread practice before the wide circulation of mobile phones cameras, which enables every single participant to capture any moment on their cameras as is the case nowadays.

<sup>17</sup> Jeffrey S. Juris, ‘Violence Performed and Imagined: Militant Action, the Black Bloc and the Mass Media in Genoa’, *Critique of Anthropology*, 25:4, 2005, pp. 415.



is, additionally, made implicit in the images of the protesters they have injured), images of the direct confrontations are not included in the series. The series therefore does not tell the viewers as much about the rapport between the different societal groups that were present, but act metonymically for the relationship of solidarity and comradeship between the activists themselves, one of whom is the photographer himself.

Therefore, deskilling in the case of *Waiting for Tear Gas*, not only aligns Sekula's project with that of activist amateur photographers, but also highlights the photographer's robust resistance to fix the movement in one single image, which would stand for the whole event, contrasting the common visual tropes of photojournalism. Sekula, in the brief text that accompanies his Seattle photographs, clearly defines his practice as *anti-photojournalistic*, disassociating himself and his work from the rules that govern standard photojournalistic working methods.<sup>18</sup> He refused to carry a press pass and use flash, telephoto lenses and auto-focus or even a gas mask.<sup>19</sup> He also showed a clear wish to depart from the obsessive attempts of the photojournalist to capture spectacular and emblematic images of violence, in a bid to create headlines.<sup>20</sup>

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<sup>18</sup> The term 'anti-photojournalism' initially introduced by Sekula became the central theme of an exhibition at La Virreina Centre de l'Imatge, Barcelona from 5 July to 10 October 2010. Curated by Carles Guerra and Thomas Keenan, the exhibition focused on critical approaches to the institution and practice of photojournalism. See more: <http://antiphotojournalism.blogspot.co.uk/>

<sup>19</sup> Alexander Cockburn, Jeffrey St. Clair and Allan Sekula, *Five Days that Shook the World*, n.p.

<sup>20</sup> In an interview, Sekula explains further how these photojournalistic rules derive from the industry's limitations. He narrates that he ran into Gilles Perress of Magnum while documenting the Democratic Convention, in Los Angeles in 2000, who although was equally disinterested in the dramatic image of the Black Block, he was assigned to create one page for Vanity Fair. Hou Henry, 'Allan Sekula and Bruno Serralongue: New History', *Flash Art*, Vol XLVI, No 288, Jan-Feb 2013, p 73.

This overt criticism of the inevitable failure of any single image to semantically convey a complex situation or movement pertains to Sekula's photographic practice throughout his career. But his persistent exploration of the serial and sequential forms was cast a different light in the 1990s, when a marked predilection for the large pictorial, and the 'flawless' image, was unquestionably the most prominent trend in art photography at that time. Andreas Gursky's work is a paradigmatic example of this—he was one of the most celebrated photographers of that era, known for his large, detailed, digitally manipulated prints and for his focus on depicting positive aspects of globalisation—which brings him into stark contrast with Sekula, as Begg has argued.<sup>21</sup> Gursky's *May Day III*, 2000, is taken from a vantage point and depicts May Day protesters as a homogenized crowd with seemingly, nothing significant differentiating them from other crowds he has photographed, including bankers, traders and holiday makers. Instead of any static image of the movement produced by representatives of the mainstream media, or one taken with the intention of being presented to an audience on the walls of a museum, Sekula's project is an assemblage of eighty-one 35mm coloured slides, in a continuously running projection. This presentation resonates with the 15mm slide sequence of Sekula's earlier work, *Untitled Slide Sequence* (1972), which clearly challenges prior representations of the working class in the German and American documentary photographic traditions, highlighting the difficulty of creating a "portrait of the working class." In the wake of the new politically progressive global movement of the 1990s, the difficulty photographers face in any attempt to capture in a single evocative image, a diverse range of social subjects as agents of change, was made apparent once again.

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<sup>21</sup> Zanny Begg, 'Recasting Subjectivity: Globalisation and the Photography of Andreas Gursky and Allan Sekula', *Third Text*, Vol. 19, Issue 6, 2005, pp 625-636.

The predilection of the subject matter, his method of deskillling, and his method of distribution within a printed book format, (which was in alignment with the movement's ideas and edited collectively) placed his project in alignment with activist photography distributed online. Thus, it becomes clear that the project's radicality does not merely lie in its content, but in its conditions of production and distribution, which are embedded in the anti-capitalist struggle. Echoing Benjamin's well-known thesis in *The Author as Producer*, *Waiting for Tear Gas* is a product of lived social relations and its initial distribution within the accompanying, collectively edited book helped to directly support the movement.<sup>22</sup> However, in its presentation at Tate, the inherent spatial and temporal movement in Sekula's *Waiting for Tear Gas* projection urged the spectator to follow a linear progression from daytime to nightfall, and from a period of waiting to the eventual confrontation. In the accompanying book, the Seattle photographs are presented uncaptioned, which is replicated by the slide presentation. The running slides, and the continuity and uniformity of the photographs, offer the spectator a complex, unstaged image of a movement in flux—a brief, illuminating glimpse at a dynamic struggle to build a wider system of change. The project was exhibited alongside other canonical art works in the spectacular arena of Tate Modern, where the exhibition's temporal distance from the events in Seattle and the paucity of contextual information in the gallery had the effect of dislocating the work from the immediacy, radicalism and political urgency of the protest it captured.

## **PART II: *Liberate Tate & Civil Disobedience***

In November 2013, while *Waiting for Tear Gas* was being exhibited at Tate Modern's site at Bankside, *Liberate Tate*, a collective of artists and activists, staged the performance 'Parts Per

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<sup>22</sup> Walter Benjamin, 'The Author as Producer', in (1998) *Understanding Brecht*, Verso, London, 1934.

Million' at Tate Britain's Millbank side. Fifty activists wearing black with veiled faces marched in a procession through the (recently rehung) BP *Walk through British Art* display. As the veiled protestors followed a route determined by the chronology of the artworks, they counted in unison the rising carbon levels in the atmosphere. Combining performance and direct action, the group opposed the Tate's institutional sponsorship ties to BP (British Petroleum) and additionally they highlighted a contradiction between the institution's claims to support practices of sustainability, and the reality of the ecological destruction caused by BP (and the other oil and gas companies).<sup>23</sup>

This intervention was one of the series organised by *Liberate Tate* to contest BP's relationship with the Tate. The collective was founded in January 2010, when John Jordan of the Laboratory of Insurrectionary Imagination (known as the "Lab of ii") was invited by the Tate to lead a two-day workshop on art and activism. While the initial idea of the workshop was to examine the "political issues within a publicly funded institution", Tate made clear to Jordan 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."<sup>24</sup> The *Disobedience Makes History* workshop succeeded in creating a space for participants to consider and debate the relationship between the museum and its oil and gas industries' sponsor. The collective response from the participants to the Tate's attempt to censor any direct confrontation between Jordan and the workshop group and BP came in the form of a direct intervention: the slogan "ART NOT OIL" was placed on to the top floor

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<sup>23</sup> For more information see: <http://www.liberatetate.org.uk/>

<sup>24</sup> John Jordan, 'On Refusing to Pretend to do politics in the Museum', *Art Monthly*, 334, March, 2010. Available online: <http://www.artmonthly.co.uk/magazine/site/article/on-refusing-to-pretend-to-do-politics-in-a-museum-by-john-jordan-2010> (Accessed on 20 October 2016)

windows of the Tate building, and from this point of departure, *Liberate Tate* took shape as a political art collective.

Over the next six years, *Liberate Tate* staged seventeen creative interventions, starting with *License to Spill* at Tate's Summer Party on 28 June 2010. This particular annual gathering marked twenty years of BP's sponsorship of Tate, whilst BP's disastrous oil spill in the Gulf of Mexico played out in the news media. During the party, activists threw molasses, intended to resemble crude oil, onto the gallery floors and entrance way, pointing out to the prestigious guests that the resulting mess was "tiny in comparison to the size of the whole gallery"—a deliberately provocative parody of the notorious statement by BP's chief executive Tony Hayward that the catastrophic BP oil spill was "relatively tiny" compared with "the very big ocean".<sup>25</sup> Through processes of continuous experimentation and creativity, *Liberate Tate* formulated tactics such as their use of black clothing and raw materials. The black clothes and covered faces render each individual anonymous, equal part of a collective body. This embodiment of creativity, direct action and horizontality in a range of performances, attempted to catch both the Tate institution and its visitors off guard. The activists demanded not only that Tate be held accountable for its sponsorship with BP, but that it must eventually rid itself of any form of association with the multi-national.

BP, which has its headquarters in London, began funding the rehanging of Tate Britain's permanent collection in the early 1990s. A fully privatized company by 1987, BP has also sponsored major exhibitions at the British Museum, the BP Portrait Award at the National

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<sup>25</sup> Mel Evans, *ArtWash: Big Oil and the Arts*, Pluto Press, London, 2015, pp 1-5.

Portrait Gallery, as well as productions by the Royal Opera House and the Royal Shakespeare Company. At the Tate, the BP logo started to appear in the galleries, on exhibition catalogues and related publications and, at times, on the huge banners hung in front of the gallery that advertise forthcoming shows. BP's name has also been part of museum initiatives such as *BP Walk Through British Art*, an exhibition of the greatest British artists from 1545 to the present day in chronological order; *BP Spotlights*, a continuously changing collection display; *BP Art Exchange*, a cultural collaboration between schools, artists and cultural institutions and *BP Family Festivals*, which lay on a series of free activities, orientated towards families with children.<sup>26</sup>

Such examples of corporate intervention in contemporary culture, in particular those of oil companies such as BP and Shell, have been customary since the 1980s. Chin- Tao Wu has convincingly argued that the deregulation and privatization—central to the political agendas of Thatcher's governments and Reagan's administrations in Britain and the USA respectively—had detrimental effects on art institutions.<sup>27</sup> Throughout the 1980s, Wu argues, the cultural scene in Britain and the US transformed due to governmental policies and business initiatives that converted museums into profit-oriented, commercialized institutions, heavily dependent upon corporate sponsorship.<sup>28</sup> Not only did both Thatcher and Reagan severely cut direct subsidies for the arts, they also actively encouraged the channeling of private investment and business intervention into the cultural sectors.<sup>29</sup> Although there had been some corporate

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<sup>26</sup> For more information on these initiatives, check: [http://www.bp.com/en\\_gb/united-kingdom/bp-in-the-community/connecting-through-arts-and-culture/bp-and-tate-britain.html](http://www.bp.com/en_gb/united-kingdom/bp-in-the-community/connecting-through-arts-and-culture/bp-and-tate-britain.html); <http://www.tate.org.uk/whats-on/tate-britain/display/bp-walk-through-british-art>; <http://www.tate.org.uk/whats-on/tate-britain/exhibitionseries/bp-spotlights>; <https://bpartexchange.tate.org.uk/>;

<sup>27</sup> Chin-Tao Wu, *Privatising Culture: Corporate Art Interventions since the 1980s*, Verso, London and New York, 2002.

<sup>28</sup> *Ibid*, pp 122-158.

<sup>29</sup> *Ibid*, p 48.

involvement in the arts before the 1980s, this was on nothing like the scale seen in the UK and USA from the 1980s onwards. The legacy of this shift in the funding of arts production and provision is a wide-scale corporate sponsorship of the arts that has profoundly shaped the artistic landscape and affected the function of art institutions in the UK and USA.

The American and British corporate sectors put an immense emphasis on art sponsorship as part of their advertising and public relations strategies. Often, corporations, whose public image may be in need of some improvement (commonly the case with tobacco and petroleum industries) are among the biggest sponsors of the arts. In the British context, BP and Shell currently dominate the funding of all major cultural institutions. BP's involvement with London-based art institutions, including the Tate, can be seen as part of a wider "network of relationships between oil and gas companies and governmental departments, regulators, cultural intuitions, banks and other institutions that surround them", which ultimately enable these companies to extract, transport and sell more oil.<sup>30</sup> Even more importantly, these relationships aim to secure the companies' "social license to operate", through the deployment of a business plan that seeks to build "a positive image in the eyes of politicians, diplomats, civil servants, journalists, academics, non-governmental organisations (NGOs) and cultural commentators", and which aims to provide the corporation with favorable conditions within which their operations can be perpetuated in the long-term.<sup>31</sup>

While BP's incentives to fund the Tate may seem self-evident, Tate's motivations in their engagement with BP seem rather more ambiguous. The institution refused, in response to

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<sup>30</sup> Liberate Tate, 'Confronting the Institution in Performance: Liberate Tate's *Hidden Figures*', *Performance Research*, 20:4, August, 2015, p 79.

<sup>31</sup> Ibid, p 81.

numerous Freedom of Information requests, to disclose the exact amounts it receives from BP. Days before the museum's representatives were called to appear before a hearing at the Royal Courts of Justice, *Liberate Tate* performed *Hidden Figures* in Tate Modern's turbine hall. Activists carried a hundred-square-metres in size cloth, which resembled Malevich's work *Black Square*, on display at the time in the gallery as part of the exhibition *Malevich: Revolutionary of Russian Art*. As the activists unfolded the cloth, museum visitors and passing tourists, both adults and children, were invited to move in and out beneath the black square. The open, participatory nature of the performance was intended to stand in direct contrast to the secrecy that characterised Tate's shielding of precise information about its funding from BP. The black cloth on one level symbolized the black rectangles used by the institution to redact details in the minutes of the Tate Ethics Committee's meetings. The activists demanded that these details be released to the public, to shed light on the nature and extent of the museum's economic links to its corporate sponsors.

On 27 January 2015, Tate finally revealed, in response to a judgement by the government-appointed Information Commissioner, that BP sponsorship amounted to less than 0.3 percent of Tate's operational annual income. The revelation gave rise to a number of questions in the ongoing debate around the funding of arts organisations. In this case, in particular, questions were asked about the extent to which a leading, publically-funded museum, such as the Tate, ought to be expected to adhere to its own policy directive to embed sustainability in its displays and public programmes. The issue of whether it was ethical for the Tate to be sponsored by a company that is involved in what are widely argued to be ecologically and socially destructive activities was also raised. The criticism levelled at Tate by the *Liberate Tate* activists rose above the level of an "institutional critique", by opening up broader political and social questions. As a spokesperson for the collective put it: "It is equally a concern if ecological



issues are seen as divorced from social ones. The very ‘specificity’ of ecology implies that environmental damage is the only concern, which lets the oil companies off the hook for numerous human rights violations. We are asking that Tate’s ideas about sustainability are held accountable, not just measured with a graph or statistics (for example carbon auditing), but in the way in which it is involved in shaping social meaning.”<sup>32</sup> The broadening of this criticism of Tate requires one to consider wider issues of political corruption, conflict and violence as correlated effects of BP’s continuously expanding business operations, and demands greater, more ambitious political responses to present and future ecological catastrophe than policies such as targets for the reduction of fossil fuel emissions, or investment in alternative sources of energy to fossil fuels.

Such stimulation of debate around a broad range of ecological issues was seen again in January 2012, during the *Floe Piece* performance, when masked *Liberate Tate* activists, all dressed in black, transferred a fifty-five kilogramme chunk of Arctic ice from the Occupy London protest camp outside St Paul’s Cathedral, across the Millennium Bridge, and into Tate Modern’s Turbine Hall. The ice had been brought back to the UK by an Arctic researcher, who donated it to the Occupy London protesters.<sup>33</sup> *Floe Piece* was left to melt in the middle of the Turbine Hall, with the intention of bringing to visitors’ attention the fact that BP is able to extract oil in the Alaskan Arctic region due to climate change, while, in 2006, BP was responsible for the largest oil spill on Alaska’s north slope, at Prudhoe Bay. The climax of the event was a general assembly in the museum, co-organised by *Liberate Tate* and Occupy London activists, which

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32 Steven Lam, Gabi Ngcobo, Jack Persekian, Nato Thompson, Anne Sophie Witzke and Liberate Tate, ‘Art, Ecology and Institutions: A Conversation with Artists and Curators’, *Third Text*, January 2013, Vol. 27, Issue 1, pp 149-150.

33 For more details see: <http://www.liberatetate.org.uk/liberate-tate-stage-arctic-ice-performance-in-tate-turbine-hall/>

transformed Tate's Turbine Hall—albeit momentarily—into a free zone, in which anti-austerity politics, democracy and sustainable economy could be discussed.

Interventions in the Turbine Hall of the Tate Modern included also *The Gift*, a 16.5 metre wind turbine blade destined as a donation to the Tate's permanent collection. Placed in the Turbine Hall as part of a performance by the collective, *The Gift* was created as an 'icon of renewable energy with an express wish to stop its relationship with BP.'<sup>34</sup> The Tate's Trustees declined *The Gift*, but *Liberate Tate* continued to champion collaborative artistic practice, participatory performances and acts of creative civil disobedience until March 2016, when, as a result of their successful campaign, Tate announced that BP's sponsorship would end.

### **PART III: *A Shared History of Civil Disobedience***

These two episodes from Tate's recent history may seem at first to reveal a contradictory attitude on the part of the institution and its management—for, at the same time as Tate Modern exhibited *Waiting for Tear Gas*, a work that directly resulted from, and took as its subject, the mobilisation of political activists, the institution has been somewhat less enthusiastic towards activism that targets the museum itself, or its sponsors. Yet, this contradiction may actually be in keeping with the institution's multiple, diverse and often contradictory identity. As T.J. Demos has succinctly put it, "there is no one, simple 'Tate effect', since Tate embodies contradiction, multiplicity, paradox. There are only 'Tate effects', plural operations, disparate, and often at odds, shifting and irreducible to any overruling principle."<sup>35</sup> The tension

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<sup>34</sup> For more info on the Gift and other interventions see: <http://www.liberatetate.org.uk/>

<sup>35</sup> T.J. Demos, 'The Tate Effect', in Hans Belting and Andrea Buddensieg (eds.) *The Global Art World: Audiences, Markets and Museums*, Hatje Cantz, 2009, p 256.

between its embracement of an artwork that stems directly from a grassroots activist movement, and its expanding commercialised strategies and defence of its corporate sponsorship, may be seen as part and parcel of “Tate effects.”

This may partly explicate what appears as a paradox, the fact that the Tate exhibited Allan Sekula’s work at this particular historical conjuncture deserves critical attention, given that Sekula’s photographic work has not been particularly celebrated by the art world establishment. Buchloh has convincingly argued that the reception of Sekula’s work in the art world is an “exemplary case of the official avant-garde and museum’s culture’s marginalization [...] of those practices whose proximity to the ‘base’ of the “(photographic)” genres is perceived either as threatening to the high status of the newly accredited photographic objects or as having bypassed/ignored the current codifications of ‘proper’ avant-garde ruptures.”<sup>36</sup> Sekula’s commitment to critical realism, documentary photography, social referentiality and to an iconography of labour and activism were in total opposition to the main principles of conceptual and postmodern practices which have largely dominated the mainstream art institutions from the 1960s.

At the turn of the millennium, this state of affairs was due to change, as a result of newly widespread access to new digital technologies and the Internet, which was concomitant with significant social upheaval and responses to it, including the emergence of the anti-globalisation movement, 9/11 and the resurgence of Islamic radicalism in Iraq and the wider MENA region. These developments spawned a huge number of politicized images in the public domain, most of which became available to a wider public through the Internet, this being the

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<sup>36</sup> Benjamin Buchloh, ‘Between Discourse and Labour’, in Allan Sekula, *Fish Story*, Düsseldorf, Richter, 1995, p 190.

case with the photographs taken by activists during various anti-capitalist protests and then distributed online, as mentioned earlier in this paper. At the same time and as a result of the increasingly privatized public arena, new documentary forms have been channelled to the art sphere. This tendency has lead commentators to conclude that documentary has become one of the most influential tendencies in contemporary art.<sup>37</sup>

The embracement of projects in documentary style and socially engaged content by art institutions can be seen as part of a wider change in contemporary art, which has been described as a ‘social turn’ by art historian Claire Bishop.<sup>38</sup> This turn was exemplified by mega exhibitions, such as Documenta 11, staged in Kassel, Germany in 2002. Arguably, Documenta 11 signaled this shift of the mainstream art world towards more experimental, participatory and often, research-based and ephemeral artistic practices. Many of these diverse and complex artworks included in the exhibition- ranging from reflexive photo essays and split-screen slide shows to maps, video reportage and still images-addressed socio-political issues concerning neoliberal globalization. Documenta 11’s multicultural inclusiveness, range of artistic practices and assumed radical political agenda - aiming to challenge Documenta’s Western-centrism, both in the spatial and in the cultural-historical sense, and to question universalizing conceptions of cultural and artistic modernity - drew considerably upon the anti-capitalist struggles of the late 1990s.<sup>39</sup> The political positioning of the show’s artistic director, Okwi

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37 Maria Lind and Hito Steyerl, (eds.) *The Greenroom: Reconsidering Documentary and Contemporary Art*. Stenberg Press, Berlin, 2008, p 16.

38 Claire Bishop, ‘The Social Turn: Collaborations and its Discontents’, *Artforum*, 2006, pp 178-183

39 There has been a considerable criticism on the radical content of Documenta 11 in the left. Engaging with this literature is beyond the scope of this paper, but indicatively see: Araeen, Rasheed, ‘In the Heart of the Black Box’, *Letters, Art Monthly*, September, 2002, p 17; Araeen, Rasheed, “Eurocentricity, Canonization of the White/European Subject in Art History and the Marginalisation of the Other”, in Below, Irene, Bismarck, Beatrice von *Globalisierung/Hierarchisierung: Kulturelle Dominanzen in Kunst und Kunstgeschichte*, Jonas Verlag, 2005, pp 54–61; Anthony Downey, “The Spectacular Difference of Documenta XI”, *Third Text* 17:1, 2003, pp 85–92; Martin, Stewart ‘A New World Art? Documenting Documenta 11’, *Radical Philosophy*, 122, November/December, 2003, pp 7-19.

Enwezor, has been shaped by contemporary discussions on the global anti-capitalist movements, in particular, Hardt and Negri's concept of the multitude, as well as theoretical debates on postcolonialism, such as those of Fanon and Mbembe.<sup>40</sup>

Sekula's *Fish Story* was among the documentary-form artworks which proliferated in *Documenta 11*; this was a complex body of work that mapped maritime working conditions in the era of advanced capitalism (1987–95), through a combination of images, captions and written text. *Fish Story* critiqued the economic, political and social processes brought about by neoliberal globalization, and as such, played a significant role in forwarding the agenda of the exhibition, which was conceived as a critical space within which contemporary art and its relationship to postcolonial globalisation could be problematized. Sekula's work was also shown in Documenta 12 (2007), and in major biennials such as those in Sao Paulo and Shanghai (2010), while *Waiting for Tear Gas* has only been shown occasionally, in small exhibition spaces.<sup>41</sup>

As part of this wider sea of change in the mainstream art world can be seen a number of exhibitions, which stemmed directly from the earlier struggles of the global justice movement and marked 'an entry of social movement strategy into art's spaces.'<sup>42</sup> Indicatively, one can mention, *The Interventionists* (2005) at the Massachusetts Museum of Contemporary Art; *global*

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<sup>40</sup> See his positioning statement in the exhibition catalogue of the show: Okwui Enwezor, "The Black Box" in *Documenta 11 Platform 5: Exhibition Catalogue*, Kassel: Documenta and Museum Friedricarianum and Ostfildern-Ruit: Hatje Kantz Publishers, 2002, pp 42–55.

<sup>41</sup> *Waiting for Tear Gas* display at the Tate coincided with Tate Britain's screening of extracts of *Fish Story*. Previously, Tate Liverpool showed *This Ain't China: A Photonovel* (1974) as part of their exhibition *Art Turning Left* (2013) and *Forgotten Space* was screened at Tate Modern in 2012.

<sup>42</sup> Liberate Tate, 'Confronting the Institution in Performance: Liberate Tate's *Hidden Figures*', *Performance Research*, 20:4, August, 2015 p. 83.

*aCtIVISm* (2014) at the ZKM/ Center for Art and Media, Karlsruhe; and *Disobedient Objects* (2014) at the Victoria and Albert Museum in London.<sup>43</sup> All of these shows directly addressed issues, tactics and strategies used by activists involved in these prior anti-capitalist struggles. The emergence of these shows can be seen as the response of a part of the artworld to the counter-globalisation movement, which, following the events of 9/11 and the emergent ‘war on terror,’ had lost its initial momentum. The innovative direct actions, the radical use of the Internet, the non-violent direct action and the participatory performances put together by a wide range of people, who have been mobilized against an emerging neoliberal agenda and the TINA doctrine in the turn of the millennium, have been valuable lessons that activists carried forward in other collectives and direct action groups.

While the interventions of an artist-activist collective such as *Liberate Tate* are much smaller in scope and ambition than previous mobilizations of the anti-capitalist movement, it can be argued that a thread unities recent, localized struggles with the earlier, larger-scale protests. *Liberate Tate*’s creativity, horizontality, festivity, direct action, participatory methods, non-violent civic disobedience confrontational actions and creative civil disobedience were undeniably inherited from earlier anti-capitalist struggles. These elements, named by Graeber as the “new language of civil disobedience”, were embodied in the actions of all the following groups: ¡Ya Basta! in the Global Days of Actions in the late 1990s and the 1999 Battle of Seattle, the white-clad “Tute Bianche/White Overalls” activists seen at the J20 protests in Genoa

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<sup>43</sup> See the exhibition catalogues: Gregory Sholette and Nato Thompson ed, *The Interventionists: Users’ Manual for the Creative Disruption of Everyday Life*, Cambridge Mass, London, 2004; Peter Weibel ed, *Global aCtIVISm: Art and Conflict in the 21<sup>st</sup> Century*, ZKM, Centre for Art and Media, Karlsruhe Germany, 2015; Katherine Flood and Gavin Grindon ed, *Disobedient Objects*, Victoria and Albert Museum Publishing, London, 2014.

in 2001, the “Pink and Silver Bloc” composed of bewigged female protesters in Prague in 2000, and the “Medieval Bloc” of activists wearing cooking pots on their heads in Quebec City in 2001. The organisers of the Laboratory of Insurrectionary Imagination workshop, at the Tate, which led to the *Liberate Tate* movement, participated in the UK ‘Reclaim the Streets’ street parties in the mid- to late- 1990s, as well as in Clandestine Insurgent Rebel Clown Army in anti-G8 summit actions in Gleneagles, Scotland in 2005 and Climate Camps. All these protests were rooted in an understanding that all claims for environmental justice need to be interwoven in the struggle against neoliberal globalization and its economic, social and environmental injustices.

*Liberate Tate* can be seen as an integral part of a horizontal and rhizomatic network of struggles which connects the struggle of the Zapatistas in Mexico, the anti-capitalist mobilizations in Seattle and Genoa, the Occupy movement, the Square movements and the most recent protests against social and economic inequalities and austerity. This ongoing global, anti-hierarchical and horizontal movement has striven to “reclaim the commons” (i.e. communal public spaces) in an increasingly privatized world.<sup>44</sup> The origins of these movements are rooted in various activist groups and radical movements that emerged in the 1990s; for example, the Zapatistas movement in support of indigenous people’s claims for land rights and political representation in Mexico; the Landless Workers’ Movement (MST)—a group representing Brazilian landless peasants who illegally occupied huge tracts of empty land for the purpose of building cooperative farms; the Bolivian people’s struggle against the privatization of their country’s water supply; and the UK anti-road-building campaigns of ‘Reclaim the Streets.’ *Liberate Tate*’s actions attest to the ongoing nature of anti-capitalist struggle, and its critique of the

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44 Naomi Klein, ‘Reclaiming the Commons’, *New Left Review*, 9, May-June, 2001, pp. 81-89.

privatization of every aspect of life, the destruction of the environment and the degradation of human relations in the era of neo-liberalism. While *Liberate Tate*'s campaign ended successfully, with BP's sponsorship of the Tate coming to an end, other struggles against the colonization of the cultural sphere are ongoing.<sup>45</sup> Photographic documentation of these protests is as diverse as the actions themselves: *Liberate Tate* staged performances aimed at attracting mainstream news coverage and positively influencing public perception of their causes—and as such, their methods were very distinct from Sekula's anti-photojournalistic aesthetic. *Liberate Tate*'s rich archive, available online, has entered the circuit of activist imagery, writing, publications and related ephemera parallel to Sekula's *Waiting for Tear Gas*. They both preserve the memory of these particular, embedded moments in the history of organised resistance and struggle for future activists and the struggles to come.

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<sup>45</sup> In Britain, Art Not Oil, (of which *Liberate Tate* is a part), has targeted BP's sponsorship of the Royal Opera, the National Gallery, the Shakespeare's Globe Theatre, Shell's funding of the Science Museum and the Classic International Series concerts at the Southbank Centre, among others. Like-minded groups operate in Europe and the USA; brief examples are: the actions of the Norwegian group Stopp Oljesponsing av Norsk Kulturliv; actions against Statoil's intervention in culture; the North American group *Not an Alternative* and its mobile museum; and the UK's Natural History Museum, which, through exhibitions, public discussions and educational workshops has brought attention to the oil sponsorship of science and culture.