

## INDIRECT ACTION

### Alan Ruiz

Resistance is often confronted with opposition. Direct action elicits reaction. While the standardized bricks used to build the global city can be used to break its windows, not all objects thrown with blunt force successfully demolish an intended target. Some are confronted by a resilient material—tempered and armed with impact resistance, or coated with polytetra-fluoroethylene. The pageantry of protest can easily become a dress rehearsal for emergent technologies of shock absorption that withstand the force of impact, dissolving dissent in a fizzy solution. As James C. Scott writes, “ideological resistance can grow best when shielded from direct surveillance.”<sup>1</sup> Given the propensity for direct action to be absorbed, for action to become reaction, other ways of enacting dissent become necessary.

Light bouncing across a reflective surface carries the potential to produce an indirect sun glare, blinding vision even when out of the sun’s reach. The flash of the camera is doubled in the reflective surface of a glass window, yet if photographers shift they might not only control the angle of reflection but also avoid their own capture. The fifteenth-century art of anamorphosis, a distorted system of representation only perceptible from an indirect angle, disguises symbols of death and sex that can only be seen by aligning the viewer with the picture’s frame. Indeed, the field of art may constitute a site of *infrapolitics*, where oblique, chamfered, or multistable perceptual conditions open entryways to resistance, outside of the conventional mode of binary opposition.

Anonymity has its perks. Passive aggression that occurs offstage might influence the outcome of the larger performance. Anonymous collectives work on a viral level unavailable to the kind of heroic virtue-signaling mistaken as direct action. Indeed, counterpolitics is often rooted in the art of disguise. Under such conditions, form becomes a process, a relational model of inhabiting existing structures in order to produce resistance outside of binary models of opposition. Under the conditions of neoliberalism, collusion may be one strategy of working from the inside out. As art and culture are increasingly used as lubricants for exclusionary development, how might symbolic value be used differently? A seductive decoy might slowly reveal its insurgent perversity over time. The saboteur may use the aesthetics of the oppressor with irreverent mastery, illuminating the oppressor’s illegitimacy by beating him at his own game, thereby changing the code. Indeed, indirect action may present ways of engaging existing conditions in order to reroute predicted outcomes. Rather than treating a medium as a closed feedback loop, attention to a medium and its specificity may reveal a way of thinking about how politics are enacted rather than represented. Radical formalisms rehearse ways of engaging artistic practice as covert strategy, provoking an interrogation of the field itself. How, in other words, can art be produced in order to mobilize art against itself as art—that is, symbolic value against itself as symbolic value?

This essay is based on a longer article, “Spatial Alchemy,” forthcoming in *Ed*, no. 2.

<sup>1</sup> James C. Scott, *Domination and the Arts of Resistance: Hidden Transcripts* (New Haven, CT: Yale University Press, 1992), xii.

This catalogue was published on the occasion of the exhibition *Omnipresence*, May 24–June 16, 2018, held at The Kitchen, 512 West 19th Street, New York, NY, curated by Elisa R. Linn, Joseph Lubitz, Ellen Pavey, and Manabu Yahagi, the 2017–18 Helena Rubinstein Curatorial Fellows of the Whitney Museum of American Art Independent Study Program.

Support for the Independent Study Program has been provided by Margaret Morgan and Wesley Phoa, The Capital Group Charitable Foundation, and the Whitney Contemporaries through their annual Art Party benefit. Endowment support is provided by Joanne Leonhardt Cassullo, the Dorothea L. Leonhardt Fund of the Communities Foundation of Texas, the Dorothea L. Leonhardt Foundation, and the Helena Rubinstein Foundation.

© 2018 Whitney Museum of American Art, New York, NY.

All rights reserved. No part of this publication may be reproduced or transmitted in any form by any means, electronic or mechanical, including photocopying, recording or any other information storage and retrieval system, or otherwise (beyond that copying permitted by Sections 107 and 108 of the U.S. Copyright Law and except by reviewers for the public press), without written permission from the Whitney Museum of American Art.

Statements of fact and opinion are the responsibility of the authors alone and do not imply the endorsement of the publisher.

This publication was produced by the Whitney Museum of American Art Independent Study Program.

Editor: Benjamin Young  
Project Managers: Kenneth White and Benjamin Young  
Designers: Hilary Greenbaum and Liz Plahn  
Printer: smartpress

ISBN: 978-0-87427-166-9

Whitney Museum of American Art  
99 Gansevoort St.  
New York, NY 10014  
whitney.org

Pages 3 and 80: Constantina Zavitsanos, preparatory drawing for *Silueta (XVI)*, 2018. Graphite on paper, 11 x 8.5 in. (27.9 x 21.6 cm). Courtesy the artist.